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Feature

Platform Power to the People

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The coronavirus pandemic has shown how digital tools can foster online engagement that leads to real benefits for working people.

Platform Power to the People

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Illustration by Maggie Chiang

When stay-at-home orders swept across the United States in response to the coronavirus outbreak this past spring, workers' rights advocates accustomed to in-person meetings had to adjust quickly—and many did. In April, thousands of supporters joined a digital workers' town hall to learn about the issues facing Nashville's low-wage workers amid COVID-19, compounded by a series of tornadoes that had recently hit the Tennessee capitol's region. In May, Taco Bell workers in Michigan created an online petition with support from the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee, a group formed in the early months of the pandemic. That effort won them hazard pay and increased paid sick leave, among other benefits.

In response to the pandemic, workers both employed and unemployed have used digital platforms and tools to magnify their voices and meet their needs. They have launched online petition campaigns to demand safer workplaces. Worker centers, unions, and other economic justice groups are broadcasting Facebook and Instagram live events to share information about programs that support workers, offering

online training to navigate state unemployment insurance systems, and sending out text blasts asking workers to take direct action.

Digital platforms have also helped workers share information about the problems they're confronting, mobilize different forms of support and mutual aid, and make demands of employers and policy makers. Such engagement occurs not only within the channels created by established worker justice organizations, including unions and worker centers, but also among informal networks of workers who have common concerns. In some cases, digital tools are mediating relationships between workers and employers to address needs that have intensified during the pandemic. Online platforms are connecting people to steadier work, for example, and enabling employers to pay in to benefits funds for workers who have been shut out of government-sponsored and regulated systems.

These uses of digital tools are not new. Mainstream social media platforms, despite serious drawbacks discussed below, have played an important role in a variety of social movements. For example, activists used Facebook and Twitter to coordinate protests during the Arab Spring uprisings in the early 2010s. In the worker justice arena, online engagement using social media platforms that mobilize and organize workers, like Facebook and customized platforms like Coworker, has contributed to impressive actions and campaigns, including teacher strikes in the United States, strikes of Ryanair workers in Europe, and successful efforts to challenge unfair workplace policies in nonunion settings around the world. In many ways, COVID-19 has amplified and accelerated the digital efforts that have already been in motion. In a time of social distancing, people have increasingly relied upon digital tools to



support collective action across different sectors, just as they have for a broad spectrum of other social interactions.

However, digital engagement will never replace analog or in-person forms of connection, as we have seen in the recent protests drawing attention to the epidemic of police violence against Black Americans. Nor will tools designed to directly address specific challenges confronting low-wage workers single-handedly transform the broader set of conditions that have produced rising inequality; ongoing expansion of the low-wage economy; and entrenched marginalization based on identity markers like race, gender, and citizenship status. Just as we need to challenge the idea that technological change will inevitably lead to mass unemployment, we also need to resist seeing new technology as supplying a set of easy fixes that secure a just and equitable future of work.

In this article, we examine how worker-centered digital tools and approaches to digital engagement might fit within a larger set of strategies for shifting power in the economy and ensuring that all people have access to “decent work” that provides fair income, social protections, and the freedom to organize, among other measures. How can online organizing foster connection and collective action—even direct action—for workers separated by geography and working across different sectors? For those lacking information about their labor rights and the behavior of unscrupulous and abusive employers, how can digital channels offer a lifeline? How can digital tools help pave the way for “high-road” forms of employment that pay fairly and invest in workers, particularly in areas where prevailing policies and norms translate into chronic precarity?

Below, we look at some promising tools and approaches that are being used for these purposes, based on two years of interviews and background research funded by the Ford Foundation, the Labor Innovations for the 21st Century (LIFT) Fund, and Cornell University’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations. We then offer takeaways that address the limitations and drawbacks of digital engagement, and consider where these developments might lead, given the systemic fault lines that the current social and health crises expose.

