

Unions as social capital: the impact of trade union youth programmes on young workers' political and community engagement¹

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Summary

Jarley (2005) recently proposed a model of social capital unionism that contends that unions should strive to recreate the dense communities of the past by systematically creating social networks among workers. Underlying this approach is the notion that sustained personal contacts with members are necessary to generate the generalised reciprocity norms that mobilise workers in times of need and sustain unions in periods of relative calm. This paper describes one union's attempt at social capital building among their young members. We also report on survey results that suggest that building social capital is challenging but potentially rewarding as dense social networks are correlated with union knowledge which in turn is correlated with increased union participation as well as community and political engagement.



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Sommaire

Jarley (2005) a récemment proposé un modèle de syndicalisme comme capital social qui soutient que les syndicats devraient s'efforcer de recréer les communautés denses du passé en créant systématiquement des réseaux sociaux parmi les travailleurs. Sous-jacente à cette approche, il y a la notion de la nécessité de contacts personnels soutenus avec les affiliés afin de générer des normes généralisées de réciprocité qui mobilisent les travailleurs en cas de nécessité et qui soutiennent les syndicats en périodes relativement calmes. Cet article décrit la tentative d'un syndicat de créer un capital social parmi ses jeunes adhérents. Les auteurs donnent également un aperçu des résultats d'enquêtes qui donnent à penser que la création de capital social représente un défi mais est potentiellement rentable puisque les réseaux sociaux denses sont liés aux connaissances des syndicats qui sont à leur tour associées à une participation syndicale croissante ainsi qu'à un engagement communautaire et politique.



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Zusammenfassung

Paul Jarley hat in einem neueren Beitrag (2005) ein Modell der Gewerkschaftsbewegung vorgeschlagen, das auf dem Aufbau von Sozialkapital beruht. Dieses Modell geht davon aus, dass Gewerkschaften anstreben sollten, durch die Schaffung sozialer Netzwerke zwischen Arbeitnehmern die engen Gemeinschaftsbeziehungen der Vergangenheit wiederherzustellen. Die Grundlage bildet das Konzept, dass fortwährende persönliche Kontakte mit den Mitgliedern notwendig sind, um generalisierte Reziprozitätsnormen zu erzeugen, welche die Arbeitnehmer in Notzeiten mobilisieren und die Gewerkschaften in Zeiten relativer Ruhe stützen. Der vorliegende Beitrag beschreibt den Versuch einer Gewerkschaft, Sozialkapital unter ihren jungen Mitgliedern aufzubauen. Außerdem zeigt er anhand von Umfrageergebnissen, dass der Aufbau von Sozialkapital zwar schwierig ist, aber sich insofern lohnen kann, als eine Beziehung zwischen engen sozialen Netzwerken und gewerkschaftlichem Wissen besteht, was wiederum mit erhöhter gewerkschaftlicher Beteiligung und bürgerlichem und politischem Engagement korreliert.



As we enter a new century, however, it is now past time to reweave the fabric of our communities. (Putnam 1999: 402)

Enhanced solidarity is of obvious interest to unions searching for strategies to promote renewal. But how is solidarity most effectively nurtured and sustained? Jarley (2005) suggests that unions are best thought of as communities and that their strategies and practices should focus on efforts to build and sustain social capital among workers. He suggests that a social capital approach to labour requires that unions organise around people, not issues, by building dense social networks among members through sponsorship of a wide variety of everyday activities. The essence of this approach focuses on building personal relationships with every workgroup member in order to create an emotional bond among workers and with the union leadership (Jarley 2005; Oppenheim 1991). These personal relationships are established through frequent interaction among members both inside and outside of work. Ultimately, it is postulated that these interactions lead to the development of generalised reciprocity norms that the union can call upon in times of need to support a strike or turn out the vote in a hotly contested election (Jarley 2005; Sinclair and Tétrick 1995).

In this paper, we examine the role of workplace social networks and social capital formation in young members' levels of union participation and, through their union participation, on their levels of community and political engagement. The analysis is part of an ongoing quasi-experimental study to examine the degree to which unions can systematically build social capital among young workers in non-conflict situations and harness the ensuing social capital to improve union participation as well as community and political activism. Results of this initial analysis are encouraging in that measures of structural social capital are linked to both relational social capital and union knowledge. Relational social capital and union knowledge, in turn, are linked to increased union participation, which shows a positive link to both community and political engagement. Thus, it appears that successful union efforts to improve network density among young

workers may lead to greater union knowledge, participation and active engagement in the pursuit of union community and political goals.

