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LIMITATIONS OF BUSINESS UNIONISM AND CO-OP CONSERVATISM: A CASE STUDY OF DENVER'S TAXI DRIVER UNION-COOPERATIVES

Minsun Ji

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the labor-empowerment potential of emerging taxi driver cooperative-union partnerships. Cooperative-union partnerships can adopt differing stances toward the virtue of waging broad-based, class-conscious conflict against economic elites to win economic change, as opposed to the virtue of small-scale and practical steps to improve the immediate conditions of individual "job-conscious" workers. This case study utilizes a "class consciousness" versus "job consciousness" framework to examine a recent immigrant taxi driver union-cooperative partnership.

Case study of taxi driver organizing in Denver (CO), utilizing narrative inquiry, and survey and interviews with 69 drivers.

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The US tradition of accommodational job consciousness continues to influence union and cooperative leaders. Among Denver's taxi cooperatives, an emphasis on accommodational job consciousness, bereft of class perspectives, has undermined a narrative promoting worker solidarity or encouraging workers to engage in social justice campaigns for immigrant workers. The consequence has been to weaken the transformational potential of taxi driver activism.

Findings based on a single case study need to be confirmed through additional research.

Cooperative-union partnerships that adopt a class-conscious political approach, including leadership development opportunities, a "labor empowerment curriculum, and partnerships with broader social movements, are a promising alternative to narrowly tailored "job conscious" organizing strategies.

Immigrants are increasingly forming worker cooperatives, and the recent Denver taxi driver union-cooperative is one of the largest taxi cooperatives in the country. Current research on the labor empowerment consequences of these emerging immigrant cooperatives is sparse.

Keywords: Union-cooperatives; worker cooperatives; labor unions; taxi drivers

Taxi driving is often regarded as a "poor man's gateway to mainstream America" (Dao, 1992), but the reality is that drivers "have to pay for the right to work in that they need access to a taxi medallion to do their job" (Dhar, 2013). According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014), the annual income of a taxi driver is \$22,820, with no benefits or insurance provided by most taxi companies (Lazo, 2014), because these taxi drivers are regarded as contingent, "independent contractors" in the taxi industry (Schwer et al., 2010, p. 22). Drivers commonly work for over 70 hours a week, earning poverty wages, and most have no health insurance or other work benefits (Blasi & Leavitt, 2006).

These dismal taxi driver working conditions are associated with the logic of "flexibility" and "disorganization" in the era of informalization of labor (Luedke, 2010, p. 3). Although many workers buy into the dream of "flexibility" and the "American dream," the realities of low-wage taxi driving, with workers largely controlled by a small number of licensed taxi companies, can be more accurately described as "a sweatshop on wheels," or a "penal colony," which requires "tremendous toil without providing any true security" to taxi workers (Luedke, 2010, p. 4). Although local municipalities commonly regulate such things as how many drivers are allowed to be licensed, and the kinds of clothes drivers must wear,

officials generally do a “poor job of protecting taxi workers from exploitation by their companies” (Blasi & Leavitt, 2006, p. 5) and there is very little oversight of the work relationship between drivers and taxi companies.

However, in recent years, there has been a new effort to improve the life of taxi workers by creating taxi driver worker cooperatives. Some of these taxi driver cooperatives have collaborated with labor unions to better assert the rights and interests of taxi workers. This chapter examines as to what extent taxi driver union-cooperative partnerships might advance the interests of taxi workers and revitalize local labor movements in the United States. The chapter highlights two taxi union-cooperative collaborations that have recently been established in Denver, Colorado, uniting largely immigrant taxi drivers into two separate workers’ cooperatives, with support from the Communication Workers of America (CWA) union.

When workers form worker cooperatives and join labor unions, these organizations can adopt differing stances toward such things as the virtue and necessity of waging broad base and contentious class conflict against economic elites to win fundamental economic change, as opposed to the virtue and necessity of developing small-scale and practical steps to improve the conditions of individual workers here and now, working within the boundaries of the existing economic system. Scholars have broadly described these two approaches as being driven by either “class consciousness” or “job consciousness,” and as reflecting either a commitment to “radical unionism” or “business unionism.” The focus of this case study is to utilize this “class consciousness” versus “job consciousness” framework shed light on recent taxi driver union-cooperative partnerships in Denver, Colorado and to evaluate some important consequences of developing labor movements and organizations based on job consciousness/business unionism framework, as has happened in Denver. The case of Denver’s immigrant taxi union-cooperatives shows that the enduring US tradition of accommodational job consciousness continues to influence both union and cooperative leaders. Among Denver’s taxi driver cooperatives, an emphasis on accommodational job consciousness, bereft of class perspectives, has undermined a coherent narrative promoting worker solidarity or encouraging workers to engage in broader campaigns of social justice for immigrant workers in general. The consequence has been to weaken significantly the transformational potential of taxi driver worker activism.

ACCOMMODATING JOB CONSCIOUSNESS VERSUS ADVERSARIAL CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

As union-cooperative partnerships expand, an important question is “to what end?” The fact of expanding labor partnerships suggests a future of enhanced

labor power, but we must remain attuned to the fact that labor movements, old or new, constantly face the kinds of difficult choices described by America's Progressive Labor Party in its call to action in 1964:

Two paths are open to the workers of any given country. One is the path of resolute class struggle; the other is the path of accommodation, collaboration. The first leads to state power for the workers, which will end exploitation. The other means rule by a small ruling class which continues oppression, wide-scale poverty, cultural and moral decay and war. (Cited in Benin 2000, pp. 20)

A great deal of labor history is shaped by the different trajectories that result from labor organizations choosing different paths in navigating the complicated choices between "class struggle" and "accommodation, collaboration." In assessing the likely consequences of newly emerging partnerships between unions and cooperatives in today's labor movement, we must therefore pay close attention to the way these movements unfold in practice on the ground, and how they answer that eternal question of "reform or revolution," "class struggle or accommodation."

The choice between "class struggle" and "accommodation" with a "small ruling class" is deeply related to notions of "class" itself. Thomson (1966) in his classic *The Making of the English Working Class* argues that "class is something that happens when people, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against others whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs" (cited in Isaac, Harrison, & Lipold, 2008, p. 11).