COLLECTIVE ORGANIZING

Widespread social-distancing mandates and guidelines have forced organizing more fully into the digital realm. Essential workers have challenged perilous working conditions, and much of the coordination of these actions has occurred online. In some cases, the labor movement has used digital tools to support workers as they confront unprecedented circumstances, but a surge of grassroots online mobilizing has taken place outside established organizations.

In unionized workplaces, workers have formal channels for registering complaints with employers. Nonunion workers, who are the majority of US employees, must find other ways to deliver their message to management. Such authority figures, however, are often inaccessible amid subcontracting arrangements and corporate structures that put distance between frontline workers and corporate decision makers. Further, some companies have shifted their employment model toward the use of independent contractors, who can have more difficulty accessing essential benefits and protections and taking action to improve the quality of their jobs.

The recognition of changing employment conditions and the particular challenges faced by nonunion workers led activists to develop

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Coworker, a platform that gives workers a mechanism for shaping their working conditions by voicing their views, even in the absence of unions. The platform offers a free, low-barrier, virtual space for people to start petitions about issues they encounter in the workplace and to find like-minded colleagues. Workers have launched campaigns to change company policies about scheduling and dress codes, for example, and can connect with other employees in their region and around the country to build support for their causes.

What began as a venue for voicing complaints and encouraging other workers to sign petitions has matured into networks of worker solidarity. Even before the pandemic, shifts were under way, both in how workers were engaging with the website and in their rising expectations about the changes that were necessary and possible. When COVID-19 reached the United States at the beginning of 2020, these workers had relationships in place for moving new campaigns related to essential and frontline workers.

In 2018, employees at Publix, a grocery store chain, used Coworker to successfully wage a campaign to allow them to have facial hair. Fueled by that victory—and a network composed of the employees who signed the petition—Publix workers were able to quickly pivot to making pandemic-related demands, like hazard pay and personal protective equipment. (As of this article’s publication, Publix has not yet met the workers’ demands.) Interest in launching similar petitions has exploded during the pandemic: Coworker has seen 40 times more website traffic than normal, and a tenfold increase in the number of campaigns, most of which essential workers started.

Worker initiation of campaigns reflects Coworker’s guiding principle—that workers should lead and that they have access to resources such as media training, leadership development, technical assistance, and help connecting with colleagues. For Coworker, these tools support people in becoming workplace advocates in places that lack organizing infrastructure and show how digital tools can expand the landscape of labor activism.

If Coworker embodies distributed organizing that emerges from grassroots efforts, Pilipino Workers Center (PWC) is a good example of an established organization that uses digital tools to advance a decentralized organizing model. PWC works with low-wage immigrant care providers in Southern California, many of whom work in isolated conditions, and has experimented for years with digital tools to strengthen peer relationships within its membership. When COVID-19 collided with the care-work labor market—causing many people to lose work and others to risk their health by continuing to work in clients’ homes—PWC relied on digital organizing to establish a relief fund, deliver care boxes with food essentials to the immigrant community, and, as a member of the California Domestic Worker Coalition, help shift an existing legislative campaign to respond to the needs of household workers. PWC used an array of digital tools and tactics to support these efforts, including launching virtual town halls via Zoom, using Facebook to fundraise and organize, and tapping into a member circle program that uses the free messaging platform WhatsApp

to connect workers in small groups, growing existing relationships and helping create new ones.

The member circles, which consist of the most active members of PWC's base, are coupled with other methods of digital outreach that consist mainly of one-way broadcast communications, from email newsletters and invitations to events and actions. Member circles allow their leaders to disseminate this content in a more personal format to members, helping to foster two-way communication. PWC's ultimate goal is for its entire membership to join these circles, increasing participation in setting the organization's agenda and enabling members to express concerns and ideas that circle leaders can convey to PWC staff. The use of circles during the pandemic has grown; the group has increased its membership and is launching new circles to meet a growing desire for connection.