Social capital, unions and young workers

In this paper we explore the theoretical rationale for union social capital building as a mechanism for sustaining relationships with workers in times of relative peace that can then be mobilised in times of need. The challenges to unions building social capital in a modern society that fragments worker lives and provides limited opportunity for sustained interactions between members is addressed in a case study of one local union's efforts to build social capital among their young workers. Finally, we report on survey results which examine the relationship between how many people you know, and how these relationships relate to union knowledge, union participation and community and political engagement. The implications for contemporary unions follow.

What is social capital?

Social capital is a wonderfully elastic term. It has been applied so loosely that some argue it is better thought of as a metaphor than a valid social science construct (see Adler and Kwon 2002 for a review). A key word search on *Infotrac* revealed 587 articles on social capital since 1985.

The explosive popularity and elasticity of the term underscores the need carefully to detail the concepts at issue. Social capital can be thought of as a complement to human capital (Portes 1998). If human capital entails 'what you know,' social capital involves 'who you know' (and who and what they know). More formally, following Adler and Kwon (2002) we defined social capital as 'the goodwill that is *embedded* in the fabric of social relations that can be mobilised to achieve individual or collective ends; such as, find a job, obtain a babysitter, or solve a common problem'. Social relations may be based on friendship, work, or participation in civic or leisure activities. People may appropriate the goodwill generated from one type of dyadic interaction, for example, friendships derived from leisure activities and apply it to another end, such as obtaining a job, either directly or indirectly through access to a contact's network of contacts. While social capital can have benefits for both individuals and organisations, it belongs to neither and can easily be destroyed when relationships are severed through employee turnover or perceived violations of social contracts (Leana and Van Buren 1999: 540).

Like human capital, social capital is an intangible asset, the value of which must be inferred from assessments of its various elements. The literature lacks consensus on how best to operationalise social capital, but we favour Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) three-dimensional approach that divides the construct into structural, relational and cognitive components. *Structural Social Capital* involves the size and configuration of the contacts among people in a network. From an individual's perspective, this involves 'who you can reach and how you can reach them.' In contrast, *Relational Social Capital* focuses on the character of the linkages in the network – the degree to which people like and trust one another and feel part of a group with mutually agreed upon norms and expectations. In

essence, it taps ‘the sense of community’ within a social network. Finally, *Cognitive Social Capital* centres on the degree to which network members have developed a common language and understanding of their world. Although Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) treat these components independently, we see them as mutually reinforcing with a dominant causal ordering that goes from the structural to the relational and cognitive elements.

There appears to be consensus in the literature that dense networks, referred to by Coleman (1988) as ‘closure’, involving many frequently used ties – elements of structural social capital – generate the shared values, trust and mutual understanding – elements of cognitive and relational social capital – that make group cooperation and coordination possible (Cohen and Prusak 2001). Frequent interactions permit people to know and trust one another, share information and develop common goals, values and points of view (Tsai and Ghoshal 1998). Collective goal congruence reduces the possibility for opportunistic behaviour (Ouchi 1980) and increases the likelihood that people will share knowledge and resources (Tsai and Ghoshal 1998). Dense networks contain many redundant contacts who can observe each others’ behaviour, thereby lower monitoring costs by making it more difficult for people to engage in social loafing (Lazega 1999). Dense networks also facilitate the free circulation of resources throughout the system promoting the creation of resilient trust based on generalised reciprocity norms – the willingness to do something for someone today knowing that someone else will return the favour at a later date. Generalised reciprocity norms improve the durability of social capital, making it less vulnerable to erosion through exit of any single individual.

Unions as social capital

Applying social network and social capital theory to unions is, in some ways, putting ‘old wine in new bottles.’ We should recall that many unions began as mutual aid societies (Bacharach *et al.* 2001; Jarley 2005). In the early days of unions, workers tended to live and work in dense communities that facilitated the creation of common perspectives and generalised reciprocity norms. Unions were a natural outgrowth of the many informal interactions that characterise such dense communities and union rules reinforced generalised reciprocity norms by conditioning union membership not only on the payment of dues but the provision of social services to members in need.

