Mutual Aid as Spiritual Sustenance

Michelle Miller

The reemergence of fraternal and mutual aid structures across multiple sectors of the economy is a product of a unifying working-class cultural identity related to precarity. These experiments with collective economic self-reliance reveal what future forms of labor institutions may look like, demonstrating the transformative potential of building community through mutual care.

As John Ahlquist points out in his essay on "decent jobs," in an increasingly fissured and contracted landscape, workers across supply chains require some kind of container for their shared identity beyond the shop floor in order to bargain for rights and protections.[1] In this context, the mutual aid model is, indeed, a practical building block for future institutions. The reemergence of fraternal and mutual aid structures across multiple sectors of the economy (in housing, food, and debt alongside work) is a product of a unifying working-class cultural identity related to precarity.[2] Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing climate catastrophes, violent police repression of Black and Brown communities, and a highly speculative, financialized economy, most working-class people are vulnerable to significant levels of volatility imposed on them by unaccountable institutions. In this environment, it is no wonder that communities would reach for predictable, stable, and self-governed networks as a ballast against these forces. These experiments with collective economic self-reliance, as Ahlquist notes, are critical areas of study over the coming years for understanding what future forms of labor institutions may look like. This consideration is not just about the ways in which they can function to meet material needs, but provide emotional sustenance as well, demonstrating the transformative potential of building community through mutual care. These valuable real-time models build our social capacity to participate in the kind of democratic governance crucial to a future moral political economy.[3]

The stunning victory of the Amazon Labor Union (ALU) at the JFK8 facility in Staten Island was built on multiple modes of mutual aid to foster community among workers. Workers shared food, money, and marijuana regularly with one another, creating a small but vibrant solidarity economy that helped them through the grueling campaign.[4] Organizers served food at the bus stop that many Amazon workers used on their long commute to the facility, meeting a specific materi-

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al need for people who had little time to eat during shifts that lasted ten to twelve hours. The community donated money through a GoFundMe drive, and coworkers provided stipends through the Coworker Solidarity Fund, ensuring organizers had the resources to buy the food and to help one another survive economically during the campaign to form the first union for Amazon employees.[5] More important, however, these acts of mutualism established a stark cultural contrast between the inside of the warehouse, ruled by the company, and the outside of the warehouse (specifically the bus stop), ruled by the ALU.

Amazon's public messaging relies heavily on the fact that they pay $15 an hour and provide benefits from "day one."[6] However, within the warehouses, that $15 comes at a steep price. People experience a punishing work environment, dictated by productivity algorithms that measure "time off tasks" down to how many minutes it takes a worker to go to the bathroom.[7] Once inside the warehouse, the domain controlled by Amazon, the worker's body becomes the company's equipment. Every breath and movement are monitored, scored, and rated, reducing the physical self to machinery managed by a company brain as opposed to one's own.

These kinds of scoring systems are not just present in Amazon warehouses. Increasingly, workers of all kinds, especially those who earn low wages, are measured and scored endlessly by faceless algorithms.[8] The scoring systems, which not only assess productivity but health, behavior, sentiment, and unionization potential, treat workers as individualized assets measured as potential economic risk to the companies.[9] This assetization of workers creates an environment of extreme precarity due to the opaque systems for determining at random whether any given behavior by a worker is worth the risk or cost they may pose to the company. Very little of this is related to real productive output by workers, nor does it consider the multiple other variables that can impact that productivity on a daily basis. It is, quite simply, a deeply dehumanizing expression of corporate power that treats workers as interchangeable parts within a larger machine, with roots in the slave trade and colonial domination.[10] All while, as ALU President Chris Smalls pointed out in Amazon's example, the CEO of the company flies to the moon.[11]

Contrast that experience with the feeling at the bus stop where ALU organizers reigned. When workers disembarked from or waited for buses back home, organizers provided warm food, ensuring that menus reflected the racial and ethnic diversity of employees at the warehouse.[12] Music played. People shared marijuana to relax after a hard day. The predominantly Black and Brown organizers handed out ALU T-shirts and water bottles, while inside the warehouse, workers had to earn "swag bucks" through their own productivity to get Amazon-branded merchandise.[13] Organizers relied on relationships to coworkers, not spreadsheets of names and numbers, to track their progress in building support for the union. This was an effort rooted first and foremost in community knowledge. These are skills and practices of care that many marginalized people, specifically Black peo-

ple and people from immigrant communities, have maintained in order to survive economic and cultural oppression, brought to the context of organizing the warehouse. Against the millions spent by Amazon to quash organizing, we learn that the little that we have together is enough to share among us. The money, the food, and the community are durable, reliable assets. They are physical and real. They are the bus back home, not a ship bound for space.