Both Coworker and PWC operate in areas of the economy with little formal organizing, using distributed models that combine organizational support with emergent worker leadership and democratic

COVID-19 has highlighted the value of digital tools in fostering forms of collective action, including petition drives, labor strikes, and walkouts.

engagement. These examples highlight the increasingly significant role digital tools can play in building organizing infrastructure over time. The pandemic has shown how important such infrastructure is when crisis hits, as digital relationships become survival networks and fertile ground for activism.

SHARING INFORMATION

COVID-19 has highlighted the value of digital tools in fostering different forms of collective action, including petition drives, labor strikes, and walkouts. An important element of many of these actions is the sharing of information among workers who are employed by the same company or who work in the same industry. Digital tools help workers to identify common challenges and grievances. Even when this kind of information sharing does not culminate in forms of collective action and mobilization that we associate with organizing, it can be valuable, particularly for workers who are otherwise isolated and deprived of basic information about their legal rights, as well as about the actions that routinely violate these rights. Indeed, in situations where asymmetries of information between workers and employers are large, creating channels for workers to share information can empower them to avoid or hold to account employers and other market actors who engage in illegal and unethical behavior.

In 2014, Centro de los Derechos del Migrante (Center for Migrant Rights, or CDM), launched *Contratados.org*, an online platform that gives internationally recruited migrant workers information about

their legal rights. It also offers a portal for workers to anonymously rate and share information about employers and recruiters, much like the crowdsourced review site Yelp. Dating back to the Bracero program, which was created in the post-World War II period to bring Mexican nationals to the United States for temporary work, many guest workers are employed in agriculture and food processing. When they arrive, they often confront exploitative conditions and limited exit options, and their status in the country is bound to the employers that sponsored their visas. A recent CDM report based on interviews with 100 farmworkers on a guest-worker visa (H-2A) found that nearly half had experienced wage theft (not being fully paid the wages they were promised) and overcrowded, unsanitary housing. In other studies, CDM has documented widespread fraud, in which workers have paid fees to recruiters for jobs that do not exist.

Despite documentation of such abuses by journalists and organizations like CDM, the relevant government regulatory agencies in both

sending and receiving countries tend not to supply detailed information on employers and recruiters, and guest workers have not had a way to share what they know among themselves. This is the context in which CDM identified a gap it could fill. Aware that user friendliness and other design issues have limited the uptake of similar tools in the past, it included guest workers in *Contratados.org* at every phase of the site's creation, informing its development as a mobile-friendly website, rather than as an app requiring a download. To date, the site has attracted more than half a million unique visitors, helping to identify

cases of fraud and mistreatment that have cautioned workers about specific employers and recruiters, and thereby bringing about a number of legally actionable claims.

Contratados.org also has served as a template for a similar platform in Turkey. Hosted by Garment Worker Support Center, the site provides information and support for textile workers, many of whom are Syrian refugees. Several of these kinds of platforms are currently operating in different sectors and regions around the world. In Australia, the trade union United Voice developed *Hospo Voice* as a digital platform for hospitality workers to share information and organize online. It includes a tool that allows hospitality workers to rate employers on a range of issues, including whether they show respect for workers and pay them at the correct, promised rate. In June, *Hospo Voice* published the results of a survey of more than 1,100 hospitality workers, revealing that many had faced extreme financial stress because of the pandemic and had experienced wage theft by employers. The platform demonstrates how tools like this one can aggregate and share timely information with multiple audiences, including workers, union officials, and policy makers.

Given their tenuous immigration status and the complex transnational processes through which they are recruited, guest workers face the ongoing challenge of tracking and seeking recourse for all of the legal violations committed against them. More broadly, the uncertainty and slack labor market conditions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have aggravated vulnerabilities to abuse across low-wage

sectors, underscoring the need for channels that ensure regulatory authorities can systematically pursue legal violations. Innovation through digital interfaces can play an important role in addressing this issue, too, with some of the most promising developments occurring at the local level. In Seattle, for example, the city's Office of Labor Standards has created a digital portal for reporting labor rights violations that is administered through a model of "co-enforcement" involving close partnership with local community and labor groups connected to low-wage workers in particular sectors.

