

## CHAPTER 5



### DIVERSIFYING POLITICAL ACTION IN RETAIL

In recent years, there has been a marked increase in efforts to organize retail workers and improve retail work. There has also been an expansion and diversification of the routes and vehicles being used to unite workers and advocate for change. Both in North America and around the world, innovative structures and strategies are being developed and used. Accordingly, in retail, *organizing* is not merely a synonym for *unionizing*. This chapter highlights a number of the contemporary forms of political action being used in retail.

Workers have a rich history of uniting through various kinds of organizations. These include formally recognized labor unions, community unions, groups for unemployed workers, poor workers' organizations, networks, coalitions, and workers' centers (Black 2012; Choudry and Thomas 2012; Cobble 1991a; Coulter 2012a, 2012b; Cranford and Ladd 2003; Fine 2006; Finkel 2006; Luce 2004; Nussbaum 2007; Tait 2005). In other words, organizing has never simply been a synonym for unionizing, across sectors. The relationships between formal unions and other organizational formats have varied and continue to vary. There can be collaboration and solidarity, tension and criticism, or more extensive hostility and sabotage. Of course, unions themselves are heterogeneous in a number of ways, including the robustness of their finances and their political orientation. Consequently, the degree of connectivity with and support for non-unionization-focused forms of organizing in retail varies.

Many of the newer strategies being employed stem, in part, from the challenges of unionizing retail workers. As evidenced by the previous chapter, corporate hostility to unions and the powerful union avoidance strategies that result are particularly significant challenges. The United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) has tried a number of strategies to unionize Walmart stores, but as explained in chapter 4, no significant inroads have been made yet (Adams 2005). A store in Weyburn, Saskatchewan, a community with a long history of progressive politics and leaders, did organize in 2004, but lengthy legal disputes ensued. UFCW Canada Local 1400 was ultimately recognized as the bargaining agent by the Saskatchewan Labour Relations Board four years later, but negotiations dragged on and no collective agreement could be secured. Workers were frustrated by the delays. Moreover, during such a long period, significant turnover occurred. In this context, in 2010, a decertification vote was held, and workers voted in favor of decertification. The union appealed the vote, however. In 2013, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the union's appeal would not be heard, and the results of the decertification vote were recognized. Arguably, delays and lengthy legal proceedings could be seen as another form of union avoidance.

Given the substantial and multifaceted challenges, union representatives, community organizers, and scholars have reflected on ways to tackle the unfriendly retail giant (Rathke 2006). Campaigns like Wake-up Walmart and Walmart Watch have been developed in order to educate, engage, and build networks among those interested in improving the conditions and practices at Walmart. Small associations for Walmart workers were created in both Canada and the United States. Community-based coalitions have organized against Walmart, as well. Some have provided support for workers seeking to organize, and some have fought against Walmart locations being erected in their communities. People's concerns stem from the impact of a store opening on local, small businesses; Walmart's environmental and animal welfare record; its emphasis on foreign-made products and the working conditions in those factories; and the lack of living wages paid by the company, among other issues (Adams 2005). In other words, Walmart's actions inspire a lot of anger and collective action of different kinds.

## AND STILL WE RISE

Arguably, the current organizing approach seeks to harness, combine, and further develop dimensions of these different strategies. OUR Walmart (the Organization United for Respect at Walmart) was founded in 2010 and has been growing in size and prominence since then. In the simplest of terms, it is an organizing vehicle used to propel workers who want to make change at work even though they are not currently in a union, to foster supportive community, and to promote a culture of activism. This approach could be and is sometimes called *minority unionism*, but I have argued that the term *store-based network* is more accurate (Coulter 2013b). Terms like *workers' network*, *workers' organization*, and, potentially, *workers' movement* also apply. While terminology and framing do matter and help shape perceptions among workers and the public, more broadly, even more important is the work being done on the ground.

OUR Walmart field directors and organizers work daily with worker-organizers and activists in more than 40 chapters across the United States. In early 2013, an organization in Québec was also established, called Notre Walmart (*notre* is French for “our”). Notre Walmart is in the very early stages of organizing, but organizers report that there is interest from workers at over 30 stores (Laprade 2013). The US chapters are more established and becoming even more well-known as different forms of political engagement are pursued.

Workers take action at the store, community, and corporate level. The approach is both responsive, stemming from particular challenges or issues that arise in stores, and proactive, emphasizing workers' power and their ability to change the company's practices. Issues raised to date include poverty wages, a shortage of hours, the cutting of hours, racial and/or gender-based discrimination, and a need for workers to be free to organize and speak out without harassment or reprisal.

I have argued that the overarching emphasis of the organization is that unity plus collective action equals change (Coulter 2013b). A simple but powerful illustration of this approach occurred when a greeter was denied a stool by the managers at his store, despite the fact that the corporate handbook permits seating for greeters.

In many other cases, this worker would simply have been forced to accept the decree issued that denied him the chance to sit down. However, OUR Walmart members learned of what had happened and began a sit-in protest (a particularly fitting tactic given the situation). Likely wanting to avoid a negative public relations debacle within which Walmart was highlighted for denying someone in need the chance to get off his feet, the company did not call the police. Instead, the worker was granted the right to use a stool. This example may seem simple, but it clearly illustrates the approach being emphasized through OUR Walmart. Workers learn firsthand that by uniting and taking action together, they get results. Thus, workers see not only that they have collective power, but that they can make change.

