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The power of social media as a labour campaigning tool: lessons from OUR Walmart and the Fight for 15

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Key points

Social media can help renew and strengthen trade union-led movements. It can invigorate union campaign organising by facilitating workers' involvement in three main ways:

- **strengthening a sense of collective identity among dispersed workforces**
- **developing solidarity around experiences of injustice**
- **providing self-organised workers with practical and emotional support.**

Furthermore, the use of social media can support labour movement expansion in four different ways:

- **by amplifying 'offline' collective actions**
- **by enhancing the legitimacy of the campaign through the highlighting of workers' personal testimonies**
- **by connecting the movement with activist networks**
- **by supporting the emergence of new forms of collective action.**

Introduction

This policy brief discusses how social media can help renew trade union collective action and strengthen the labour movement's capacity to mobilise. More precisely, we show how social media can influence two distinct aspects of union campaigning activities, namely organising and mobilising. To do so, we share some insights on two recent and iconic union-led campaigns in the United States (US): 'OUR Walmart' and 'Fight for 15'.[1] Both campaigns made particularly innovative and intensive use of social media and gained unexpected and significant victories, notably minimum wage increases and improvements in working conditions.

For organising activities, we first illustrate the new opportunities offered by social media by examining the OUR Walmart campaign. In this case, social media was beneficial for constructing and sustaining a network of participants and sympathisers and facilitating online-to-offline action. Social media also enabled novel forms of digital collective action which can complement more traditional types of 'offline' action. For the mobilising activities, we look at the Fight for 15 case to show how social media can help to shape the image of a campaign for the media and general public opinion. We additionally illustrate how social media can serve as a 'sounding board' to amplify and strengthen offline actions.

While the potential benefits of social media for union campaigns may be vast, it is important to recognise that new information and communication technologies are not a magic wand capable of conjuring mass collective actions out of thin air. In the third part, we insist that there are certain conditions that need to be in place in order for the potential of social media to be fully exploited, in terms of both organisational design and communication style. We ultimately warn about the limitations and potential risks of these new technologies.

1 These insights are based on extensive fieldwork, including interviews (14 for 'Fight for 15' and 42 for 'OUR Walmart'), participant observation (six weeks for 'OUR Walmart') and online data (500,000 tweets for 'Fight for 15').

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Campaign organising activities: overcoming fragmentation in the face of injustice

Campaign organising activities refer to those activities through which workers are involved and engaged in collective action. This aspect is crucial to campaigning, as worker engagement is the bedrock upon which healthy unions are built. As we will see with the OUR Walmart case, social media can greatly benefit organising activities by increasing participation, empowerment and organisational ownership.

In 2013 the retailer Walmart was the world's largest private sector employer with a global workforce of 2.2 million, 1.4 million of whom were hourly paid workers in the US (Wood 2015). Walmart, majority owned by the richest family in the US, the Waltons, was also renowned for its hostility to organised labour, having defeated numerous unionisation attempts (Lichtenstein 2009). In 2011, the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW)[2] responded to the existential threat which Walmart posed to the unionised retail sector by founding an independent worker association, 'The Organisation United for Respect at Walmart' (OUR Walmart). The campaign proved surprisingly successful, gaining significant media traction. In the campaign's wake Walmart was pressured into increasing starting pay to $10 per hour, which improved the pay of more than 500,000 workers. This victory was impressive given Walmart's historical hostility towards unions and that its starting pay had previously stagnated around the minimum wage. In California, for example, starting pay was around $8.20 per hour (20 cents above the state minimum wage) in 2013.

Developing solidarity through networking

Central to the creation of OUR Walmart was the use of social media, particularly Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram. Social media proved crucial as it provided a discursive space in which union organisers and worker activists could develop new ways of understanding their situation. Union organisers and worker activists co-produced a narrative which challenged Walmart's dominant framing of the employment situation as one in which workers were part of a well-treated 'family'. The new framing instead highlighted the unjust inequality which Walmart represents. As one worker explained to us:

> 'Walmart has been lying to [the workers] because their slogan is 'Save Money to Live Better' but who's actually living better? The Waltons, not their associates.'