However, the ways by which the concept of a shared class identity happens among workers are hard to pin down. For example, it is difficult to define clearly the relationships between capital and labor (inherently exploitive? potentially collaborative?), so it is not always self-evident to a worker that he or she shares an identity with co-workers, or that this identity might be naturally "against others [i.e., capitalists] whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs." Both unions and worker-owned cooperatives consistently face this task of helping workers define the relationship between labor and capital, and to define their own class position, and both institutions have offered alternatively radical and accommodating responses to this enduring task.

Regarding labor unions, there have been long differing perspectives on how unions should respond to capital. For example, a radical and adversarial unionist approach "emphasizes the separation of the interests of labor and capital," and presents the role of labor movements as representing the "inherently adversarial interests of workers in a struggle against the interests of

capital” (Wheeler 2002, p. 133; see also Kelly, 1998). Traditions tracking back to classical Marxism interpret the capitalist economy as defined by the inherent and indelible class conflict between capital and labor, by endemic exploitation of workers, and by the unavoidable necessity of organized labor to overthrow the capitalist system to create a new social system (Frege, Kelly, & McGovern, 2011; Wright, 2006, p. 22). More than just an economic association seeking higher wages for worker members through collective bargaining, labor unions in this tradition are seen as political organizations with broad agendas for social change. Hyman (1971, p. 155) refers to “the countervailing power of union organization” as a powerful civil society organization that mobilizes against the power of capital across a wide range of issues and through the electoral system (Commons, 1918; Levi, Olson, Agnone, & Kelly, 2009, pp. 204–205; Lipset, 1971).

However, more accommodationist perspectives have emphasized the need for unions to cooperate with capital in order to survive in a capitalist reality, and to forge pragmatic partnerships that advance the interests of both capital and labor in any given workplace. Labor scholar Perlman (1928) argued that such an accommodational approach defined the US labor movement, and he coined the phrase, “job consciousness” to describe the American unionist approach, as opposed to classical notions of “class consciousness.” According to Perlman (1928), “US workers are primarily concerned about job security, and their mentality as workers is characterized by a job consciousness rather than a class consciousness” (Brody, 1991; Peck, 1978, p. 5). Similar to the notion of “business unionism,” the notion of “job consciousness” describes how workers are primarily concerned with “marketing their labor in a way that would maximize their personal gains” (Peck, 1978, p. 21). Job consciousness also entails a belief that unions exist not to leverage transformational social movements but to “address the immediate and practical concerns of unionized workers” with a goal to “protect their members economically, primarily by negotiating and enforcing the union contract” (Mantsios, 1998, pp. 1779–1780).

Another influential labor theorist, Dunlop (1958) endorsed job conscious labor unionism, as he believed that both employers and labor can be beneficial to each other as they both want stability and prosperity. Thus, for Dunlop (1958), conflict between capital and labor through class struggles is not necessary and it is better to embrace an accommodationist approach with emphasis on job consciousness. In the same vein, German sociologist Streeck (1992) once urged that “unions should move from a conflict-oriented, adversarial, distributionist position to a productive, cooperationist position” (Wheeler, 2002, p. 180). Many others have argued that “the willingness of unions and

their members to behave ‘moderately’ provides a way to survive in capitalism,” and some suggest that “offering concessions to the employer” is “a part of a new social partnership” based on decreased antagonism between labor and capital (cited in Kelly, 1998, p. 14). In this tradition of job consciousness, “labor unions are likely to be compromising, inclined to accept reasonable gains and slow progress” (*Monthly Labor Review*, 1951, p. 126; Norrell, 1990) developing a tradition of business unionism, which has characterized much of the US labor movement for decades.

The stance of worker cooperatives concerning capital–labor relations is similarly Janus-faced. While a radical view of worker cooperatives sees these institutions as a transformational strategy through which labor wholly absorbs capital, pursues the elimination of the wage system, and seeks full control of the workplace and broader economy, a more reformist view on capital–labor relations focuses on worker cooperatives as simply a tool to foster worker ownership of shares of company stock, and possibly to enhance accommodation between labor and capital in particular workplaces.

At their most transformational, worker cooperatives are explicitly political in nature and offer a radical critique of capitalism in seeking to establish transformational forms of economic democracy in their own community (Engler, 2010; Malleson, 2014; Restakis, 2010). The Knights of Labor in late 19th century America is one example of worker cooperative radicalism which advanced the radical idea of building union-cooperative collaboration across the economy, with a goal to replace capitalism and to wholly eliminate the wage system. Worker cooperatives, to the Knights of Labor were a radical form of workers’ power and as a first step toward seizing power over the entire process of production (Gorz, 1982, p. 409). Worker cooperative control means more than mere ownership of company stock – it means that “workers collectively determine what the enterprise produces, the appropriate technology, the location of production, and related matters... [including] the appropriation and distribution of the surplus” (Wolff, 2012, pp. 118, 122).

From a far less radical perspective – a perspective that fits nicely within the traditions of job conscious business unionism – worker cooperatives are simply a tool to allow individual workers to become small business owners in their own right, and to maximize their own economic ascent. For example, while Charles Barnard (1881), former president of New Jersey Bell Telephone, argued that the worker cooperative “simply means business” by other means. From the perspective, “cooperatives are embedded in the framework of capitalist economy and compete on the capitalist market following the logic of profit-making” so they must behave like any other efficient business and focus on “improving the income of members as part of the private enterprise

system” (Thornley, 1981, p. 173). Since “cooperatives are capitalist in nature” (Abrahamsen, 1976, pp. 11–12), they always face a danger of degeneration in that they face pressure to “adopt the same organizational forms and priorities as capitalist businesses in order to survive” (Cornforth, 1995, p. 488).

In this tradition of what might be called conservative cooperativism, Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOPs) were developed as a tool of capitalist-friendly worker ownership in the late 1970s and 1980s. By allowing workers to more easily purchase stock shares in their employing company, ESOPs are a good example of capital-labor accommodation through a “cooperative” model which gives workers partial or full ownership in their companies through stock ownership, but does not challenge fundamental control of the workplace by capitalist managers, nor are ESOPs associated with broader political goals of transforming capitalism itself.