Accordingly, a multifaceted set of actions has been pursued, including information pickets at stores, marches, and caravans, the latter drawing on the tradition of civil-rights-movement activism and the Freedom Riders convoys which went to the most segregated and racist US states in the 1960s. The OUR Walmart caravans have gone to the company's shareholders meetings, allowing workers to share their stories in communities along the way and to voice their concerns directly to corporate executives and the shareholders. Again enlisting the longer history of African American activism, the song "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize" was sung at caravan events and updated to include the lyrics "I'll be buried in my grave, before I'll ever be a Walmart slave. Keeping our eyes on the prize and holding on. The one thing we did right was the day we decided to strike. Keeping our eyes on the prize and holding on."

Shareholders meetings for many publicly-traded companies are a large spectacle, and the majority or dominant shareholders—in this case, the Walton family—still wield more power than the hundreds or thousands of individuals who own some stock. Many Walmart shareholders seem fairly content with the low-wage, low-cost business model and the profits it accrues for them. Nevertheless, workers' voices would be absent if this kind of political action did not occur. It also means shareholders cannot say they did not know of the conditions at the stores or of the poverty of the workers.

In the fall of 2012, workers in more than two dozen Walmart stores in the United States walked off the job. The majority were members of OUR Walmart. Interestingly, a few workers, including

those at a store in Oklahoma, engaged in a day of action on their own, complete with homemade signs, without ever having talked to an organizer. This suggests that courage and collective action foster courage and collective action. At the same time, an organizational framework is more likely to encourage and support workers who want to stand up for themselves, and the importance of what Alan Sears (forthcoming) calls the “infrastructure of dissent” is clear.

The October actions served as a springboard for an unprecedented and historic series of actions at more than 1,000 stores on “Black Friday” (the day after Thanksgiving in the United States and the beginning of the profitable Christmas shopping season). For example, in the San Francisco Bay Area, different kinds of actions were being planned based on what the members wanted and felt was possible given their particular location and community. Some were going to release balloons with political messages inside their stores, others were planning to distribute leaflets to shoppers, and/or rallies were being organized. In all instances, coalitions with local labor councils, community groups, religious leaders, and progressive politicians were being established and solidified. Even with a supportive network, there is still worry among some Walmart workers about the consequences of taking action. However, striker Dominic Ware had this to say about fear: “I have no fear of being retaliated against . . . because the whole reason that I’m speaking out is bigger than me . . . I’m more scared about my son one day having to work for Walmart” (Eidelson 2013a, n.p.).

Some of the “Walmart Strikers” were terminated or otherwise disciplined (Eidelson 2013b). OUR Walmart has condemned all forms of alleged retaliation against workers for engaging in political action. The right of all Walmart workers to self-advocate is a core pillar underscoring the entire organization. Moreover, OUR Walmart members and organizers maintain ties with those workers who have been terminated, supporting them personally, involving them in organizing, and fighting for their reinstatement. Given the high turnover rate in retail as a result of termination and worker exit, such a commitment takes on even greater significance (Rathke 2006).

Retail workers, unions, and their supporters around the world have expressed solidarity with the US-based Walmart strikers. In this spirit, UNI Global Union facilitated international days of

action to support change at Walmart, and events were organized in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Nicaragua, South Africa, India, Canada, and the United Kingdom, among other countries. Notably, some or many retail workers, even those at Walmart stores, are unionized in a number of these places. In nations that have strong union cultures and/or governments that require foreign companies to respect existing collective agreements if seeking to do business in the country, Walmart has been forced to bargain, work with unionized workers, and follow national laws.

OUR Walmart continues to organize and expand, as new chapters are established and committees set up. Local efforts are bolstered by web and social-media strategies, which link workers with each other, educate the broader public, and share actions with the broader network of supporters. Workers' messages and the organization's emphases vary. In some instances, the message is that workers do not only want to gain greater respect, they want to help the company do better and be better. In other cases, the language is much more critical and highlights the widespread poverty wages, corporate greed, the extreme wealth of the Waltons, and the disconnect between the company's rhetoric and its behavior. Overall, the tone and emphases of both the organization and the workers involved include critique, as well as a desire for collaboration.

Complementary organizations also exist, broadening the angles from which workers within and beyond the company are contesting Walmart's practices. For example, Making Change at Walmart supports the work of OUR Walmart and, in particular, engages those who do not work in the company but wish to see improvements therein. Coalitions between store and warehouse workers are also being established and expanded to foster unity and solidarity across the supply chain, such as with Warehouse Workers United. At the same time, legal battles continue through the National Labor Relations Board in the United States, provincial labor boards in Canada, and private law suits. Walmart is the target of many law suits alleging discrimination, particularly based on gender and disregard for environmental regulations, and the company has been found guilty of many violations by courts (Adams 2005; Featherstone 2004; Lichtenstein 2009). Walmart has also sued the UFCW, the union that finances OUR Walmart (Gordon 2013).

The UFCW's role in financing and coordinating OUR Walmart is clear, but the focus is not the establishment of a union. Given the many challenges of organizing Walmart, an unconventional approach is a smart, strategic decision. The action-oriented framework facilitates the building of workers' confidence and consciousness and has helped gain tangible victories. Given the significant barriers to organizing Walmart workers, the UFCW could have opted to pursue organizing routes that are more likely to lead to new members, more quickly. Instead, the union has demonstrated a commitment to creative mobilizing and organizing. The history of organizing at Walmart is still being written because it is still made by the women and men committed to a better future for workers in the company.

Engaging and mobilizing workers across geographic regions around a specific store chain is a framework that has been applied beyond Walmart. For example, the strategy is being used by the UFCW to support workers of the Dutch food retail company, Ahold, as well. The company has many unionized stores globally, including in the United States. Two nonunion banners, Martin's and Giant-Carlisle, operate in Southern states, in particular. Consequently, the I Hold campaign was developed to support these predominantly racialized and feminized workers and argue that all workers within the Ahold enterprise should have the same standards and protections. At the same time, through the use of the name, I Hold, the campaign is not simply playing on the name of the company, but highlighting the different things workers "hold," including knowledge, power, and experience.

