



Labor Power in Numbers:

Mapping Labor Union Information Ecosystems and Data Journeys

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Introduction

Labor unions have been an essential part of the United States' working-class movement since America's first labor strike in 1768. During the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of the scientific management of labor, union organizers used data work^{1,2} to advocate on behalf of better working conditions and decision-making power in the workplace. However, the ever-evolving landscape of technology has brought about new challenges³ and opportunities^{1,2,3} for labor unions, requiring historically-informed investigation² into the potential applications of CSCW research to augment data-driven actions undertaken by labor unions. By articulating the conditions and movement of information concerning labor unions' efforts, this research aims to frame labor campaigns in ways that are tangible to CSCW researchers and practitioners such that further contributions can be made within the newly emerging field of HCI.

Aim and Hypotheses

The goal of this research is to examine the role and characteristics of data work in the context of the labor movement. Through investigating the conditions around a labor unions' formation and their on-going data practices, this research will result in a paper that aims to inform how CSCW researchers can support the continued success of the labor movement.

Participant's Role	Workers Represented	Union Scale
Vice President	Communications	Local
Union Staff	Healthcare	Local
Organizer (member)	Service (airport staff)	Local
Internal Organizer	Healthcare	Locals
Representative	State workers (DMV, Construction, public works)	Regional
Dept. Director	Education	State
Negotiator	Musicians	National

Figure 1: A table highlighting a few important differences across the participants included in the initial round of analysis.

Methods

Sampling

We conducted a semi-structured interview in which we recruited 25 participants who worked for 18 different nonprofit organizations in the U.S. & Canada. Interviews were conducted remotely through the audio/video conferencing platform, Zoom.

Interpretation

Grounded Theory - a systematic methodology that has been largely applied to qualitative research conducted by social scientists. The methodology involves the construction of hypotheses and theories through the collecting and analysis of data.

Preliminary Results

According to the results of our initial analysis and coding, two main approaches to data work in labor organizing were uncovered, along with two main organizing approaches which we expect might influence the data work taken on by a labor union. Results are gathered from a combination of participant diagrams (Fig. 2) and interviews.

Internal Organizing (Sustain Strength)

- *Workplace sends them data about members.
- Recruiting new membership.
- Membership education.
- *Contract negotiations.
- Culmination of power (strike, rally, picket, etc.).

External Organizing (Grow Strength)

- Identifying workplace leaders.
- Assess membership vote readiness.
- *Vote & Union certification.
- *First Contract development.

*Indicates that legal restrictions may apply in practice.

Service Model

- Good relationship with management is most important.
- Tries to settle without involvement of members.
- Reluctant to involve members in bringing pressure on employer.
- An insurance policy or a "third party" to call on when they have a problem.

Organizing Model

- Defending members is most important.
- Tries to involve all members in the department.
- Encourage initiative and creativity of members.
- Take personal responsibility for success or failure of the union.

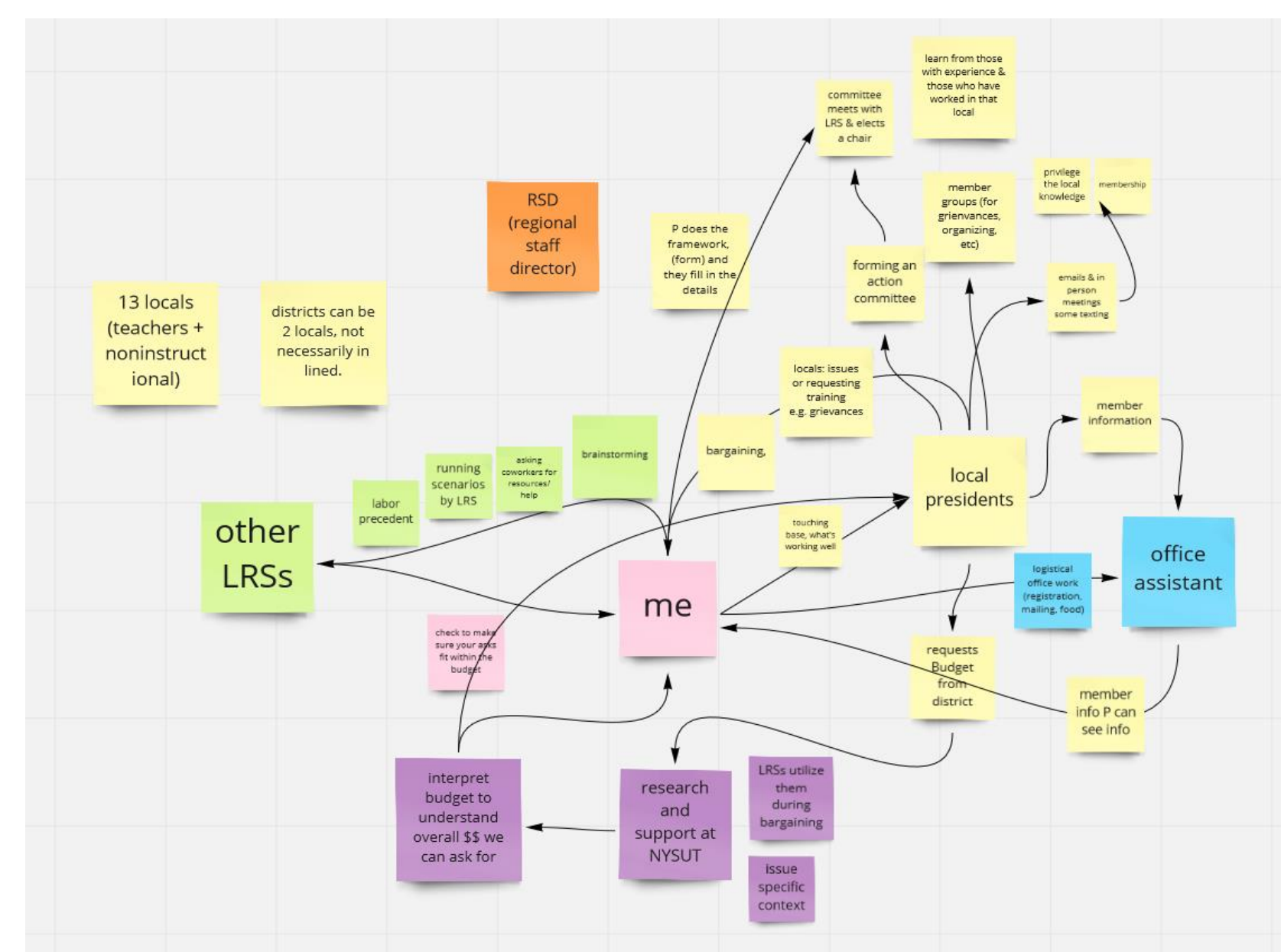


Figure 2: A participant diagram depicting their relationships to others, describing the flow of information between the participant and other stakeholders.

Future Directions

After an initial round of analyzing (8) interview transcripts, several research angles became more readily apparent: a) public/private sector b) scale/size of union c) gig vs full time. Each of these factors plays an important role in the power that a union can assert on behalf of its membership. Further analysis will be done to compare these factors across participants' data in order to describe how a labor unions' conditions play a role in the socio-technological development of a labor unions.

Future questions currently motivating the research paper are,

- Does a given labor organizing model affect a labor union's data work?
- What data abstractions are important to labor unions?
- What can data work offer to labor unions' mission of coalition building?

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References

Interested in learning more about the literature reviewed for this project? Scan this QR code!