When workers become owners of their own businesses (whether through ESOP plans or through actual models of workplace ownership and management), they face natural tensions between pursuing business profitability and pursuing broader goals of economic and political reform. Though many worker Cooperatives naturally have transformational social and political goals, they often find it difficult to maintain their own business success while also connecting to campaigns for broader change in their communities. For many cooperatives, pursuing instrumental strategies to maximize economic benefits for workers at a single workplace can turn these organizations towards accommodationist postures vis-à-vis existing economic systems and elites, and away from political mobilization to transform broader society (Bray & Bray, 2002; DeMartino, 1991, p. 35). Therefore, worker cooperatives often have been disassociated from the labor movement” (Hochner et al. 1988, p. 16) and in general have developed “outside the political arena” and without connection to broader social movements (Thornley, 1981, p. 11). For such reasons, Mellor and Stirling (1988) conclude that the cooperative movement “in itself is unlikely to have any significant impact upon levels of political consciousness” (cited in Spear, 1989, p. 566). Greenberg (1986) similarly argues that cooperatives, even with a principle of workplace democracy, do not necessarily “fuel the escalation of political class-consciousness” (Greenberg, 1986, p. 151).

In these ways, both unions and cooperatives face a choice of articulating working people’s class interests that are different from and opposed to the interests of capital, or that are aligned with and accommodating of the interests of capital and a related choice of how far-reaching their commitment to broader social and political transformation should be. The ways by which these organizations resolve these choices is a critical component of the

kind of partnerships unions and cooperatives forge with each other on the ground in specific places. To inform an assessment of the likely result (reformist or radical?) of the many union-cooperative partnerships that are emerging in different places today, therefore, we must pay close attention to the way these partnerships are actually unfolding in specific places, in specific ways, structured by local context. To provide such an analysis, this chapter now turns to a case study of taxi-driver union-cooperative partnerships in Denver, Colorado, with a brief detour into the “sharing economy/cooperative” ride-sharing model offered by Uber and Lyft. The author describes how these cooperative models have adopted individualistic, job-conscious approaches to their work (as opposed to politicized, class-conscious approaches) and I evaluate the deleterious consequences in terms of the potential for labor empowerment.

FROM INDEPENDENT CONTRACTORS TO SELF-EMPLOYED DRIVERS: UBER’S “SHARING ECONOMY” LIBERATION?

The biggest challenge faced by taxi workers has to do with their legal classification. Being classified as an “independent contractor” can exacerbate the workplace difficulties faced by taxi drivers. While the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) guarantees a minimum wage, regulated hours, and overtime pay for employees in most industries, “independent contractors” are excluded from those guarantees, thus resulting in independent contractors lacking minimum wage protections, as well as “employer- provided health insurance, paid vacation and sick days, pensions and other benefits” (Blasi & Leavitt, 2006; Milkman, 2014, p. 6). With no guarantee of minimum wage protections, independent contractors are often described as working with “zero hour contracts,” where employers are not obligated to provide any minimum working hours to employees and that employers can “employ staff without ever guaranteeing work” (Flynn & Lockett, 2017).

Another challenge is that the number of taxi licenses (often called “medallions”) is often limited by law, so as not to introduce destructive competition into the taxi business (Inamdar, 2013). The medallion and leasing system was first introduced in New York City in 1937 to regulate the number of taxis on streets (Hodges, 2007; Inamdar, 2013; Vidich, 1976). Today, many cities utilize the medallion system, and prices for medallions vary greatly from city to city. Purchasing a licensing medallion costs \$250,000 in San Francisco (Said,

2015), \$700,000 in Boston (Newsham, 2015) and \$270,000 in Chicago as of 2015 (Madhani, 2015), a jump from its previous value of \$150,000 in 2008 (Bruno, 2009, p. 9; Luedke, 2010, p. 11). The scarce and expensive nature of these medallions and the limited number of taxi companies that control them, mean that individual taxi drivers are at a disadvantage in negotiating fair payments from the company (Bruno, 2009; Inamdar, 2013).

In recent years, however, cooperative and allegedly more humane business models have emerged to challenge the traditional world of taxi-driver exploitation. The dramatic rise of cooperative networks of self-employed drivers, such as Uber and Lyft, has been celebrated by many as a welcome challenge to the old model of exploited taxi drivers, controlled by monopolistic private cab companies. Uber and Lyft originally were based on the creative economic innovation of expanding the “sharing economy” through a shared ride strategy, freed from corporate taxi control. Post-structural theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and Gibson-Graham (2003) celebrate a wide range of alternative economic arrangements that emerge in the realm of “community economies,” arguing that such innovations as self-employment, volunteer work, peer-lending, gifting, self-provisioning, and worker cooperatives, even when locally focused and small in scale, have real meaning in terms of opening up different economic practices and pathways. In this regard, the innovation of a cooperative “sharing economy” through companies such as Uber and Lyft could be a strategy to diversify economic alternatives, which can be important in deconstructing “capitalocentric” (Gibson-Graham, 2003, p. 126) economic thinking and opening opportunities for worker empowerment.

Classified as “transportation network companies” (TNC) made up of independent car-driving contractors who use Apps such as Uber or Lyft to connect with customers – and not as individually owned businesses with employees – Uber and Lyft have used “the networking potential of the internet to bring together its drivers and customer alike, both on their own initiative” (Searles, 2015). When surveyed, the substantial majority of drivers for these RideShare services voice a preference for the flexibility and autonomy of companies such as Uber rather than enduring the corporate rules of working for a traditional company, such as a taxi company. For example, 87% of Uber drivers voiced a preference for “being my own boss,” while 85% stated that Uber allowed for more flexibility and “work–life” balance than working for a taxi company (Hall & Krueger, 2015).

Capitalizing on this desire of more workplace flexibility and autonomy, Uber and Lyft are the examples of what Adam Thierer calls “permissionless innovation” – a concept that fits with the notions of immediate economic innovations, including “the freedom of entrepreneurs to experiment freely

with new technologies” (Searles, 2015). Taking advantage of this “permissionless innovation,” Uber has experienced explosive growth over the past five years since its foundation in 2009, and has recently been “valued by investors at \$50 billion” (Zhang & Shih, 2015). Uber now controls up to “10% of the international market,” operating in 45 countries (Palmer, 2015, p. 8).