Contemporary efforts to revitalise unions through implementation of the ‘organising model’ can be viewed as an effort to improve union member network density by reducing hierarchy and vesting more power in activist members. Activists are encouraged to create greater solidarity among members by enlisting widespread participation in acts of confrontation against the employer to end injustice. While acknowledging the short-term efficacy of such conflict escalation strategies for both solidarity building and goal attainment, such as ending injustice, Jarley (2005) argues that exclusive reliance on such strategies tax workers’ tolerance for conflict and are not sustainable in the long run. He argues that unions must go beyond simple conflict escalation techniques and employ more sustainable strategies for recreating community in the workplace: ones that recognise the many mechanisms by which workers interact in ways that can promote

generalised reciprocity norms and behaviour that can be called upon in times of need. To put it another way, although solidarity can be effectively enhanced through conflict, it cannot be sustained exclusively through conflict because there are limits to worker tolerance for it. Thus, it is important to take advantage of the naturally occurring social networks that exist among workers and sponsor activities that will promote network density, shared understandings and generalised reciprocity norms among members that the union can call upon in times of need. Conflict can enhance solidarity, but it is not the source of solidarity. Solidarity comes from the everyday interactions among people that allow them to get to know and understand each other.

In the language of social network theory, mapping workplaces and getting workers together regularly in informal settings that allow them to know more about each other's personal needs, hobbies and aspirations is an effort to build network density. By cultivating personal relationships among union members and between union members and leaders – structural social capital – unions foster an emotional bond among members and between the members and the union that builds resilient trust and generalised reciprocity norms – relational social capital. Enhanced network density also increases communication flows about the union, increasing union knowledge – cognitive social capital. Increases in union knowledge and relational social capital lead to higher levels of participation in activities that promote union objectives.

Thus, for example, a union may call on the social capital it has with its members to get out the vote to defeat an anti-union political candidate or gain community support for a city living wage ordinance. Members who answer the union's call are more likely to engage in political or community activity in the future for a variety of reasons. For one, participation in the union sponsored event increases their interaction with other members, sustaining network density and promoting generalised reciprocity norms. Secondly, such activity educates members on the inner workings of political processes. They feel empowered to do more. And thirdly, the activity extends members' social networks to include access to new-found political resources, including contacts, that they can call upon to pursue political and community objectives that do not directly involve the union.

Young workers, political engagement and social capital unionism

This latter, third order effect of union participation on community and political engagement is at the essence of a social capital approach to unions. In short, unions should work to extend the networks of union members both inside and outside the workplace in ways that link members to new resources empowering them to pursue a variety of workplace and extra-workplace goals. Jarley (2005) argues that such a brokerage approach is likely to improve the instrumental value of unions, especially for people who have sparse social networks and few financial resources by which to purchase effective substitutes for social capital.

Young workers comprise one such group. Because many young workers are new to their workplaces, they lack well-developed social networks that can help them adjust to their

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new work environments and obtain valuable on-the-job training that is frequently social in nature: that is, knowledge transferred through informal interaction with more experienced workers. Young workers are also new to the union, the political process, and civic life. By providing sponsored access to the union social network, unions can help young workers successfully adapt to their new workplace and accrue relational social capital with other workers. This social capital can be called upon to solicit young worker participation in union political activity and because such activities connect young workers to new political and civic resources, they can call on those resources to pursue a variety of objectives.