For guest workers in the agriculture and food-processing industries, the pandemic has highlighted long-standing hazards. In addition to crowded and unsanitary living conditions, many have inadequate protective equipment, are exposed to toxins that lead to respiratory problems, and are excluded from access to paid sick leave. Guest workers who lose their jobs face deportation if they are unable to find new work, and the Trump administration recently issued a ban on new temporary work visas and is seeking to cut pay rates for migrant farmworkers on guest-worker visas. In May, two workers on guest-worker visas from northern Mexico were among the approximately 100 employees at a crawfish plant in Louisiana to contract COVID-19. Fired from their jobs when they sought out medical treatment at a local hospital, the workers were supported by CDM's legal team in filing complaints with the relevant government agencies. (Their case was still pending when this article went to print.)

As the repercussions of the pandemic for guest workers continue to unfold, traffic on *Contratados.org* has spiked. The site has shared information about health services and changes in administrative procedures through videos and blogs that have reached more than 100,000 visitors, and CDM has conducted surveys on *Contratados.org* and social media channels to provide real-time information on challenges that guest workers are experiencing during the current crisis. CDM is also using *Contratados.org* for mobilization efforts related to its policy advocacy, engaging workers on the site to contact officials about policy changes that affect them adversely, including the proposed wage cuts.

CONNECTING WORKERS AND CUSTOMERS

As the effects of COVID-19 reverberate through the US labor market, the virus has illuminated the particular challenges faced by people who are not in traditional employment relationships, including those who work informally, provide services to individual households, or are engaged as independent contractors—jobs in which rights and protections are often limited, and in which those that do exist are difficult to enforce. At gig-economy companies such as Uber, Lyft, and Handy, use of digital technology has hastened workplace "fissuring," or fragmentation, and has been used to create platforms geared more toward customer convenience than toward workers' ability to earn a decent living. A recent report by the National Employment Law Project showed that many platform-based gig-economy companies have been lobbying together with other corporate allies to make it easier to misclassify workers as independent contractors, potentially opening up even larger swaths of the US economy to tech-enabled workplace fissuring.

Despite these developments, the use of digital technologies in hiring and employment does not need to be detrimental to labor rights and standards. Carina, an online interface that matches unionized,

credential-verified caregivers with families and other individuals who need in-home, long-term care services, presents a model that supports better conditions for workers and customers alike. Carina is an independent nonprofit technology organization working in partnership with Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 775, the Local 775 union-employer benefits fund, and the state of Washington. It was developed specifically with the intention of addressing the needs of both workers and customers. Home-care workers frequently encounter difficulties finding clients and securing consistent work from week to week, while people requiring in-home support often experience gaps in care when, for example, their provider can no longer offer services. With more than 17,000 registered users, Carina helps to address these issues in a way that builds on the rights and protections that Local 775's union contract offers.

While gig-economy hiring platforms use algorithmic matching to generate spot transactions, Carina's creators quickly realized that this would be the wrong vehicle for the kinds of relationships they wanted to foster. Instead, the platform facilitates matches through an elaborate system of filters. Workers and consumers post detailed profiles and can see the distance and travel time to prospective matches. Text message and email alerts call users back to the platform when their account has activity, but personal contact information is shared only when both parties have given their consent. Carina also has strict policies banning discrimination and abuse by anyone using the site and has designated channels for reporting harmful behavior.