Some scholars such as Hall and Krueger (2015) see the sharing economy of companies such as Uber and Lyft as opening new financial opportunities for workers, and argue as follows:

The availability of modern technology, like the Uber app, provides many advantages and lower prices for consumers compared with the traditional taxi cab dispatch system, and this has boosted demand for ride services, which, in turn, has increased total demand for workers with the requisite skills to work as for-hire drivers, potentially raising earnings for all workers with such skills. (Hall & Krueger, 2015)

Beyond allegedly rising job and income prospects of individual taxi drivers, freelance operations such as Uber and Lyft are sometimes hailed as being an excellent example of cooperative self-help networks. Professional conferences featuring such “solo self-employment” companies commonly feature the traditional buzz-phrases of the cooperative movement. As Schneider (2014) summarizes such conferences, “the same words come out over and over: “trust,” “community,” “network,” “passion,” “collaboration” and a good deal of “love.” “... For them, a desire to change the world for the better was almost obligatory.” Celebrated as a cooperative peer marketplace, worker networks such as Uber are said to “hold out the prospect of self-management and variety, with workers taking on diverse assignments of their choice and carving out their own schedules. Rather than toiling at the behest of some faceless corporations, they work for their peers” (Singer, 2014).

However, a closer look at the actual reality of much of the solo self-employment model demonstrates its limitations as a labor empowerment strategy. The problem is that while workers express support for autonomy and individual opportunity and conjecture about the possible advantages of cooperative self-employment networks, in practice these networks are not delivering anywhere near the kind of progressive liberation promised to individual workers. This reality is exacerbated by the very isolation and individualism celebrated by job-conscious supporters of the Uber/Lyft cooperative self-employment model, which operates entirely bereft of notions of “class conflict,” and without any connection at all to broader labor empowerment campaigns in the community.

Continued worsening of economic prospects for most taxi drivers in the last decade shows that the result of Uber’s and Lyft’s individualistic

job-conscious labor strategy has not been positive for most workers who drove taxis before the Uber/Lyft revolution. Most immigrant taxi drivers in fact have found their economic position worse off than before the arrival of Uber and Lyft due to heightened competition from the less regulated and less immigrant-accessible world of these free-market ride-sharing platforms (Bollier, 2008; Schneider, 2014). The new model of flexible ride-sharing has allowed companies to “essentially channel one-off tasks to the fastest taker or lowest bidder ... pitting workers against one another in a kind of labor eliminating match” (Schneider, 2014). Managing piecemeal and disorganized workers into a ride-sharing network of “cooperative” and “independent” workers allows companies such as Uber to have it both ways: “Behaving as de facto employers without shouldering the actual cost burdens or liabilities of employing workers” (Schneider, 2014). These companies can avoid complying with state regulations, can externalize “costs like gas, insurance, payroll, etc., so that profits are maximized and expenses as close as possible to non-existent” (Bollier, 2008), effectively “shifting risk from corporations to workers, weakening labor protections, and driving down wages” (Asher-Schapiro, 2014; McBride, 2014; Palmer, 2015).

In fact, by undermining competing taxi companies, the new ride-sharing cooperatives actually undermine public infrastructure (as they pay less in taxes and fees to local jurisdictions who must maintain roads, police, fire service, etc.), and reduce the ability of localities to democratically regulate their industries (e.g., by bypassing local regulations on taxi company fleet’s carbon emissions; Bollier, 2008). Conaty, Bird, and Ross (2014, p. 27) conclude that “cooperative” self-employment networks therefore are not tools of labor empowerment, but rather are simply a new mechanism for “investor-owned corporations to extract value from the ‘precariat.’” Furthermore, these workers are hardly engaged in a transformational “cooperative” business model in which the workplace is democratized, economic gains broadly shared, and the health of the broader community prioritized. Rather, just as individual rideshare drivers are above all driven by a job-conscious desire to maximize their own income through flexible and independent driving, so too are the powerful investors behind the Uber and Lyft apps seeking to maximize their own stock gains in a wholly traditional way.

The Uber and Lyft models show that cooperative networks face profound limitations when their role is limited mostly to facilitating material gains to individual members – seeking good wages and benefits for independent workers however possible within the existing system. Perhaps, a different rideshare model would have emerged if the drivers had organized “around a logic of mutual aid, which emphasizes that, like an extended family, the union is a

corporate entity whose members have multiple obligations to one another and share a collective responsibility for the well-being of one another” (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Sonnenstuhl, 2001, p. 73). These very same lessons can also be seen in the case of recent taxi worker organizing in Denver, Colorado.

TAXI DRIVER COOPERATIVES: NEW DIRECTIONS IN DENVER TAXI DRIVER ORGANIZING

Similar to many labor unions, the CWA Local 7777 in Denver has sought to address its long-term decline in union membership (Hurd, 2004; Katz, Batt, & Keefe, 2003) by reaching out to organize new sectors of the economy beyond traditional communication workers.

Katz et al. (2003, p. 576) show that union density among “all employees in the telecommunication industry fell from 56% in 1983 to 24% in 2001,” while network technician’s unionization rates fell from “82% in 1983 to about 57% in 2001,” and unionization rates for customer service and sale workers fell from “66% to 26%.” During the last two decades, the communications sector has experienced the fastest decline in union membership, with a 23.6% decline in membership between 1988 and 1996, and another 23.7% decline in membership between 1995 and 2002 (Hurd, 2004).

While CWA 7777 continues to organize communications and media companies such as AT&T, Avaya Century Link, and Dex One, it also has sought to expand and diversify its shrinking membership base in recent years by organizing the administrative staff of a different union (SEIU Local 105), Denver Public School food service employees (Terry & Carey Catering), and transportation sector workers (taxi and SuperShuttle drivers).

In reaching out to organize new labor sectors, it is notable that leaders of Denver’s CWA 7777 union have often critiqued the traditional process of union organizing through collective bargaining, and have sometimes pointed to the empowering potential of organizing workers into a worker cooperative. For example, as CWA 7777 reached out to taxi workers, union leaders suggested that the most successful organizing strategies for taxi workers may not be traditional labor union approaches but might lie in organizing workers in through “non-NLRB strategies” such as forming a taxi-worker cooperative to upend traditional models of business ownership (Lepie, 2014; Waldinger et al., 1998), and to reinvigorate taxi driver organizing and local unionism.