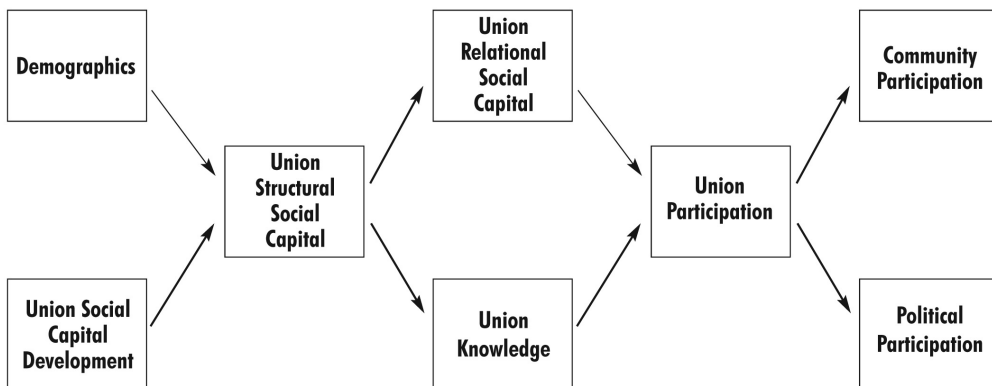
A dearth of research exists on the degree to which unions can build and sustain network density and social capital in periods of relative labour peace. Studies of organising election drives, bargaining disputes and comprehensive campaigns suggest unions can build networks among members and mobilise workers in times of crisis (Bronfenbrenner *et al.* 1998). But day-to-day community building has been largely ignored, and, as we have argued above, nurturing and sustaining structural, relational and cognitive social capital during periods of relative calm is critical to exercising effective union power in times of need. Thus, a key question is ‘what are the most effective day-to-day mechanisms by which unions can enhance member network density and promote relational social capital that builds the union’s capacity to mobilise its members?’ Research on union participation among young members is also sparse, but anecdotal evidence suggests that this is an especially difficult group to activate. If unions can identify methods that build structural, relational and cognitive social capital among this group, it is likely that they can do so for others.

Social capital, union participation and political engagement among young UFCW members

We worked with two local unions of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) to create structural, relational and cognitive social capital among young workers as part of an effort to boost their union participation and civic and political engagement. These two local unions are very large by American standards and operate in the retail food and food processing industries. Together the two local unions operate at more than 200 locations and have a combined membership of almost 40 000. The collective agreements they have with employers require most employees, including the young workers under study, to be members of the union as a condition of continued employment. The local unions also have significant presence on shop floors, with almost 500 volunteer stewards representing the union on a day-to-day basis, helping workers to resolve grievances and keeping workers informed about the union. Both local unions could also be characterised as traditional service-based unions, although both have had a continuing interest in moving their organisations from a traditional service model to a more organising-driven approach. The effort to involve more young workers in the union was seen by the union leadership as part of the overall organisational change process.

Young workers (aged 14 to 25) were targeted for a variety of reasons. First, they represent a significant portion (25%) of the union's membership. Secondly, turnover among this group is high as many young workers see these jobs as summer or after-school employment. Identifying and providing effective services to meet young workers' needs has proved difficult. Thirdly, both union presidents recognise that for many of their young members, their UFCW experience is their first union experience and, as such, it is likely to have a major impact on their views of unions generally. They expressed a strong desire to make sure that young workers who left the UFCW had a positive experience; one that would make them more likely to join a union at their next place of employment. Finally, young workers were believed to have relatively little social capital in the workplace or the financial resources to acquire effective substitutes for it. Thus it was believed that social capital building efforts would appeal to young members and that an investment in such activities by the union would generate a significant increase in young workers' commitment to and participation in union sponsored activities (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Structural social capital model of union effects on community and political engagement



In order to gauge the degree to which the data support our initial hypotheses about the role of structural, relational and cognitive social capital in promoting union participation as well as the impact of union participation on community and political engagement we conducted a baseline social capital survey of young members. As indicated above, social capital depends on sustained interaction among workers – structural social capital – as well as the quality – relational social capital – and content – cognitive social capital – of these interactions. Social capital was captured through three variables. Structural social capital was measured by asking respondents about the frequency or number of times that they saw their friends from work socially, talked to them at work, and the degree that their friends are active in the union. Whereas structural social capital represents the extent of interaction among workers, relational social capital represents the quality of those interactions (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998). In this case, the relational social capital scale taps the degree to which young members have developed

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a shared common bond with the union and generalised reciprocity norms. Questions focused on the degree to which respondents believed the union would help with a problem, the union would carry through on its promises, and consider young members' best interests when making decisions. Union knowledge reflects the cognitive dimension of social capital and is measured using four items averaged to capture the degree to which the member knows who to see in the union should they need help.

The survey of 1 000 young members yielded 133 usable questionnaires (13% response rate). Approximately 63% of the sample was between 18 and 25, 46% female, 80% white and 16% black. Almost three-quarters of the respondents are currently students with 36% having some high school education, 36% having earned a high school diploma, and another 23% having some college education. Slightly over a third of the respondents have been union members for less than one year, another third for between one and two years, and fewer than 5% for over five years.