Similarly, UFCW Canada created a network called Ask Target for Fairness in response to corporate actions. Large and profitable US-based retailer Target moved into Canada in 2012. The company replaced more than 140 existing Zellers department stores with Target locations. However, Zellers workers were informed that they were losing their jobs and only that they were welcome to reapply for work in the Target stores. The workers were not provided with any guarantee of similar positions, recognition of seniority, or any of the modest increases in wages and benefits they may have earned through collective agreements or decades of service. The UFCW formally represented workers in 16 Zellers stores. In these low-cost department stores, some people had been working in the same store for 10 or 20 years. One woman from

Niagara Falls, Ontario, who spoke out against the job losses, had been working in her community store for 38 years. Some workers who asked for reference letters to help them with their job searches shared what the company provided in response with me. The letters provided by the company were comprised of one short paragraph indicating that the individual had worked in the store, in specific positions, and for how long. There was no mention of performance or commentary on workers' skills. The workers saw this as yet another indication of how little their years of work were appreciated.

In contrast, the union worked with any interested employees to try and gain guarantees from Target for all Zellers workers, whether they were UFCW members or not. The parent company, HBC, issued a letter forbidding Zellers workers from talking to the media, but a small number spoke out nevertheless and felt buoyed by the support from the union (Kopun 2012). The campaign's efforts focused in particular on raising workers' issues through social and mainstream media, petitions, community rallies, presentations at shareholders meetings, and direct conversations with human-resources representatives from Target. Target eventually agreed to guarantee Zellers workers interviews, but nothing more. As Target stores opened across the country, Target Canada's president, Tony Fisher, would not comment on how many Zellers workers were actually hired, nor would he provide any information about how many full-time jobs there were in Target stores for Canadians, period (Kopun 2013; Strauss 2013).

Each example of the store-based network strategy demonstrates interactive, participatory avenues for worker engagement and community education. There are other organizational variations on the idea of engaging retail workers in networks across space, as well. For example, the Food Chain Workers Alliance is a US-based coalition that unites food retail workers with those involved in the growing, production, and storing of food. Clearly, a network or coalition framework is a vehicle, and the specific content and focus are shaped by the social actors involved and the issues being tackled, among other factors. The vehicles can be proactive and/or responsive, and usually are both.

Overall, although aware of the challenges and cognizant of workers' legitimate worries, there is a real sense of excitement within labor organizations about the prospects of making change

through unconventional organizing frameworks and the accomplishments that have already solidified small victories for workers. OUR Walmart organizer Alan Hanson (pers. comm.) says, these approaches “are the most exciting things happening in the labor movement and the only way we’re going to organize retail.”

## RETAIL WORKERS UNITE

The Retail Action Project (RAP) is another interesting example of contemporary organizing and political action in retail. It differs from the networks mentioned in a few ways, including in terms of scope and structure. RAP is based in New York City, a place mentioned often in this book because it has a long history and vibrant contemporary cultures of political action in retail and beyond. In 2005, RAP began as a community labor coalition linking the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU) and the Good Old Lower East Side community group. Early efforts focused on supporting predominantly young and immigrant workers, often as they fought against wage theft and discrimination. Wage theft is illegal and can take various forms, including paying workers less than the minimum wage, not paying for the total number of hours worked, and naming a position an internship. Young workers, recent immigrants, or undocumented workers can be particularly vulnerable to wage theft since unscrupulous employers may presume such groups do not know their full rights, have the resources to defend themselves, and/or be susceptible to threats. RAP has worked with the attorney general’s office to investigate retail workers’ cases. Retail workers at a number of stores have won settlements, including Yellow Rat Bastard workers who were paid \$1.4 million in owed wages. Similarly, \$950 thousand was paid to more than 100 workers at Mystique, and workers at Scoop were paid an undisclosed amount. Shoe Mania workers won \$1.15 million and shortly thereafter joined the RWDSU.

Since its early days of political action, RAP has grown in size and prominence, and it became an advocacy organization in 2010. Housed in the heart of Manhattan, RAP’s small office is busy and bustling. This is a reflection of the diverse kinds of activities being pursued, work being done, and people involved. RAP has a small waged staff, paid and voluntary worker-organizers and trainers, and many volunteers. RAP members do not come from a

single store or chain, but rather the retail sector as a whole. They may be moving between retail jobs, currently unemployed but looking for work in retail, or long-serving workers in nonunion stores. In other words, the New York retail sector is the basis for unity. Accordingly, RAP is a sector- or occupation-based organization (Coulter 2013b). There are different ways for workers to be engaged. Workers join the network to keep informed and can attend events of their choice. Particularly active workers can also become involved as organizers, trainers, or members of the leadership board or board of directors.

Structurally, RAP is akin to a workers' center model seen across North America, exemplified by the Restaurant Opportunities Centers, Workers' Action Centers, and Migrant Workers Centers (e.g., Black 2012; Choudry and Thomas 2012; Cranford and Ladd 2003; Fine 2006). RAP has very diversified funding sources, including private foundations, union support, and contributions from members and private donors. Its actions are diverse. The organization provides practical and professional assistance services to bolster participants' abilities to gain and maintain retail work, including through help with résumé writing, job searches, customer-service training, and legal referrals. The office also provides workers with access to tangible essentials like computers and printers. These kinds of resources should not be assumed to be easily accessible for all people, particularly those who are unemployed or earning poverty wages.

Some labor advocates may balk at the idea of a workers' organization providing customer-service training. Yet RAP executive director, Carrie Gleason (pers. comm.), recognizing the diverse skills required in retail, as outlined in chapter 2, says the following: "Low wages in retail are often justified by the claim that retail is a low-skilled job. Yet, working on the shop floor is often fast-paced, physical work that demands emotional intelligence and significant multitasking within rigid expectations. Through our professional development programming and services, RAP supports workers' career advancement, and shifts public perception[s] about the value of work."