Walmart's extreme hostility towards unions made the role of social media even more crucial. Walmart not only expelled union organisers from stores but also operated a workplace regime of surveillance and fear. Workers faced high levels of monitoring and the threat of being punished if caught talking about unions, collective organisation or working conditions. This made it extremely difficult for workers to discuss their grievances face-to-face with each other or with union organisers in the workplace. Even though Walmart stores tend to have a workforce in excess of 300 workers, the fear of retaliation led to a situation in which only a handful of workers were willing to risk joining OUR Walmart. As a result, OUR Walmart members were dispersed spatially in different stores or temporally on different shifts, or both. Social media provided workers with the opportunity to overcome these barriers and connect with each other and with union organisers. Through engaging in discussions over Facebook, workers were able to learn of similarities in their experiences and provide each other with practical and emotional support. This fostered their identification with each other's situations and interests. Akira, a recently dismissed employee who was working as a campaign organiser, explained this process particularly clearly:

> 'It is basically an outlet for not only frustration but also networking … [seeing] what Walmart is doing now to other associates and comparing our similarities … just being there for one another so you know that you're not the only one going through what you're going through.'

A sense of group identity was further developed visually by the uploading of videos on Facebook and YouTube of speeches by charismatic leaders and symbolic actions. Importantly, these connections were possible despite the network being geographically dispersed across a vast country. Bill, a senior official at UFCW, explained how social media massively expanded worker communication and interaction:

> 'There's thousands of conversations happening every day. . . people are building their own groups, they are learning from each other, they're supporting each other. . . it breaks down the barriers and the walls that people face in life and it's also a place where people can support each other whether they are in the same store or across the nation and, lastly, it's got a natural way that people can become engaged.'

Expansive solidarity and worker empowerment

An advantage of social media-facilitated groups is that, unlike traditional unions, they do not have rigid communicative boundaries and they are organisationally de-centred. This enables an expansive form of solidarity to develop in which workers can easily learn about mobilisation efforts and begin communicating with their colleagues simply as a result of viewing a post on social media or joining an online group. Wide-ranging interpersonal connections took place as anyone could join the network via social media.

OUR Walmart also made use of other internet-based forms of communication such as online video conference calls and voting apps. These online tools enabled workers from across the country to overcome their geographic dispersal and link together to discuss major issues, provide feedback and make decisions. By using a range of internet tools, the movement was able to take a novel organisational form. Unlike a traditional union, OUR Walmart did not seek to engage in formal collective bargaining or to gain union recognition. Although the UFCW played a vital role in the

2 A union with a broad membership of more than 1.3 million across the retail, food processing and meat-packing industries.

decision-making behind the mobilisation effort, it did not do so in a bureaucratic manner. Instead, the network's meetings, whether online or in person, were run in a participative manner, departing from the formal process-heavy style typical of union meetings. Union organisers played the role of facilitators, actively seeking out workers' views and encouraging participation. The result was that membership was experienced as empowering and workers felt ownership of OUR Walmart and the decisions it made.

Mobilisation activities: amplifying, legitimising, expanding and re-inventing

The literature on this topic repeatedly demonstrates that worker involvement alone is insufficient for labour actions to be successful. Unions also need to engage external stakeholders to grow and sustain their movement. In this second section we look at how these mobilising aspects of union campaigning may also benefit from social media.

In this context, the 'Fight for 15' movement presents an illuminating case. Backed by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), a major US labour union in the service industry, Fight for 15 kicked off in 2012 with a strike involving 200 fast-food workers in New York aiming to raise the minimum wage to $15 per hour, a figure which, at nearly $8 higher than the federal minimum wage, is considered a living wage. Since this initial high-profile strike, the movement has continued to grow, creating a large network of allies and sympathisers and involving activists from a wide variety of backgrounds. It has also benefited from extensive and mostly positive media coverage. More importantly, the movement has accomplished significant victories, such as a commitment to raising the minimum wage to $15 in Seattle and in the states of California and New York. Fight for 15 also has a massive online presence, with more than 300,000 likes on its main Facebook page, tens of thousands of followers on Twitter, and online videos which have been viewed millions of times. This huge presence on social media is obviously only one of the many ingredients that explain Fight for 15's success, but it is an undeniably important factor. It has facilitated the mobilising activities of the movement in four main ways: by amplifying its offline actions, by shaping a positive and legitimate image, by expanding the movement through connection with activist networks and by creating new forms of engagement.

Amplifying offline action

Social media can amplify offline collective actions by increasing their visibility. In the case of Fight for 15, the ability of social media to do this was astonishing. For instance, analysis of Twitter data demonstrates that during the Fight for 15 days of action, the number of messages on Twitter containing the hashtag #Fightfor15 was multiplied by a factor of 16 compared to regular days. This impressive variation provides an indicator of how social media may expand and amplify offline actions.