During the pandemic, home-care workers in Washington and other parts of the United States have been placed under extreme stress, caring for populations that are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 while having to navigate their own risk of becoming infected and transmitting that infection to their loved ones. Since schools have been closed, many parents have also had to figure out how to balance caring for their children with the need to continue working in order to support their families. Those managing the Carina platform have mobilized to address these challenges. In addition to providing regular coronavirus-related updates, they have developed an online platform through which working families can access licensed childcare via unionized in-home providers, who, like home-care workers, confront challenges in terms of maintaining a steady client base. To expand the reach of the platform both for those needing childcare and for providers, Carina partnered with the city of Los Angeles, United Healthcare Workers West, and other unions representing essential workers. At recent count, more than 1,900 licensed day care centers were listed on the platform, in five states (California, Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts, and Washington).

Mission-driven platforms are also emerging in the terrain that gig-economy companies occupy and include platform cooperatives that seek to provide a solidarity-based alternative to the so-called sharing economy. In New York City, for example, a network of housecleaning worker co-ops has affiliated with a digital platform called Up & Go, which connects workers to clients. Several ride-sharing platform co-ops have emerged around the world, including EVA, which ranks second in market share behind Uber in Montreal's rideshare industry. In the United States, these platforms encounter a different set of challenges from Carina. They operate outside publicly funded

service delivery systems and have to compete with large corporate actors that use their market power to eliminate competitors and drive down labor standards. In Austin, Texas, ATX Taxi, a taxi worker co-op operating through a web-based app, gained market share after the city council banned Uber and Lyft for documented labor rights violations, but it quickly lost its foothold when the rideshare giants successfully lobbied the Texas state legislature to overturn the ban. Even short of excluding these companies from local or statewide markets, regulating them more stringently—as in California Assembly Bill 5, a controversial new law that requires gig-economy companies such as Uber and Lyft to hire workers as employees, rather than as independent contractors—could help create more space for a success story like Carina to happen at scale in other parts of the economy.

SECURING BENEFITS

The fact that millions of workers in the United States lack access to paid leave often results in workers reporting to their jobs when they are sick. At the onset of the highly contagious coronavirus, lack of access to this basic benefit risked the lives of workers and their families, employers, and the public. Recognizing the public health implications, federal, state, and local policy makers scrambled to establish paid leave policies, which temporarily addressed some of the gaps in the existing patchwork of policies. Yet these expansions excluded many workers, including house cleaners, ride-share drivers, and others who are classified—or misclassified—as independent contractors.

Alia, the first platform to offer portable benefits to domestic workers, was launched in 2018 to fill a hole in the market. Some unions, such as SAG-AFTRA (a union for film and television workers), provide portable benefits to their members, but no such option was available for nonunion workers—including workers who have been excluded from the right to form a union, such as domestic workers. NDWA Labs, the innovation arm of the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), decided to build a technology platform that would allow domestic workers to collect employer contributions toward this and other benefits, such as life insurance.

In its first phase, the platform has launched to serve house cleaners, who tend to have multiple clients and face particularly steep challenges to accessing paid time off. As a result of explicit carve-outs in labor and employment law rooted in a history of white supremacy, domestic workers are excluded from basic protections—like the minimum wage and health-and-safety laws—that cover most people in paid employment. During the New Deal era, white Southern Democrats refused to support landmark labor laws if they included domestic workers—most of whom were Black. This targeted, racial exclusion has had lasting effects on working conditions. The frequently informal nature of work agreements combines with race- and citizenship-based power differences between domestic workers and employers to circumscribe workers' ability to exercise their rights. NDWA works for the dignity and power of nannies, house cleaners, and caregivers through worker organizing, policy advocacy, and efforts aimed at shifting cultural narratives about care work.