Moreover, some seeking work in New York retail may have recently immigrated to the United States and thus be facing cultural and/or linguistic barriers to finding even low-wage jobs. Accordingly, customer-service training, provided by a worker-friendly

organization, could be viewed as helping these people gain a greater chance of getting a foothold into waged work. At the same time, if a worker comes to RAP for customer-service training, this can lead to increased engagement with the organization and its more explicitly political projects. For example, while at the RAP office in 2011, I spoke with two workers who had initially come to RAP for professional help but had become politicized over time, and RAP staff told me that this is common. When workers enter RAP, they step into a welcoming space and community, where they are respected and valued, something that can stand in stark contrast to their experiences in the city and economy more broadly. They also become involved with an organization pursuing many projects, many of which take the idea of respecting individual people as retail workers and translate that into political action that promotes policies to enshrine and legislate greater respect at a broader level.

In that vein, other educational initiatives at RAP include workers' rights and organizing training, as well as media skills development. Moreover, RAP is always building campaigns. Often, individual workers' concerns are the catalyst, particularly when a pattern is evident or a particularly problematic employer identified. Recently, workers at both Juicy Couture and Victoria's Secret have brought their concerns to RAP, seeking to amplify their message and learn from RAP staff and activists, for example. Sustainable scheduling, or "just hours," has been a key focus, as workers seek to combat the expansion of part-time positions and the hiring of new part-time workers when existing employees are seeking more hours. Multifaceted action plans are developed, combining media and social-media strategies, participatory events, and community engagement. A growing and diverse coalition, which includes workers' organizations of various kinds, community groups, and research institutes, has formed to fight for a fair work week. RAP also partners with researchers in universities to conduct much-needed studies about retail workers and the sector (Luce and Fujita 2012). As implementation of the Affordable Care Act progresses, RAP is launching a Healthcare Access Program and will be actively engaged in enrolling as many of the 75,000 uninsured New York retail workers as possible.

Indeed, in only a few years since the organization's establishment, RAP members have already engaged in many forms of political action and been very visible around the city at political

and cultural events, including labor demonstrations, commemorative events honoring workers' organizing and resistance, and Pride marches. RAP has engaged in political theater at fashion events, hosted art displays, and facilitated media productions. RAP also has organized protests, particularly at workplaces seen as violating labor law and workers' rights.

It is precisely the degree of collaboration, community, and constant political engagement that makes New York City a symbol of hope for retail workers. As a major global city within which the retail sector plays such a prominent role in the economy and, simultaneously, a place with a very high cost of living, the need to raise the region's retail standards cannot be denied. The complementary forms of political action being pursued and coalitions being formed in New York make the city stand out as being at the forefront of the struggle to revolutionize retail. Indeed, retail worker advocates are front and center in many examples of political action in the city. They also bolster campaigns for other groups of low-wage workers, including car-wash workers, or "carwash-eros" as they are sometimes endearingly called. Retail workers' unions and organizations are actively fostering a culture of solidarity and activism and pursuing social change at local, workplace, and governmental levels. Notably, retail workers' organizations in New York City have targeted public policy and government as routes to improving retail work, a dimension to which I will return below.

### SPACES OF SOLIDARITY AND STRUGGLE

Retail worker advocates are continually reflecting on and assessing their strategies, as well as thinking about scale and how efforts should be coordinated both spatially and conceptually to be most effective. This process of reflection has contributed to the framing of organizing based around a shared retail company, wherever it operates, as well as on activism that is focused within a specific geographic space, like a city. Put another way, scale has been incorporated in different ways, simultaneously.

Size and place are also reflected in organizing that hones in on a very specific, local space of retail work—the mall. In the United States, the RWDSU developed a community-engagement campaign centered on and around the Queens Center Mall in Queens,

New York. The mall is located in an ethnically-diverse and primarily low-income community and, with more than 3,000 people working therein, it serves as a major employer in the area. The mall is a space within which multiple workplaces are housed, as well as a center of community commerce. In other words, as is the case in communities across North America and around the world, many residents worked and/or shopped at the local mall.

Moreover, like many retail establishments, the mall's parent company had received tax credits and other public subsidies. The RWDSU has consistently argued that when private employers benefit from public money, that places even greater social responsibility on the retailers. Companies' bottom lines benefit from such subsidies and from paying less in taxes into the public purse. As a result, there is no reason such companies should be poverty-wage employers.

This premise has been used to mobilize people in interesting ways. For example, when developers sought to remake the Kingsbridge Armory in the Bronx into a retail establishment, drawing on extensive public subsidies as part of the process, workers and their allies argued that the organization should sign an agreement that guaranteed living wages and protections for any workers who wanted to organize a union in the workplaces that would be created. In other words, community members did not simply want retail jobs; they wanted retail jobs that paid family-sustaining living wages and afforded workers the right to organize without interference. Their organizing and lobbying for a "Community Benefits Agreement" and the developer's refusal to sign such an agreement contributed to a 45–1 vote against redevelopment by the New York City Council (Busecma 2009). This example suggests not all communities want retail jobs at any cost and that some people are willing to forego immediate poverty-wage jobs in favor of a longer-term strategy to reshape retail positions and transform lousy jobs into good jobs.