Out of a total of eight taxi cooperatives in the United States and three unionized taxi worker cooperatives, two union-cooperatives – Union Taxi and Green Taxi – are located in Denver, organized by CWA 7777 (Ji, 2014;

Palmer, 2015). Theoretically, this emerging collaboration between labor unions and worker cooperatives in organizing taxi drivers to confront their harsh workplace conditions is an example of what Witherell (2013) calls “an emerging solidarity” among labor organizations. However, ideas of taxi drivers organizing to build broader labor solidarity with radical potential should be balanced against the fact that a cooperative “worker-owner” model can also match many workers’ American dream of being a “business owner,” which can be something very different from a dream of being a labor advocate. As I will show, in the case of Denver’s taxi cooperatives, the enduring American tradition of job-conscious labor organizing amid workers with individualistic dreams of business ownership, and without broader political engagement, became a powerful contextual factor that structured the path these cooperatives-union collaborations followed, and that constrained their transformational potential.

Union Taxi in Denver

In 2009, Union Taxi became Denver’s only taxi union-cooperative organized by CWA 7777. Although there was a previous unionized taxi cooperative, Yellow Cab, founded in 1979 with the help of an independent nonaffiliated union, the Independent Driver Association (IDA), it filed for bankruptcy in 1993 (Gunn, 1986; Levinson, 2014).

The biggest motivation of workers wanting to organize the Union Taxi worker cooperative had to do with leasing fees that workers are subject to paying taxi companies. Denver taxi workers have been subject to high monthly leasing fees to private companies, ranging from \$2,000–3,200 a month. On top of that fee, as independent contractors, Denver taxi drivers have to cover gasoline, car maintenance fees, and all other expenses related to running a car (Colorado Public Utilities Commission (PUC), 2008). “The moment we ignite our car in the morning, we owe the company money,” explains Juan (Interview: July 10, 2014). Many companies have fired workers on the spot for any attempt to protest the company’s fees, arguing that “Mohammad comes, Mohammad goes” (Interview: September 11, 2015). One worker stated: “I worked 15 hours a day for three days but I did not make a penny for these three days because I had to pay all to the company” (Interview: September 6, 2015). After excluding all such expenses, an organizer at CWA 7777 argues that “an average wage for a taxi driver is estimated to be about \$3.75 an hour” (Interview: July 10, 2013).

As a response to such conditions, the effort to organize a taxi cooperative with labor union support originally came from a previous CWA 7777

president, Duncan Harrington (Interview: December 10, 2014). Harrington did not drive and thus he relied on taxis for his work. While using a taxi as his transportation, Harrington discovered the plight of taxi workers in terms of their long hours of work, little protection, and little pay. After hearing that taxi workers had no place to meet, Harrington let taxi workers use his local union office space so that workers had a place to meet and organize themselves (Interview: April 21, 2017). As a result of a series of worker organizing meetings at the CWA office, Pro Taxi, a taxi association, was established in 2005, which in turn became instrumental in establishing a worker cooperative, Union Taxi, in 2009. The incipient partnership between taxi workers and CWA 7777 led to form a more formal partnership, as CWA 7777 became a key political ally, lobbying to pass legislation, which was necessary, so that a new taxi company could be formed in Denver. In exchange for the work of political lobbying, taxi workers paid membership fees and became associate members of CWA 7777.

The political support of CWA 7777 was key in changing the Colorado legal landscape to allow for Denver taxi drivers to form a new cooperative. Before the new taxi cooperative could begin operations, it was necessary to gain the support of the PUC, the agency deciding which taxi companies can operate in the state. The PUC was established in 1913 to regulate rates and utility services such as electrical, common carrier, pipeline, gas, telephone, and water corporations, but the agency also is charged to regulate “entry into the taxicab market and to regulate the fares that taxis could share.” The original condition for any taxi company in order to obtain a taxi certificate (or taxi “medallions”) from the PUC is to demonstrate that “adequate service is not being provided and that the existing companies cannot provide adequate service” (Kramer, 1993). In Denver, at the time taxi drivers were considering forming a new taxi cooperative, three taxi companies (Yellow Cab, Zone Taxi, and Metro Taxi) had already operated since the 1930s and no other companies had been allowed to operate since 1947 (Kramer, 1993). For this reason, Kramer (1993) called the Denver taxicab market an “oligopoly.” Although there had been many attempts by new taxi companies to enter Colorado’s taxi industry over the years, the PUC had typically denied new license applications. Although there was pressure for the PUC to change its industry focus in 1994 from seeking a “regulated monopoly” to seeking “regulated competition,” thus allowing for new taxi companies to form, this Colorado legislative effort failed (PUC, 2008, p. 3).

In 2007, a new taxi “deregulation” bill was introduced in the state legislature to eliminate some monopolistic regulations in the industry (PUC, 2008). One of the big changes was to shift the burden of proof away from a

newly proposed taxi company and onto an existing taxi company in terms of proving that allowing a new company would or would not harm the public. Instead of a newly proposed company being required to prove that their new business would not harm the public, the new standard was that “existing carriers wishing to contest a new applicant’s application should be required to prove that granting the applicant authority to provide service would harm the public” (PUC, 2008, p. 13).

The CWA 7777 union was crucial in providing four years of political lobbying support to pass this new legislation that allowed new companies to break the Colorado monopoly in taxi business. Following passage of this legislation, the new Union Taxi cooperative opened shop in 2009. The Union Taxi cooperative was awarded 262 licenses to distribute to new taxi-business worker-owners. Union Taxi worker-owners also became CWA 7777 members, paying dues of \$28 a month, and renting CWA 7777 space (Interview: July 10, 2014). Denver now had a new taxi driver union-cooperative, although the consequences of this new institution in terms of advancing the long-term interests of Denver’s transit workers remained to be seen.