Alia addresses multiple issues for NDWA and its members and affiliates. First, offering a mechanism through which workers can exercise a right to paid time off recognizes that all workers deserve

benefits—no matter what kind of work they do or where they do it—and that domestic workers need time to attend to the many obligations and exigencies of their lives. Second, Alia allows the alliance to provide a material benefit to workers' quality of life that is critical to their health and well-being, which encourages the development of trust and long-term relationship building. Finally, for a workforce that tends to be isolated in individual workplaces and thus hard to find and engage, Alia represents an initial entry point for becoming a part of the domestic-worker movement. Once workers create an account and begin to use the platform, the Alia team also guides them in how to approach their employers and request contributions, offering sample messages and coaching. While these efforts are labor intensive, the interactions offer an important person-to-person link to the organization and a potential pathway for workers to organize.

The Alia team is learning that workers are more successful in obtaining benefits if they are first introduced to the platform by an employer. In this scenario, the workers avoid the need to request employer contributions, which is a barrier to uptake. Employers, for their part, often want to do the right thing, according to NDWA, but need the kind of guidance and infrastructure that Alia provides. However, systems of voluntary contribution have inherent limitations, and a mandate for employer contributions would go a long way toward helping Alia to scale across the sector. A successful 2019 campaign in Philadelphia is an important test for the effect of such a policy: Among other significant gains, the Philadelphia Domestic Worker Bill of Rights is the first legislation in the country to mandate the right to portable benefits for domestic workers.

TAKEAWAYS

Our research during the past two years has enabled us to talk with a wide range of workers and workers' rights advocates about the benefits and challenges of using digital tools and platforms in efforts to build power and improve working conditions. Drawing on the above examples, as well as additional research, we offer four takeaways that might help inform ongoing efforts to use digital tools and platforms effectively in the labor justice arena.

Digital tools can expand distributed organizing. | COVID-19 has underscored the value of digital tools in advancing labor rights and supporting collective action among working people. In the organizing arena, mainstream platforms like Facebook and mission-driven platforms like Coworker have enabled people to identify common concerns about inadequate protections against the virus, and to make demands of employers, policy makers, and other powerful actors. These activities are a subset of a wide array of movement activities percolating through online channels. Most strikingly, social media channels—predominantly Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram—have served an important coordinating function in the nationwide Black Lives Matter protests. These platforms have helped activists to organize actions at the city and neighborhood levels, counter and block police surveillance of protest activity, and narrate the purposes of the protests in ways that challenge mainstream media stories.

Digital tools can foster distributed engagement and organizing for labor rights as well. Often, as in the case of petition drives launched on Coworker, this activity emerges outside the context of established labor organizations. Within existing organizations, digital tools can support less hierarchical and more peer-to-peer

organizing and engagement—commonly referred to as a “starfish” form of organization. While unions have dues-paying membership structures, worker centers such as PWC—operating outside the union organizational model—often rely on digital tools to build a membership base by expanding their engagement with workers. The choice to pursue distributed models of engagement often emerges in part out of necessity, since worker centers are frequently grant funded and have relatively small numbers of paid staff. However, as with PWC, the choice is also connected in many cases to a broader theory of change that places more value on decentralized decision-making and information-sharing and the cultivation of strong ties among members. For PWC, WhatsApp-based member circles have played an important role in identifying needs and mobilizing mutual aid during the pandemic.

Distributed organizing and mobilization using digital tools have also occurred within unions. For example, a union local within the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) has been using Action Builder, an app to support worker organizing, for pandemic-related response efforts like mutual aid and help applying for unemployment benefits. A group of stagehands also joined IATSE after organizing largely over Zoom—an emergent trend seen across a number of sectors during the pandemic. In several cases, groups of union members have mobilized independently of established leadership structures to issue demands, such as launching petition drives demanding hazard pay.