These experiences instill in people a sense of possibility that economics and money can work in a fundamentally different way. They also create a practice of democratic sharing and accountability within institutions. Through the Solidarity Fund at my organization Coworker.org, which contributed stipends to ALU organizers among many others, we have learned that meeting both material and spiritual needs are equally critical to success. Through year one of our pilot, people who were engaged in organizing at tech companies received $2,500 as stipends to spend on whatever would help them continue their work.[14] These stipends were provided by fellow workers in the tech industry and disbursed by a committee also made up of workers. Criteria were transparent and simple. You simply had to be organizing at a tech company to qualify. While no reporting was required, some workers volunteered what they used the funds for: splitting the money among other workers in their committees; covering rent so they could take time off to organize; providing water, food, and computer equipment; and even buying Christmas presents for their kids because money was tight. This variety in how the stipends were used provides a snapshot of what workers truly need to continue engaging in the workplace advocacy that makes decent jobs. It requires access to basic elements of stability that moves beyond what foundation-funded labor nonprofits or even trade unions are often structured to provide.

While meeting workers' material needs was crucial to continuing their organizing work, the spiritual sustenance of being validated and celebrated by fellow workers was equally important. Organizing work can be punishing, lonely, and long, isolating a person from their friends and family.[15] Many people supported by Solidarity Fund stipends were some of the lowest paid workers taking on their massive tech company employers. Due to the distributed nature of this kind of organizing and the generally atomized, decentralized structure of twenty-first-century movement work, finding ways to enable connection to others in a similar position and the sense of their part in something much bigger than themselves provided the emotional boost needed to keep going. Many of these groups continue to rely on support to create democratic governance, engage in conflict mediation, and gut-check ideas for what to do next. All of this is predicated on sharing accumulated knowledge among organizers, recognizing that the experiences workers have as they model new ways of building power provide a valuable pathway for our future.

These perspectives on organizing and decent jobs come at a moment of significant change and fluidity within the labor movement. The concepts of union membership and labor organizing are more popular than they have been in more than half a century, while the ability to achieve those precise forms of worker power in most companies is minimal. This split suggests that over the coming years of labor's resurgence, we will see a flowering of the multiple formations and structures for worker power that may inform the design of more permanent labor institutions. What has been clear from high-profile moments like the victory in Staten Island is that concepts like mutualism and communities of care, which are already components of Black and immigrant economies, will be common among many of those formations.

The labor institutions that make up the moral political economy that political scientists Federica Carugati and Margaret Levi envision will be built from these emerging formations.[16] To achieve this vision, we require a deeper examination of the unpaid labor, nonmonetary transactions, culture of exchange, and relationships that make unions possible. As I consider these factors, my mind goes to the theoretical framework established by economist Nina Banks, which recognizes the collective unpaid work of Black and other racialized women as an economy that supports community well-being and addresses "needs not met by private and public sectors."[17] The labor that Banks outlines in her research is in alignment with the same habits of mutualism and community support that we have seen in examples like ALU's victory for the Amazon workers at the warehouse in Staten Island.[18] It suggests that the pathway to a moral political economy already exists in a realized form as established by Black and other racialized women. If we are to genuinely address the failures of the current political economy, it is sensible to consider the expertise of the people most marginalized by that economy and recognize their mechanisms of survival as the starting frameworks for wholesale adoption.[19] In fact, any future consideration of our moral political economy should not only be centered on the priorities and economic cultures established by Black and Brown working-class women, but also led by them. What is inspiring in this consideration is the realization that we, in fact, have everything we need to achieve a moral political economy in the future. It is in the organizing and power-building efforts led by workers today that we create the institutions that establish that economy in the future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle Miller is the Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director of Coworker.org.

ENDNOTES

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