A related example is provided by OUR Walmart. During OUR Walmart's 2012 'Black Friday' day of action, around 600 workers were involved from a workforce of over a million. Yet OUR Walmart claims that the action of these few hundred workers generated over 300,000 Facebook posts and 60,000 tweets on Twitter. As a consequence of this amplification effect, the media coverage gained by OUR Walmart is estimated to be worth an equivalent of $24 million in advertisements in 2012 and $31 million in 2013 (Wood 2015).

Enhancing the legitimacy of a labour campaign

A strong presence on social media can also help enhance the labour movement's legitimacy by presenting it as worker-led, horizontal and grassroots. As Marshall McLuhan famously stated: 'the medium is the message'. By adopting emergent communication technologies which are structurally dispersed and horizontal, the labour movement can more easily give voice to marginalised workers and enable them to provide their personal testimonies. Not only are such testimonies an emotionally powerful communication tool but they also increase the authenticity of campaigns by emphasising their grassroots, worker-led and spontaneous elements. In the case of Fight for 15, the movement was perceived as being much more grassroots and worker-led than it actually was, notably thanks to the use of social media (Dencik and Wilkin 2015).

Increased legitimacy is crucial for the labour movement during a period in which representative organisations in general, such as unions and political parties, tend to suffer from a strong legitimacy deficit and are mistrusted by the public. This is particularly important in those countries where unions can no longer claim to represent a majority of the workforce. Recent sociological inquiries (see, for example, Gerbaudo 2012) highlight that contemporary activists, public opinion and the media tend to be much more favourable to movements built from the bottom up than to hierarchical ones. In this sense, social media can help the labour movement regain legitimacy.

Connecting with online activist networks

Social media can also help labour unions reach out to potential allies beyond the 'usual suspects'. Our analysis of Fight for 15's online communication reveals that the movement made significant efforts to create and sustain online coalitions with digitally structured activist networks. Ties created through this digital form of coalition-building were particularly evident in two cases: the #OccupyWallStreet mobilisation, particularly the early stages of the campaign in 2012, and the #BlackLivesMatter movement of 2014. Through a determined and active presence online, unions can create and sustain links with activist networks. Social media represents an increasingly important space in which unions can create and sustain coalitions beyond alliances with traditional partners.

Creating new forms of collective action

Finally, the Fight for 15 movement illustrates how social media can support the creation of new forms of collective action by enabling people to take part through tiny acts of participation such as

'sharing', 'liking', 'commenting' or 're-tweeting'. As expressed by a Fight for 15 supporter and then re-tweeted by the SEIU official account (on 15 April 2015):

> 'If you can't make it into the streets, give your support. Tell your story on #fightfor15. We all have powerful ones.'

The accumulation of these tiny acts of participation can have significant societal impacts (Margetts *et al.* 2015). This new form of digital activism has long been mocked for being merely 'clicktivism', that is, a costless but ineffectual type of action which creates the illusion of political engagement. However, research on the Fight for 15 contradicts these negative appraisals of digital activism, based on two main arguments. First, digital forms of action can be an initial step towards deeper, 'physical' forms of engagement. Second, digital actions, when used in combination with offline actions, may be a very effective tool for putting pressure on companies' highly valuable but immaterial assets: their brand and reputation.

Necessary conditions, risks and limitations

The success of OUR Walmart and Fight for 15 underscore the great potential of social media to improve both the organising and mobilising aspects of union campaigns. However, it also highlights that the adoption of social media alone will not transform labour-based collective action. We consider that there are at least two conditions of union action which must be met before the potential of social media as a campaigning tool can be truly maximised: acting as an 'orchestrator' and adopting a social media type of communication (see Figure 1).

Unions as network 'orchestrators'

The first condition relates to organisational form. Unions must organise in less bureaucratic and more networked ways if they are to successfully integrate social media. Such a network form would entail the supporting of workers' informal self-organisation through online tools. Key to the OUR Walmart and Fight for 15 mobilisations was the way in which unions did not attempt to use social media in a traditional hierarchical manner based on top-down communication. Instead, they acted as facilitators of network participation, seeking to increase bottom-up communication. This mirrors findings that successful union organising requires leadership commitment to building membership-led organising campaigns while coordinating strategy and structural change from the centre (Simms 2007). Network forms of organisation do not require total autonomy but rather an 'orchestrator' who can provide strategic oversight. This means that the 'orchestrating' union must not attempt to bureaucratise communication and instead limit itself to allowing the quick and easy sharing of information across the network (Heckscher and McCarthy 2014). Both OUR Walmart and Fight for 15 demonstrate how, despite the union being necessarily bureaucratic, it was still possible for it to engage with networks in a horizontal manner. Our case studies also demonstrate that the development of online activities require that unions invest both time and material resources in building social media-based networks.