Table 1 reports the key findings with respect to the variables of interest. Workplace density is an average of 3.1 on a four point scale indicating that a number of the young members felt socially connected to their co-workers. Community engagement was also relatively high with a mean of 3.8, but political engagement was lower with a mean of 2.9. Union participation was also low with a mean of 1.2 on a five point scale.

Table 1 : Descriptive statistics

	Mean	Standard Deviation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. Structural Social Capital	3.05	0.52	1.0															
2. Union Knowledge	3.13	1.12	.32	1.0														
3. Relational Social Capital	3.30	0.69	.33	.56	1.0													
4. Union Participation	1.21	.26	.29	.53	.38	1.0												
5. Community Engagement	3.77	.66	.28	.22	.43	.26	1.0											
6. Political Engagement	2.86	1.05	.10	.16	.17	.27	.51	1.0										
7. Race	.80	.40	.28	.12	.11	-.00	.14	.11	1.0									
8. Age	2.86	1.02	.00	.20	.12	.23	.14	-.01	.17	1.0								
9. Education	2.22	1.25	-.02	.14	.03	.12	.03	-.03	.03	.55	1.0							
10. Student	1.27	.45	.01	.23	.14	.21	.07	-.04	.12	.55	.04	1.0						
11. Tenure	3.87	1.13	.36	.22	.10	.31	.04	-.08	.04	.23	.20	.05	1.0					
12. Sex	1.54	.50	.25	.02	.16	.15	.08	-.13	-.01	.17	.30	-.01	.06	1.0				
13. Number of Activities	2.62	1.18	.11	-.04	-.03	.17	.13	.22	.15	.01	-.02	-.12	.00	.10	1.0			
14. Local	.55	.50	-.00	.13	-.01	.10	.05	.14	-.00	-.29	-.41	.01	-.13	-.16	.07	1.0		
15. Esteem	3.33	.57	.20	.11	.13	.11	.26	.08	-.05	.11	-.03	.05	.06	-.05	.04	-.05	1.0	
16. Injustice	2.30	.55	-.23	-.19	-.57	-.13	-.38	-.29	-.24	-.02	-.03	-.05	.05	-.01	-.08	.04	-.18	1.0

Examination of the correlation matrix reveals a number of interesting relationships. Structural social capital is moderately correlated with both union knowledge ($r=.32$) and relational social capital ($r=.33$). Relational social capital is fairly strongly correlated with union knowledge ($r=.56$) and both measures, especially union knowledge, show a strong association with union participation ($r=.53$ for union knowledge and $r=.38$ for relational social capital). Union participation shows only a modest correlation with both community ($r=.26$) and political ($r=.27$) engagement, with the two measures of engagement showing a fairly strong association ($r=.51$). Finally, there is a fairly strong correlation between structural social capital and community engagement ($r=.43$).

Consistent with the correlational results, multivariate analyses of the survey findings (available from the authors upon request) indicate that several member characteristics have an impact on the level of the respondent's structural social capital. More specifically and consistent with the correlations in Table 1, being white, female, having been a union member for longer, and having positive self esteem all relate to having more structural social capital. Structural social capital, in turn relates positively and significantly to both union knowledge and union relational social capital – young members who know other young members in the workplace were also likely to know more about their union and report a more trusting relationship with the union. Union knowledge appears to be more important to union participation than relational social capital. Finally, union participation has a positive and significant impact on both political and community engagement. Given the cross-sectional nature of the data, these results do not establish causality. Although we believe that social capital contributes to participation it could be that union participation causes increased social capital.

The UFCW experiment with youth representatives

The key question is thus how to increase structural social capital among young workers? Jarley (2005) suggests that unions should identify those young workers with extensive networks on the shop floor and recruit them into workplace representative roles where they think and behave more like organisers than grievance handlers. He goes on to note that organising in this context should focus on brokerage activities – systematic methods for bringing disconnected workers together in ways that build network density. Such organising efforts should focus on getting to know people, rather than fixing short-term grievances because a deeper understanding of workers' aspirations and concerns is necessary to build lasting relationships among members and between members and their union (Jarley 2005).