In that vein, the Queens Center Mall campaign built directly on the energy and momentum of the Armory redevelopment rejection. The campaign sought to promote progressive change across stores and, at the same time, challenge dominant perceptions of malls as exclusively for-profit spaces. The campaign had three goals. First, all employers should pay living wages. Second, all employers should remain neutral if workers sought to organize. Third, space

in the mall should be allocated for not-for-profit community needs, like ESL classes, job training, and community-group meetings. Workers, community members, and politicians were all engaged through meetings, rallies, and petitions, among other strategies. The campaign is less active now, and efforts are being channeled more to other campaigns, but Phil Andrews (pers. comm.), director of the Retail Organizing Project at the RWDSU, says this: “Because the odds are firmly stacked against retail workers and their unions, every opportunity to work with community, faith and public officials must be taken. In addition, it’s necessary to focus on targets and campaigns that have significant leverage points—in this case, the fact that public subsidies supported a project that created mostly low-wage jobs and provided no benefit to the community.” Whether malls continue to be used as springboards for organizing in New York or other communities is yet to be determined, but the strategy undoubtedly offers a way of emphasizing the importance of retail jobs and workplaces in communities of all sizes. Such strategies can also be used to foster worker-shopper solidarity, educate the public, and build worker power.

Notably, the South African Commercial, Catering, and Allied Workers’ Union (SACCAWU) has also sought to harness the potential of the mall as a space for organizing through mall committees. The committees stemmed from the union’s gender-equity initiatives and were conceptualized as a way to expand the focus beyond existing unionized workplaces within the malls. The idea was for stewards to reach out to precarious, often women, workers in neighboring, nonunion stores and build political action from the issues workers were directly confronting. A key goal was for the committees to open spaces where workers could raise issues beyond the walls of their workplaces (Kenny 2009b, 2011). The organization format and degrees of formality varied substantially across malls because of local circumstances and social actors’ own personalities and emphases. Bridget Kenny (2011) has assessed the accomplishments and limitations of the strategy in the specific political, historical, and cultural conjuncture of that country and also raises questions of cross-cultural applicability about how “politics” is conceptualized by workers and unions and how union structures can be used to support workers’ challenges that extend beyond their workplaces. This highlights another way to think about scale and builds on feminist scholars’ emphases on the

interconnectedness of “public” and “private” spheres (Bezanson 2006; Glazer 1993; Luxton and Corman 2001).

These sorts of strategies provide further evidence to disprove the claim made in many corporate antiunion materials that unions are simply interested in collecting dues. The data from the retail terrain disprove this assertion, as more unions commit to initiatives that do not generate dues revenue or promote unionization. Indeed, all forms of retail organizing are very resource-intensive work. The newer, innovative organizational formats suggest that retail unions are serious about making change in the sector and are willing to broaden and diversify their approaches to that end. Non-unionization-focused forms of organizing do not provide workers with the protections and benefits of a collective agreement or the substantial resources of formal union membership. Yet these frameworks do provide workers with a collective framework for learning about politics and power and exploring ways to win improvements. In some ways, political action not concentrated on unionization allows for a greater focus to be placed on understanding and education, thereby building workers’ consciousness and power in the longer term. Given the state of retail work and the cultural devaluation of retail workers, I believe these forms of political action play an important role in fostering much-needed social and cultural change. Legal scholars like David Doorey (2012) are also beginning to analyze how new labor laws could provide graduated forms of protection for workers to recognize and advance these sorts of organizational vehicles.

The network-type approaches are easily implemented across geographic space but necessarily require resources to be spread, as a result. A sector-based organization like RAP is well suited to urban centers within which many retail workers are located. Other locally rooted strategies, like mall committees or campaigns, offer a way of promoting worker unity and social change applicable in various communities, including in smaller towns with one mall.

The organizing vehicles also illustrate different ways to think about membership and representation. Given the high employee turnover rate and varied workplace structures in retail, sector-based forms of representation make sense (Coulter 2011; Ikeler 2011). In that vein, RAP offers one model for engaging retail workers regardless of the store in which they work. Formal unions would be well served to not only support initiatives like OUR Walmart,

RAP, and community-rooted mall campaigns, but to seriously reflect on ways to expand how retail worker representation is conceptualized. The retail sector can be defined and approached in a number of ways, including in a city, region, or national context.

Moreover, the diverse and multileveled community of retail action seen in New York City suggests retail workers' organizations can and should play a prominent role in advocating for changes in how retail work and workers are perceived more broadly. Various retail workers' organizations in Europe have already put this idea into action, as well. For example, Mandate trade union in Ireland has launched both a Respect Retail Workers campaign to engage workers and the broader public, as well as a Fair Shop campaign to recognize those retailers who engage in collective bargaining and provide better retail jobs. In Britain, Check Out LGBT, a coalition involving retailers and retail workers' organizations, has recently been established to promote both workers' and shoppers' rights and combat homophobia. These examples illuminate some of the ways educational and activist campaigns can foster connections between retail workers and shoppers and how retail worker advocates can strive to shape cultural ideas about rights, consumption, and work.

## SOCIAL CHANGE

When it comes to better retail jobs and a more ambitious, holistic approach to workers' well-being, it is the Nordic and Scandinavian countries of northern Europe that stand out. In Sweden, for example, retail jobs are considered good jobs (Andersson et al. 2011). How people define "good jobs" varies within and across cultures. At minimum, material conditions of work, such as wages, benefits, and hours, usually matter. Often factors like job stability, scheduling predictability, and income security will figure in people's conceptualizations of job quality. Sometimes experiential dimensions like feeling respected and valued are highlighted, as well. In certain cases, people will consider what the work accomplishes or does to benefit others as part of their assessments of the relative quality of a job. The Swedish workers and researchers with whom I spoke argued that all these levels are important in Sweden. In a comparative perspective, the mere fact that retail jobs in Sweden are well paid stands the country in stark contrast to most other national

contexts. The inclusion of broader measures of worker well-being makes the Swedish context even more noteworthy. To fully understand retail work in Sweden, both the specifics of the sector and the broader national context need to be outlined.