After establishing a worker cooperative, Union Taxi drivers paid a monthly fee of \$700–800 to a central pool pay for administration of their cooperative, which is significantly lower than the required monthly payment of \$2,000–3,500 that taxi drivers had to pay to competing, non-cooperative companies. According to an organizer at CWA7777, workers bring 75% of their income back home as a result of being part of a union-cooperative (Interview: July 10, 2014). Although Union Taxi cooperative workers take a much greater portion of their fare earnings home as wages than did taxi workers with non-worker-owned Denver taxi companies, the Union Taxi company still earns solid profits. Union Taxi had an annual revenue of \$13 million as of 2014, and the company was profitable enough that in 2014 Union Taxi purchased their own building and moved out of the CWA 7777 building (Interview: February 10, 2014).

Green Taxi: A Second Union-Cooperative

In 2014, workers who wished to leave their traditional private taxi companies – but who could not acquire one of Union Taxi’s limited taxi licenses – decided to form a second unionized taxi company in Denver. Just as Union Taxi drivers had done previously, workers decided to form a new company when they had grown tired of paying high leasing fees to their existing private companies: Yellow, Metro, or Freedom Cab. “It was our dream to be part

of Union Taxi because leasing fees are only \$800 a month ... not \$800 every week to private owners,” said a Metro Taxi worker (Interview: October 25, 2014).

The idea of joining CWA 7777 to resist such work conditions came from meetings where worker leaders expressed interest in joining a union as a way to get political support for the idea of their new business cooperative, following the successful example of Union Taxi. Within a month of first proposing the cooperative idea among themselves, more than 1,000 taxi drivers joined CWA 7777 in October 2014. Taxi workers viewed the labor union as their main ally in their struggle, which matched survey data that show that “immigrant workers have more favorable attitudes toward labor unions than do the US-born workers” (Milkman, 2011, p. 244; Milkman & Ot, 2014). CWA 7777 responded quickly to workers, drawing on the union’s previous experience in creating a union-cooperative, Union Taxi. The principles, bylaws, and all other administrative and political matters were articulated in the past through the case of Union Taxi, and this second round of forming a new cooperative followed a similar process as during the Union Taxi campaign.

Following successful political lobbying to win support for Union Taxi in 2009, CWA 7777 once again pushed through legislation in 2015 to help workers open a new unionized taxi cooperative in Denver in 2015. The legislation allowing this new company was different from previous laws regarding the taxi business because the bill (HB 15-1316) simplified the process by not requiring newly proposed companies to provide evidence that there is “a public need for the service.” Rather the PUC was only charged with ascertaining “whether the applicant is operationally and financially fit to provide the proposed taxicab service” (Legispeak, 2015). At the same time, the bill (House bill 15-1316) was sponsored and supported by members of both parties (Republicans and Democrats), who aimed to allow taxi companies to enter business so that it would lead to “free market competition, expanded consumer choice, and improved quality of service” (House bill 40-10.1-203; Buni, 2015). In support of free competition among taxi companies, a union organizer at CWA 7777 argued that “if Union Taxi dies from competition, so be it.... If we cannot compete, we deserve to die” (Blake, 2016).

As a result of support from both political parties, the bill was passed and became law on June 6, 2015. Subsequently, the new workers cooperative, Green Taxi, received a permit from the PUC in May 2016 and began to operate in July 2016 with 800 worker-owners – the largest taxi cooperative in the United States (Blake, 2016; Proctor, 2016; Stearn, 2016).

UNIONIZED WORKER COOPERATIVES IN PRACTICE: JOB OR CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS?

Union leaders and workers alike have celebrated the union-cooperative model as an effective strategy to protect vulnerable independent contractors such as taxi drivers. Labor unions can arguably enhance the political lobbying power of taxi drivers as a group, and a worker cooperative is a well-established path to achieving the American dream of becoming an independent business owner. From this perspective, a union-cooperative collaboration is a “perfect marriage” to accomplish multiple goals of building the political power of workers, protecting workers against exploitation by private taxi companies, and allowing workers the chance to secure their own economic independence. However, in reality, this perfect marriage in the form of a union-cooperative has experienced many obstacles in terms of building labor power in Denver.

Economically Driven Worker Cooperatives: “We are Owners, Not Workers”

Although some have celebrated alliances of unions and cooperatives as a new strategy of labor empowerment, the case of Denver taxi cooperatives shows that unionized cooperative members have sought little more than individual economic benefit through their new cooperative, and have shown little evidence of collectivist values, appetite for collective labor action, or concern for broader social issues. Evidencing a strong sentiment of individualistic ownership, 59% of cooperative members (41 members) interviewed by this author claimed that they did not think of themselves as “working class,” or as a member of any class, while just 25% of workers (17 members) interviewed did think in such class terms. The majority of workers interviewed agreed with the claim that “I do not think of myself in working class terms. I am just an individual owner” (Interview: September 10, 2015). One worker described this sense of being an individual business owner, rather than a member of workers’ collective in the following interview:

It was my dream to be an owner of business in America. So, of course, I am proud to be the owner of this taxi company and I feel like I achieved an American dream already. My life was miserable when I worked at Metro Taxi. But, now, no one can boss me around because I am one of the owners. But, I have never thought myself in class terms, because I don’t know what that means. (Interview: September 5, 2015)

Figure 1 presents the results of all interviewed workers (total workers, 69). When workers were asked to describe which term best described how they thought of themselves, 59% reported that they didn’t think in class

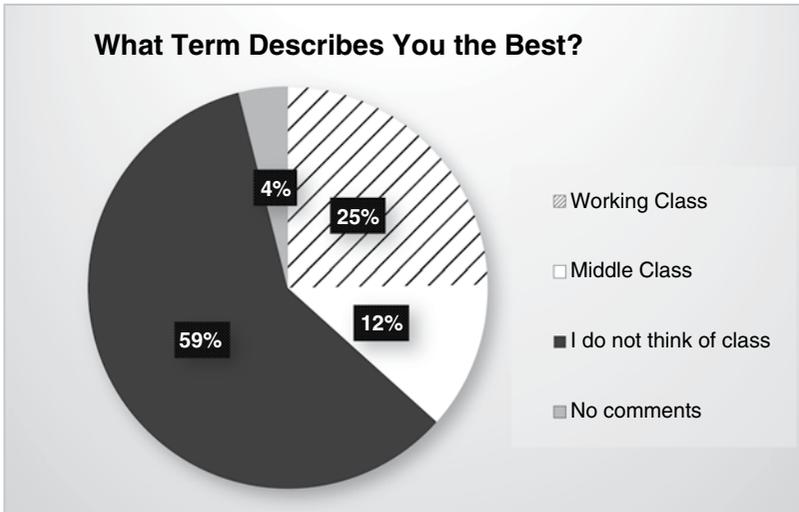


Fig. 1. Denver Taxi-Divers' Self-Identified Class Position.