Unions have often been latecomers to more sophisticated modes of digital engagement. Some people within organized labor are skeptical about whether engagement occurring outside union channels amounts to building durable power in the absence of organizational infrastructure. While these concerns are reasonable given that much of digital organizing is still experimental, dismissing the value of digital engagement is misguided, for at least two reasons. First, grassroots engagement on platforms such as Coworker often occurs in settings where unions do not have an established presence—and there are digital tools being developed that would make it easier for people in those conditions to formally unionize. Second, structure and distributed engagement are not mutually exclusive. In New York City, during the early days of the quarantine, a progressive caucus within the United Federation of Teachers, called the Movement of Rank and File Educators, mobilized online to lead early requests for schools to be shut down. As this example and recent petition drives launched by union members suggest, digital engagement can help to foster greater responsiveness and accountability within long-established worker organizations—a more democratic brand of unionism.

United for Respect, a nonprofit group that focuses on improving working conditions in the sprawling low-wage retail sector, is one organization that has experimented widely with digital engagement and now conducts training on effective approaches for unions, worker centers, and other economic justice organizations around the world. Originally developed as a campaign within a union, United for

Respect has since evolved into an independent organization. Many groups have been keenly interested in the group’s “online-to-offline,” or “O2O,” organizing framework, which addresses a range of issues, including how to build trust and cultivate decentralized leadership online and how to set in motion positive feedback loops between online and offline modes of engagement.

Digital tools present new opportunities—and new challenges. | During the pandemic, digital tools have supported worker organizing and mobilization to address health and safety concerns, helped workers to obtain the information they need about changing conditions and to share that information among themselves, enabled workers to maintain steady work with needed supports, such as childcare, and facilitated access to benefits and mutual aid. In some cases, there are also important links across these different dimensions. For example, providing services using digital tools may bolster an organization’s value and create on-ramps for new members who then become engaged in organizing via digital and other channels.

Despite the many opportunities that digital tools present for building worker power and improving working conditions, it is

The revolution will be livestreamed. The question is how we can combine all our tools—digital and analog—to challenge the bulwarks of power.

important to be explicit about the challenges of using digital tools and platforms effectively. Some organizations—especially those with limited capacity—have struggled to move online quickly, and those that have done so face increased competition from a digital space teeming with events, petitions, calls to action, and donation requests. In the context of resource constraints, workers’ rights organizations must prioritize their work carefully. Staying current on technology trends and platforms can be difficult, and some worry about wasting time on new technologies that might not deliver as promised.

For groups that have been successful in reaching people through digital channels, doing so often creates new capacity issues related to engaging people meaningfully and moving them along a “ladder of engagement”—a term that describes the process of deepening member and constituent involvement in a group’s activities. And for groups creating new tools for organizing and other purposes, building something that performs a useful function is just the first step. Getting people to actually use it, being able to continually upgrade it, and integrating the tool into broader organizational strategies are all important concerns. Several organizational leaders we spoke to over the course of our research said that even purpose-driven financial backers often fail to grasp all the needs that exist beyond the initial launch phase.

Digital tools carry inherent limitations. | Many organizers we have spoken with also underscore the danger of seeing digital tools as a silver bullet, despite recognizing and expressing their value. The craft of online-to-offline organizing remains under development, and significant questions remain about the relationship between online engagement and achieving durable gains for workers, in part because of the challenges of doing digital engagement well. However, these questions also have to do with limitations in what digital tools can accomplish on their own.

One important set of limitations is connected to the enduring digital divide. Unreliable internet access, limited digital literacy, and language barriers affect many marginalized communities most acutely, often limiting the reach of worker-oriented digital tools and platforms for those who might stand to gain the most. Support for online access, training, concerted outreach, and commitments to language justice can all help to make digital tools more accessible to those facing barriers to navigating online spaces. As *Contratados.org* illustrates, this kind of awareness should inform every phase and aspect of digital engagement, including design and development in the case of new tools. That said, no tool or initiative can fully address larger structural realities that limit digital access, and an overreliance on digital engagement can end up reinforcing certain patterns of marginalization.