To start with wages, retail workers in Sweden make significantly more than their counterparts in most other countries. In comparison to the average earnings for a retail worker in the United States, for example, the average Swedish retail worker makes at least 40 percent more. Retail workers' wages in Sweden increase for every year of service, but even at starting or entry levels, the pay is sufficient for supporting oneself and any dependents. At the same time, retail workers are given extra pay for working "uncomfortable hours"—that is, evenings and weekends. For evening and weekend work, every shift is paid at least time and a half (150 percent of the normal wage). In some instances, the pay is double time (200 percent of the normal wage). This extra pay is to recognize that workers are being asked to take time away from homelife to work and thus should be provided extra compensation.

In the Swedish retail sector, schedules are generally drawn up annually, at the beginning of the fiscal year. Put another way, workers often know their work schedules for the entire year, regardless of whether they are part-time or full-time employees. Newer hires who begin positions partway through the year will only know their shifts for the remainder of the fiscal year, and in practice there are still instances when schedules may change. Yet there is little scheduling volatility and, overall, substantial notice and predictability. Workers are not sent home without pay if the store is less busy, either. When I asked those working in retail about being sent home, let alone being sent home without pay, it seemed a very foreign prospect that was met with great surprise.

These differences—better wages and more predictable scheduling—capture two of the most common complaints retail workers outside of northern Europe have about their jobs. In contrast to retail workers in North America, for example, Swedish retail workers have income that is both sufficient for maintaining a decent standard of living and reliable. Moreover, they can predict and plan both their pay and their schedules. As a result, education, child care, leisure activities, and other elements of life, like medical appointments, can not only be afforded, but can be planned and secured.

These conditions did not spontaneously appear, however, nor were they proposed by Swedish retail employers. They were gained through political action. Sweden's largest retail union, Handels, was founded in 1906, and smaller retail workers' organizations existed even earlier. Over the course of the twentieth century, workers in retail and across sectors organized at a number of levels and established strong, robust unions and labor federations. The role of electoral politics was also taken seriously, and workers played an integral role in progressive parties, particularly the Social Democratic Party, which governed the country for much of the twentieth century. Swedish people sought to build a society within which people's welfare, in a broad sense, was prioritized. In that task, they recognized the need for strong unions to protect and advance workers' interests and proactive, progressive public policy that guarantees rights to all citizens, regardless of where or whether they work for wages.

Similar social visions exist in other Scandinavian countries like Denmark, Norway, Iceland, and Finland; thus this socioeconomic and political approach is called the *Swedish model*, or the *Nordic model*. Concisely, the model is underscored by a social-democratic approach to society, politics, and the economy. As such, it is driven by a commitment to reciprocity, collaboration, equality, and solidarity. Sweden is a capitalist country, but it is quite different from most countries' versions of capitalism in a number of ways. There are for-profit businesses, including massive global corporations, and entrepreneurial innovation is encouraged. Financial organizations rank Sweden as among the best places to do business, including the World Economic Forum, which consistently places Sweden above the United States in its global competitiveness rankings (Schwab and Sala-i-Martin 2012). In Sweden, corporations are not worshiped as a sacred, unfettered group above the law or social responsibility, however. Instead, both the idea and practice of social and economic partnership are promoted, and unions, employers, and government are seen as integral to the Swedish model. Accordingly, workers are widely represented by strong and coordinated unions across job categories. About 70 percent of all Swedish workers are currently union members (Kjellberg 2011). Virtually every occupational group in Sweden is unionized and protected by a collective agreement. For example, a majority of frontline retail workers in stores are represented by

Handels. At the same time, certain sales workers and many managers, as well as the workers of all kinds in retailers' corporate offices, are represented by a different union, Unionen. In other words, the salespeople are unionized, but so too are the store managers and the retail company's office workers, whether they be in the mailroom, accounting department, human resources, or any other white-collar position.

Employers, too, are formally united into associations, usually based on sector. In this context, collective bargaining is normal, regular, and widespread, and it occurs at the national level. Thus, when Handels bargains with the retail employers' association, Svensk Handel, to negotiate the collective agreement for the retail sector, the contract covers the country as a whole and all sizes of stores therein. As a result, the same wage rates, benefits, and standards apply across retailers. Thus, the collective agreement governs the wages and conditions of work across the retail sector. Workers who join the union gain additional protections and benefits, more generous insurance programs, and the opportunity to contribute to their union and the Swedish labor movement more generally. There are about 150,000 frontline retail workers (called "blue collar workers" regardless of the store in which they work) in Sweden. Currently about 60 percent of them have joined Handels in order to be full union members. Union representatives continuously engage in major recruitment drives at the store level in order to gain new members and talk with existing members. For example, in a weeklong campaign in early 2013, representatives from Handels spoke to 10 percent of all workers and visited almost one-third of all the workplaces. Successive, effective collective bargaining, including some strikes, along with workers who are actively engaged in local clubs and the national union, have created the good conditions retail workers in Sweden enjoy today. Not all groups of workers have gained the same precise protections, and Handels's record speaks to its history of ambitiously fighting for more rights, protections, and guarantees for those in retail.

As is the case in all countries, Swedish unions are not homogeneous, nor entirely united in their politics (Ekdahl 1992). Some, including Handels, have been more militant and politically engaged. Sweden is often heralded for being one of the most, if not the most, equal country in the world in terms of both class and gender (Lister 2009). At the same time, a majority of retail workers in Sweden

are women, and in contrast to some other workers' organizations, Handels continues to advance the need for greater equality between genders in theory and in practice (Briskin 1999b). For example, the union is currently engaged in internal debates about whether further requirements should be placed on the parental leave program so that men are required to use half of the time, in order to enshrine an equitable distribution of days away from work.