Worker-focused, people-to-people communication style

The second necessary condition relates to the union's communication style. Unions should move from a communication style which is organisation-focused, procedural, and which stresses extrinsic

Figure 1 **Organising and mobilising phases: conditions, possibilities, limitations and risks**

	Organising activites Relations with workers	**Mobilising activities** Relations with partners, supporters and media
Necessary conditions	– Move from hierarchical to network culture – Unions orchestrate rather than manage the campaign – Investment in resources	
	– Adaptation of communication to social media codes: personalised, brief, visual and emotive	
Potential advantages of social media	– Creates a feeling of togethernessamong dispersed workforce – Creates a collective sense of systemic injustice beyond individual cases and grievances – Provision of practical and emotional support	– Creates a 'grassroots' image for a campaign – Creates a 'sounding board' for 'offline' action – Connection with online structured activist networks – Creates new forms of collective action
Limitations and risks	– Enables management and corporate surveillance – Enables management and corporate counter-communication and 'trolling'	

Source: own typology.

motivations for action, towards one which is worker-focused and which visually and emotionally gives voice to individual testimonies. Such accounts enable unions, via empowered workers, to concisely convey concrete experiences of injustice. With this in mind unions need to move from an 'organisation-to-people' to a 'people-to-people' communication style. Traditional union communication strategy tends to position their discourse at the organisation level by recalling the organisation's values and by prioritising the visibility of its name and logo. Fight for 15 and OUR Walmart instead adopted a communication mode that mimicked the typical nature of social media interaction. Such communication favours an emphasis on the individual expression of workers themselves. As such, both campaigns facilitated the emergence of easy-to-share and easy-to-identify-with individual worker narratives.

Social media and the risk of managerial counter-attack

If social media can be a powerful device for unions, it can equally be used by corporations against organised labour, in two notable ways (see Figure 1). First, social media can become a place for corporate counter-attack in order to discredit labour actions. This may take the form of open and direct counter-communication, through the creation of alternative campaigns, hashtags and Facebook groups. Corporate counter-communication may also take more discreet and malicious forms, as for instance through the infiltration of Facebook groups to troll or manipulate the collective dynamic. Second, continuing the long history of state complicity in the blacklisting of union activists, social media can become a space for managerial (and state) surveillance. For instance, Walmart hired the security company Lockheed-Martin to analyse social media data during the OUR Walmart campaign,[3] with many worker activists consequently being fired.

Conclusion

We have shown the ways in which social media can benefit union campaigns by enabling networking between workers facing injustice, strengthening solidarity and worker empowerment, amplifying offline actions, enhancing organised labour's legitimacy and even enabling new forms of collective action. However, as the two campaigns analysed in this policy brief are from the US, one may question whether such use of social media can or should be transferred to the European context. Indeed, cultural particularities and union structures have a significant influence on social media use (Martinez Lucio and Walker 2005).

Given the greater institutional embeddedness of many European unions, relative to their US counterparts, it may be more difficult for European unions to adopt the practices highlighted above. Additionally, given that European private sector union density is usually significantly higher and collective bargaining coverage more extensive, European unions may feel that adopting such tactics is unnecessary. However, in many European countries union membership is falling, often mirrored by declining levels of collective bargaining. Even where membership and collective bargaining appear robust, this is mainly due to the specific legal supports in certain countries. However, across western Europe for example, 'almost universally, the content of sectoral agreements is being hollowed out' (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013: 29). While European unions are in a stronger position than those in the US, they nonetheless face the same structural problems. Union power on both continents was at its height in the 1960s, a period marked by large-scale industrial production and Keynesian economic policy. European unions should therefore use their existing position of relative strength to adapt to the future world of work. Importantly, in the context of the high-profile labour mobilisations described above, the US has seen a recent increase in membership among young workers.[4] There are two reasons to believe that social media, when used in the ways discussed above, could help European unions in the crucial task of recruiting young members. Firstly, such an approach would enhance the 'deliberative vitality' of unions for young workers, by increasing their integration and participation in union life and in the labour movement more generally (Vandaele 2015). Secondly, involvement in collective action has been shown to be a predictor of union membership growth (Hodder *et al.* 2016). Therefore, the expansive solidarity and tiny acts of participation, enabled by social media, provide young workers with new pathways towards union membership. Despite the costs and risks, it is crucial that European unions learn from the US and experiment with social media to avoid a future crisis in the European labour movement.

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