The point that digital tools cannot solve big structural inequalities and labor market disadvantages on their own is fairly obvious, but it bears underscoring. Carina offers an example as a high-road hiring platform. It helps workers to find steadier work, thereby addressing the erratic scheduling and income volatility that are a chronic problem for workers in the industry. It is also part of a larger institutional mix in Washington State that has resulted in workers there having some of the highest wages and best working conditions in the country. However, even in the current best-case scenarios, the take-home pay of home-care workers in the publicly funded system remains abysmally low because of a history of racially inflected policy decisions—another variation on the same dynamic that has left domestic workers in the private-pay market lacking adequate protections. No digital tool can counter the accumulated weight of these histories. It is important not to become so enamored of new technologies as to lose sight of the deep inequities that still need to be challenged through political struggle.

Government plays a significant role. | Central to such political struggle is the role of government, which has the power to institutionalize broad health care, labor, and other protections. As is evident amid the COVID-19 crisis, the US government has often failed miserably at doing so. Digital tools that provide workers with specific services and support are frequently responding to various ways in which government actors have abdicated crucial responsibilities and/or actively excluded entire groups of people from important policy protections, often in connection with factors such as race, gender, and citizenship. Alia, which occupies the void created by the exclusion of domestic workers from access to paid time off policies, is one example. Engaging officials at the local, state, and federal levels will prove important to how these tools become part of long-term strategies to institutionalize protections for all working people.

A number of our case illustrations offer useful strategic insight in this regard. Carina's partnership with a statewide union and state

government was crucial in bringing the benefits of the platform to workers at scale, and the platform's developers are now exploring potential partnerships in other cities and states around the country. Complementing NDWA's base building and community organizing among domestic workers and employers, the portable-benefits policy win in Philadelphia is an important step toward institutionalizing the benefits of Alia, one that may become a model for other cities and states—and that may contribute to NDWA's long-term strategy of overturning the exclusion of domestic workers from crucial benefits and protections at the national level. And Seattle's digital portal for reporting labor rights violations using a model of coenforcement with labor and community groups represents the kind of collaboration needed to reverse perennial underenforcement of labor standards and protections—a problem that the uncertainty and labor market conditions flowing from the current crisis only exacerbate.

Regulation of mainstream digital platforms also figures prominently in whether and how digital tools can be used to empower workers. For example, prohibiting low-road practices among gig-economy companies can help to create an environment in which worker-oriented alternatives gain a foothold. Organizers also point to serious problems with privacy, security, and misinformation on Facebook and other social media platforms, and to the failure of regulators to adequately address these issues. Recently, activism has crested against Facebook's refusal to curb the spread of misinformation (which has played an important role in the election of right-wing leaders around the world) or to consistently stand against explicit white supremacy and incitements to violence. This highlights a basic tension in how Facebook is used for labor organizing: It is a space where many workers are already engaged, but many aspects of the platform subvert efforts to advance the broader interests of the most vulnerable and exploited workers. More robust regulation could help to curb elements of the site's operations that harm people and undermine informed and equitable democratic participation.

THE FUTURE OF DIGITAL PLATFORM POWER

The current moment is one of peril and possibility, and digital engagement will continue to play an important role in the pandemic and in the ongoing struggles for labor rights, racial justice, and climate justice that outlast the current public health crisis. A recent Roosevelt Institute report based on a survey of essential workers found that the COVID-19 crisis may be generating heightened interest in unionization and workplace collective action, and digital tools of the kinds we have discussed will help to shape whether and how that energy translates into meaningful and durable gains. The wave of protest activity responding to the epidemic of police violence against Black people in the United States shows that there is no replacing mobilizing in the streets as a way to build momentum, foster solidarity, and change the hearts and minds of those in power. It also makes clear that digital tools will be indispensable in helping to coordinate, narrate, and activate now and into the future.

The revolution will probably be livestreamed. The real question is how we can combine all the tools in our tool kit—digital and analog—to challenge the bulwarks of corporate and political power standing in the way of progress, and build something better from the ashes of this calamity. ■