(Source: Author Survey of 69 Denver Taxi Drivers)

terms, while 25% thought of themselves as “working class” (12% of these very low-wage workers actually thought of themselves as “middle class”). Evidencing entrepreneurial aspirations, the desire to become and identify as a business owner is strong among Denver taxi workers. Many cooperative owners claimed that “we are all here with an American dream of becoming business owners” (Interview: September 12, 2015).

One member of the Union Taxi worker cooperative, Ahamed, describes the benefit of being a business owner:

I was an accountant in my country but when I came here, there was no job. I went to a community college to keep studying but at the same time I drove the taxi to make money. Being the owner of the Union Taxi was good because we are the bosses and that we only pay \$700 a month to Union Taxi, which is much less than what other workers would pay driving at Metro Taxi. I became the owner when the previous owner sold his spot to me. (Interview: February 15, 2015)

This notion of low-income workers transcending their situation through individualistic business ownership corresponds to a long-enduring pattern wherein American workers seek to transcend class position through individual effort, and not by mobilizing as self-conscious members of a “working class,” confronting the inequities of capitalism (Salvatore, 1984). In this way,

worker ownership is seen by taxi drivers not as a political tool of class solidarity but as an instrumental mechanism for attaining middle-class identity.

In Denver, the consequences of individualistic business ownership undermining notions of class solidarity were made clear as both organizers and rank-and-file members of the existing Denver taxi cooperative (Union Taxi) worried about the possibility of competition from another taxi cooperative when Green Taxi was first organized. The Union Taxi cooperative owners were not supportive of these new labor organizing efforts, and resisted the granting of a business license to this “competing” association of taxi drivers, since this new license might lower profits for Union Taxi workers (Interview: December 10, 2014). This concern among Union Taxi workers was described in the following interview (September 10, 2015):

I was lucky to be the member of Union Taxi, and have made some improvement in my income as I do not pay that much monthly fee to the company. When I heard that there would be another taxi company like Green Taxi, I got immediately worried. Because there are not many people using taxis, while there are too many taxi companies in Denver.

At the same time, and also reflecting an individualistic and divided labor movement, some Union Taxi cooperative members attempted to join the new Green Taxi cooperative as double owners of both cooperatives – and subsequently subleased their personal work licenses to entirely new tax drivers – in order to maximize their own material gains by siphoning off some of the earned income of new drivers (Interview: September 27, 2015).

In this kind of model, worker cooperatives retain “an individualist notion of ownership: shares can be traded, inherited, or accumulated by individuals, and this enables unequal distributions of shares” (Grassroots Economic Organizing (GEO), 2012). However, a potential problem lies in the tendency of such individualistic trading and pursuit of wealth-building to undermine notions of working class struggle by overemphasizing how labor unions in the United States can facilitate economic ascent into the middle class. Michael Zweig argues that “when the working class disappears into an amorphous middle class, the working poor—more than forty-six million strong—drops out of the picture” (Lichtenstein, 2012, p. 11).

Exemplifying this utilitarian approach to worker cooperative ownership as an entrepreneurial tool of economic ascent, Denver’s Union Taxi was organized such that individual taxi drivers can transfer their ownership to someone else at will, and there is no collective organizational control or regulation as to how the transfer of ownership would occur. Many members have transferred or leased their cooperative ownership share to families and relatives without requiring any kind of training in cooperative principles. There is no

broader involvement of other cooperative members in reviewing such transfers, and drivers paying for such subleased medallions gain no membership or voting rights within the taxi cooperative (Interview: September 5, 2015). This author interviewed drivers who paid to lease their cooperative taxi licenses from other cooperative members, and found that none of those who leased their cooperative licenses were familiar with what a worker cooperative was or how it was meant to function. Many workers stated that they were just leasing a car from a cooperative member (owner) and paying that owner between \$1,000–1,500 a month for driving a car (that petite bourgeoisie owner then would pay the cooperative itself \$800 a month for the taxi license, keeping the difference as personal income). One worker interviewed stated the following:

I did not know that Union Taxi was a worker cooperative. I do not know what a worker cooperative is. I just lease this taxi and pay \$1,500 a month to the owner. The owner went back home to visit his families and that is why I am only using his taxi while he is gone for a while. (Interview: September 10, 2015)

Another worker, M, sub-leases his Union Taxi medallion from his cousin who is a cooperative owner of Union Taxi, and who he pays \$1,500 a month in order to drive the taxi.

While Union Taxi worker-owners focus on their personal economic improvement through their worker cooperative, there is little attention to broader social and political reform potentials that sometimes are associated with a worker cooperative. For instance, Union Taxi members voted to withdraw entirely from the CWA 7777 union after they had built a record of business success and were able to purchase their own building in the Fall of 2014. Previously, Union Taxi members had paid union membership dues of \$28 a month to CWA 7777, which also covered office space rental fees and a parking lot for their business from 2009–2014. The vice president of CWA 7777, Linda Harris, explains: “They got their own building and decided they didn’t need us anymore” (Blake, 2016).

In essence, taxi cooperative owners saw the CWA union as a “business enterprise, effectively selling their members services for a fee” (DeMartino, 1991, p. 34) – the very essence of the instrumental business unionism tradition in the United States. Union Taxi cooperative owners had essentially contracted with the CWA Local 7777 to secure important services such as political lobbying to secure a business license, technical assistance in setting up their business, and office and parking space during the cooperative’s early years. However, as the business became self-reliant, the need to continue as dues-paying union members evaporated, since the union-as-vendor no longer had important goods and services to provide (DeMartino, 1991, p. 34).

Although CWA 7777 continued limited forms of political lobbying, and arranged for political meetings as needed to defend the interests of taxi

drivers even after Union Taxi was established, Union Taxi workers came to view that the labor union simply did not do enough for members to continue to justify the monthly membership dues. Thus, in 2015 Union Taxi left CWA 7777. This example illustrates the lack of a deeper labor ideology, worker solidarity, or transformational political commitments on the part of Union Taxi cooperative owners, who seemed to view their cooperative as mainly a tool of individual economic ascent and not as a strategy of political or social change.