Paid parental leave is not something widely afforded to retail workers in countries like the United States, but it is the norm in Sweden. In fact, all Swedish workers are entitled to 480 days of paid parental leave. They are also guaranteed at least five weeks of paid vacation per year and paid sick days (at full pay), regardless of whether they are part-time or full-time. Swedish workers also are guaranteed unemployment insurance and pensions, the funds for which come from employers and the public coffers. These guarantees are enshrined in national law, as public policy, and considered social rights and/or citizenship rights. In North America, right-wing interests criticize universal social programs, like social security, by trying to create a negative association with the word *entitlement*. In Sweden, the idea of being entitled to specific rights and programs is viewed positively, as an expression of a shared commitment to everyone's well-being and a reflection of widespread social solidarity. Such guarantees are a point of pride in Sweden, providing peace of mind and contributing to the high standard of living for all workers, including those in private sector service work like retail.

Not all of the programs Swedish people access are directly tied to work, but they improve the standard of living for workers nevertheless. This is indicative of a more holistic approach to people's well-being and the policies reflect the fact that workers' lives are not only affected by what happens within their physical workplace. For example, because of public funding, child-care fees for parents whose children are in daycare are nonexistent or minimal, and primary health care and postsecondary education are free. Everyone with the ability and interest can study at college or university without paying tuition fees. As a result, these policies substantially lower the proportion of income workers must allocate to health care and/or education for themselves or their dependents. In order to provide such public programs, Swedish people pay income tax rates between 29 and 60 percent, which fund the welfare state

or social state that delivers services without discrimination based on income or class. Stefan Carlén (pers. comm.), chief economist and head of the Organizing and Research Department at Handels, explained that most people pay income tax of about 30 percent and that the higher rates are only for those with very high incomes. Because the wage floor is relatively high and incomes much more equitable, those working in retail are not living in poverty, required to take on two or three jobs, or struggling to make ends meet. In sum, retail workers in Sweden benefit from three levels of protection: union membership, the collective agreement for the retail sector, and national policies.

While there is a widespread commitment to partnership, unions still have to bargain hard to improve the conditions for their members. In this task, solidarity among groups of workers continues to be important. For example, when the 2012 round of collective bargaining between Handels and the retail employers' association began to stall, other unions announced their commitment to engage in "sympathy strikes" to support the retail workers. In other words, these are strikes not for workers' own specific bargaining or conditions but entirely in support of other workers—in this case, retail workers. The construction workers' union and the forestry/paper workers' union both set a day when they would strike if an agreement was not reached for the retail workers. The forestry/paper workers' union's commitment gained particular attention because those are the workers responsible for manufacturing toilet paper within Sweden, and a strike would have contributed to a shortage. Moreover, Torbjörn Johansson, a spokesperson for the construction workers' union, expressed not only worker solidarity, but recognition of the highly feminized nature of retail work: "It's obvious that we as construction workers must support our wives, girlfriends, daughters and friends in their fight for equal pay" (The Local 2012 n.p.).

At the same time, while employers undoubtedly advance their own interests, there is evidence that a commitment to being good employers and managers is not merely rhetoric in the Swedish context. Thomas Andersson and Stefan Tengblad (2007) situate current approaches to business leadership within the longer history of labor-management cooperation and power sharing at work. They explain that both the idea and practice can be understood through the Swedish word *medarbetarskap* and argue that

it is best translated into English as “co-workership.” Managers and leadership matter, they argue, but co-workership is characterized by the building of relationships of trust and openness, cooperation, meaningfulness, and agency. This approach to daily employment relations and broader work life is different from a company’s rhetorical assertions of valuing its employees, but denying their knowledge, value, and contributions, in practice. Instead, co-workership is interwoven with the larger Swedish cultural commitment to “cooperation, distributed responsibility and fair treatment” (Andersson et al. 2011, 254), an organizational and interpersonal reflection of the Swedish model more generally. In contrast to the neoliberal push for the ideas and priorities of business to be implemented in the public sector, the Swedish model fosters a private sector that takes ideas of cooperation, fairness, and social responsibility seriously. This translates into greater willingness to contribute to the public resource pool through taxes, to collective bargaining, and to a retail sector within which more managers see salespeople as coworkers, rather than subservient, easily replaceable employees. Academic research (that is, not research conducted or largely funded by retail employers) has found that retail workers in Sweden are much more satisfied with their jobs in comparison to countries outside of northern Europe. The most recent data suggest “retail work can be perceived and experienced as socially rewarding . . . with decent working conditions, development opportunities and favourable compensation and benefits” (Andersson et al. 2011a, 253). In other words, retail jobs are considered good jobs in Sweden not only because of their material conditions, the higher wages, overtime pay, and so forth, but because workers feel they have more say and control over their jobs and that their knowledge is recognized and valued. The relatively higher-quality experience of retail work does not stem from one single policy or dimension, but rather from the combination of unionization, collective bargaining, public policy, and management practices. This holistic, multifaceted approach both reflects and reproduces the Swedish promotion and prioritization of social solidarity.

The Swedish case offers a compelling example of how complementary forms of political action at workplace and governmental levels have positively affected retail work and workers. At the same time, no country is a flawless utopia, nor a static, unchanging

entity. Two recent elections have brought center-right politicians to power, who have begun to implement neoliberal policies, such as privatization, and undermine the Swedish model (Sandberg 2013a). Moreover, some scholars and union representatives alike argue that both the Social Democratic Party and sections of the Swedish labor movement have become more passive or centrist, or more complicit with neoliberal aspirations and language (Östberg 2012). Precarious work is on the rise, and retail work itself is becoming a site where precariousness is being both expanded and contested (Engstrand 2011). The present and future of the Swedish and Nordic models are being analyzed and debated, as Swedish citizens decide what the next chapter in their national story will be (Sandberg 2013b). In recent years, the neoliberal turn in Sweden has led to increased unemployment, some erosion of the country's universal social programs, and escalating debates about immigration and racial diversity. Swedish retailers, like Ikea, have also been the target of increased criticism and political action globally, as retail workers outside Swedish borders struggle to gain greater respect and better conditions (UNI Global Union 2013b).