To recruit young workers interested in furthering union goals and solicit their ideas about how to sponsor union activities that would facilitate brokerage and union social capital formation, we held four focus groups with young members of the two local unions. These young workers were recruited from a subset of workplaces where we planned to introduce social capital building strategies. Other locations were to serve as control groups for the experiment.

Much of the discussion focused around having the union sponsor sporting events – bowling, softball, basketball and cornhole (a regional version of bean bag toss) – or social events – concerts or picnics – where young members could gather. However, consistent with the notion of brokerage, the focus group members made clear that many workers would not turn out for 'fun events' without someone they know encouraging them to attend. They suggested having younger union members serve as union representatives and encourage youth involvement

As a result of the focus groups, one of the local unions has adopted the youth representative concept and formally trained ten 'youth representatives.' The youth

representatives are responsible for regular contact with young workers in the stores concerned, answering their questions about the union and encouraging them to attend forthcoming union-sponsored events. Youth representatives do not handle grievances but focus instead on getting to know the young workers in the workplace and introducing them to their union steward if formal union advocacy was required. Thus, youth representatives are not involved in conflict situations, but instead their efforts are devoted to building social capital by encouraging young workers to get to know each other and the union. The hope is that these youth representatives and the relationships they build with young members will create solidarity among the workers and goodwill with the union that can be called upon in times of need.

Implications

It is too early to gauge the success of the youth representatives. Initial experience with the concept has shown some significant obstacles in that some of the young members were uncomfortable visiting worksites alone, they lacked reliable transportation and educational activities interfered with the union business. But we need to complete the field experiment by comparing changes in the social networks, social capital and political engagement variables in the stores with and without youth representatives to shed light on the effectiveness of the youth representative concept.

That said, the initial survey results produced a number of insights of relevance to union leaders and policy-makers on both sides of the Atlantic. First, some individual characteristics systematically relate to members' structural social capital. White workers, those who made up 80% of the sample, have more structural social capital than people of colour. Thus, it is tempting to suggest that structural social capital is related to workplace homogeneity, but note that women had more structural capital than men despite being in the slight minority (46%) of respondents. Workplace tenure also positively relates to structural social capital, suggesting that social networks are built over time and that stable workplaces are likely to have more structural social capital than unstable ones. If so, this is a challenge for unions like the UFCW who are trying to build social capital among young workers who view their current employment as transitory.

More importantly, our results suggest that even among young members – those with relatively little social capital and levels of participation – those with denser workplace networks knew more about the union and developed greater trust and reciprocity norms towards the organisation than workers with sparse networks. Knowledge, in particular, is associated with greater union participation and union participation is associated with greater political engagement. We have long known that union members tend to be more politically active than non-members, but our results also suggest that young workers with denser networks and higher union participation were also likely to be more engaged with their community.

These results are preliminary but if these relationships hold among young workers who are predominantly students without a long-term commitment to this workplace, they may be even stronger for union members as a whole.

At the risk of stretching the potential generalisability of our results, the implications for union policy-makers is clear: whether you represent an American union trying to increase member activism on the shop floor to enhance the effectiveness of its contract negotiation and enforcement activities, a British official trying to build the union's capacity to get members out to the polls to elect Labour Party candidates, or an official on the continent trying to forge workers into a social movement to fight indignity and injustice, building dense networks among members where they work is a key to success. Union power derives from network density – a group of workers who know each other, have developed a common purpose and a willingness to engage in generalised reciprocity because a fellow member is in need or an injury 'to one is an injury to all.' Strangers do not do this, *confrères* do. They do it not in pursuit of abstract ideals, but for each other.

This will not be easy. The challenge for unions is to find ways systematically to create dense networks and social capital in societies where suburbanisation, long commutes, overtime and video games vie for people's time and leave them increasingly disconnected from one another. Recruiting and training activist networks largely devoted to cultivating social relationships with similarly situated workers takes time and patience. It may be especially difficult in workplaces characterised by low wage work where many people's lives are characterised by the quest for adequate housing, transportation and funds (Ehrenreich 2001). But it is just these types of workers who would benefit the most from increased social capital of their own. Getting to know them, understanding their needs and employing the resources of the union's network to improve their lives in even small ways is likely to build lasting union members who once again feel tightly connected to each other and willing to pursue collective goals. Reweaving the fabric of community in workplaces is a key to union renewal.

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