Nevertheless, the conditions for retail workers in Sweden continue to offer a stark contrast with most other national contexts. However, the future of retail work and whether the supportive social system that bolsters workers' quality of life will be maintained, changed, or dismantled is directly dependent on the choices and actions of the Swedish people. For their part, through *Handels*, Swedish retail workers are actively engaged in discussions about politics, social policy, and society, seeking to play a greater role in current public debates about the future of their country.

## PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES

Workers' and unions' active engagement in the broader political arena and the larger social context has played a significant role in creating the higher standard of living Swedish retail workers enjoy. Given the low levels of retail unionization in countries like the United States and Canada, strengthened employment standards and public policy would lift the low-wage floor and promote universal standards that benefit all workers, especially low-wage private sector service workers. Promotion of legislated living wages is one example of political action that is already underway, as

worker-advocates argue that the minimum pay required by law should be enough for basic needs and dignity (Luce 2004; Coulter 2012a, 2012b). Catherine Ruetschlin (2012) argues for a \$25,000 per year floor for retail workers in the United States employed at companies with over 1,000 employees. Bills targeting large retailers, specifically those with sales in excess of \$1 billion, have been proposed. In 2006, Chicago's city councilors voted for such a bill, but the city's mayor at the time, Richard Daley, vetoed it. In July of 2013, city councilors in Washington, DC, passed a similar living-wage bill for large retailers, enshrining a wage floor of at least \$12.50 per hour. Walmart made its opposition to the initiative in DC clear and threatened to pull out of plans to build new stores in the area if the law is passed, and, ultimately, the mayor vetoed this bill, as well (Davis and Debonis 2013; Debonis 2013).

Recent campaigns across urban centers in the United States have begun to make the case for guaranteed paid sick days for all workers, as well. Retail worker advocates have supported and advanced these kinds of policy-focused political action. The campaigns have highlighted the importance of paid sick days as both a workers' issue and a public-health matter, to prevent the spreading of germs to shoppers and products, including food. If public policy is strengthened and expanded so basics like paid sick days are a right, retail workers will see a tangible improvement in their quality of life and, so too, will precarious workers across sectors. Undoubtedly, policy improvements are an important step, and any legislative changes would also need to be enforced and offenders prosecuted. But concerted, coordinated campaigns to improve employment standards should be expanded, and politicians who support these kinds of measures, supported. Universal public-policy guarantees would play an important role in improving workers' lives and complement ongoing efforts to organize retail workers. Moreover, policy-focused campaigns foster greater awareness and dialogue in the public arena about retail workers' conditions, rights, and lives. Accordingly, diverse forms of political action are mutually reinforcing.

Long-standing and newer cooperatives also offer food for thought. Cooperatives are formed when people unite through a jointly owned enterprise that is democratically controlled. Cooperatives can be for consumers, workers, producers, shared services, or a combination thereof. They can be built from scratch, an

evolution of an existing enterprise, or created from the remains of a bankrupt or abandoned business. Decisions about products, daily operations, pay, distribution, and all aspects of the business can be made democratically in cooperatives. Different versions exist across Canada, in the United States, and around the world, including in Spain, where Mondragon, the largest cooperative in the world, operates. There are about 350 food retail and wholesale cooperatives of different kinds in the United States (Deller, Hoyt, Hueth, and Sundaram-Stukel 2009). In Canada, the long-established Co-operative Retailing System services more than 500 communities, particularly in the western prairie provinces (Federated Co-operatives Limited 2009). Profitable Florida-based grocery chain, Publix, also offers an alternative retail model. It is not a cooperative, but its stock is entirely owned by current employees and retirees (Plerhoples 2013). These enterprises challenge conventional ideas about hierarchy, business organization, work life, and economic success. The strengths and weaknesses of cooperatives have been debated by scholars from a number of perspectives (Birchall and Ketilson 2009; Cheney 1999; Kasmir 1996; Ness and Azzellini 2011). The specific roles cooperative and other forms of employee ownership and/or control play and could play in improving retail workers' lives warrant greater study.

Overall, it is clear that retail workers and their organizations are developing, exploring, and implementing a range of strategies to promote change. Some of the organizational shapes are updated versions of strategies used historically; others borrow from other sectors; and certain strategies are innovative routes, unique to retail, which reflect the structure of the industry and distribution of workplaces. The snapshots presented in this chapter do not capture the full range of strategies being used regionally or globally, and each approach highlighted deserves far greater scholarly attention. Yet, together, the cases highlighted reveal that this is an interesting and important historical moment for those actively engaged in promoting change in retail and for all those interested in the future of not only retail work, but work itself. The simultaneous pursuit of multiple strategies facilitates greater unity, awareness, and engagement among retail workers. Diverse forms of political action intended to improve the sector and build workers' power challenge the social and economic devaluation of both retail work and workers.

In fact, the battle over retail work is at the heart of the larger struggle over the future of work and economics. In many ways, the retail terrain is emblematic of the larger socioeconomic questions that need to be asked and answered. Are we heading to a future wherein the majority of people are confined to have-little or have-not status and to feeling not only economically stressed, but personally strained and disrespected? Without question, retail workers and their allies want to build a future where the answer is no. In the next and final chapter, I assess the breadth of the political action explored in this book. I consider the accomplishments, challenges, and possibilities of political action and whether we are in the process of revolutionizing retail work.