Governance Structure at the Unionized Cooperative

Emphasis on the economic role of worker cooperative in the case of Union Taxi and Green Taxi can also be seen in the clear separation between management and labor in the cooperatives, and in the way by which the cooperatives are run similar to conventional companies. Average workers are not involved in company governance, as they depend upon seven elected board members to take care of management-related business concerns. With a clear distinction that taxi drivers are simply workers, while elected board members make all important decisions, workers are not expected (or allowed) to participate in many affairs at their cooperative. In interviews, many workers argued that it was the responsibility of board members to know how to run the business and understand the principles and rules governing worker cooperatives. “Worker cooperative education is not given much time at our cooperative and it is okay,” said one worker. “Cooperative education is for board members only. Isn’t it?” (Interview: September 20, 2015). Confirming this view, there are no workers’ committees established to work on various issues at Union Taxi in Denver – workers are simply not involved in collective efforts to sustain business growth, to build alliances with other workers across the region, to engage with lobbying or other political work, or to develop worker education or leadership within the cooperative.

Instead of showing interest in (nonexistent) workers committees, interviewed workers expressed the view that managers at their companies should have the power over almost all administrative affairs. Over 50% of taxi cooperative owners interviewed believed that they needed “bosses” (meaning managers) to run the cooperative effectively. One worker emphasized the need to have a hierarchical structure to have a well-run company:

I think it is important for us to have someone with skills and experiences to manage the company. We are owners of this taxi company but it would be a disaster if we do not hire a manager to run the company. So, I consider those managers in administration as bosses. That is why I answered that we need a boss. (Interview: September 20, 2015)

Correspondingly, both Union Taxi and Green Taxi are governed by seven-member boards of directors, and an elected president, without any other mechanisms for worker engagement in cooperative governance. In the case of Union Taxi, communication between elected directors and worker-owners occurs mostly through email, with two general meetings a year and a few occasional meetings on the need basis. Thus, the ways by which Union Taxi members can be engaged in political issues or in broader labor mobilization campaigns are rare, except for a few occasions of participating in taxi worker protests against rising business competition from Uber and Lyft. Rather, Union Taxi is run similar to any other typical company, with no expectation of broader political or social engagement on the part of worker-owners. This may pose a threat of Union Taxi falling into a “hierarchical and managerial model” (Reedy, King, & Coupland, 2016, p. 5), resulting in “the near inevitability of degradation” within the unionized worker cooperative (p. 5).

*The Role of Labor Unions: Political Lobbying versus
Leadership Development*

Similar to their approach in supporting Union Taxi, the CWA 7777 union has interpreted its role almost entirely as a supportive lobbying group for the Green Taxi cooperative. CWA 7777 convened meetings of taxi cooperative owners only when there was a need for workers to participate in political hearings related to taxi business. The ways in which union organizers work with cooperative leaders on a regular basis are quite limited, as CWA 7777 defines their supportive role for taxi cooperatives as being limited mostly to professional political lobbying. CWA president Lisa Bolton stated in 2015: “We do not run their business. Our job is to pass legislation so that they can open a taxi business.” In this regard, the approach of CWA 7777 has been to limit its role to professional advising with a small circle of cooperative owners, and to political lobbying before official licensing bodies. This emphasis on political lobbying as the most important role of a labor union in supporting the emergence of a union-cooperative reflects upon the tradition of business unionism where labor unions do not present themselves as vessels of social movement but instead offers specific goods (such as higher wages) and professional services (such as professional lobbying or technical assistance) to union members in exchange of their membership dues.

Palmer (2015), in his taxi-industry report for the Worker Cooperative Industry Research Series, describes the weakness that comes with such a

political lobbying focus and the associated danger of a cooperative model “degenerating” from its original goal of worker cooperative.

Political strength is possible as well through a sustained focus on lobbying efforts and the maintenance of strong ties to allied organizations with a history of political activism. But a worker cooperative in the taxi industry that does not take these issues seriously will not fare any better than conventional firms... (Palmer, 2015, p. 7).

A similar criticism of the union’s focus on professional political lobbying is shown in the statement by United Steel workers’ union president Leo Gerard who argues that there is a natural outgrowth of the American worker tendency to trust their system to deliver the goods more than workers do elsewhere.

I actually believe that Americans believe in their political system more than workers do in other parts of the world,” Gerard said. He said that large labor demonstrations are often warranted in Canada and European countries to pressure parliamentary leaders. Demonstrations are less needed in the United States, because often all that is needed is some expert lobbying in Washington to line up the support of a half-dozen senators (Maisano, 2013).

As labor unions have become one of the strongest political lobbying institutions in the United States, spending hundreds of millions of dollars each year for political lobbying and electoral work, it has presented some difficulties, as excessive focus on political lobbying can result in less organizing on the ground. In 2014, according to Heritage Organization, the AFL-CIO spent “a fifth of its \$200 million budget on politics and lobbying” and spent another \$45 million for political lobbying in 2015 (Sherk, 2015).

The argument here is not to reject the necessity or virtue of political lobbying. In fact, the largest union-cooperative, Cooperative Home Care Associates (CHCA), which has 1,100 worker-owners (out of the total 2,300 members; Flanders, 2014), was critical in passing legislation to improve the life of low-wage workers in the home care industry. The management of the cooperative worked in tandem with a labor union, SEIU 1199, to “raise the floor” for all home care industry workers (Kennelly & Odeko, 2016; Witherell, Cooper, & Peck, 2012, p. 17). It is also notable that CHCA had strong collaboration with SEIU 1199 since 1987, long before it joined SEIU in 2003, as the senior management from CHCA had consistently encouraged workers to attend various rallies and volunteered at the SEIU 1199 to support home care organizing (Berry, 2014; Berry & Schneider, 2011; Burns, 2013).

In the case of Denver’s taxi workers (see Fig. 2), 30% of workers surveyed regarded political lobbying as the most important role of a labor union, followed by 33% of workers who believed that protests for workers’ rights are the most important role of a labor union. Interestingly, almost 30% of workers

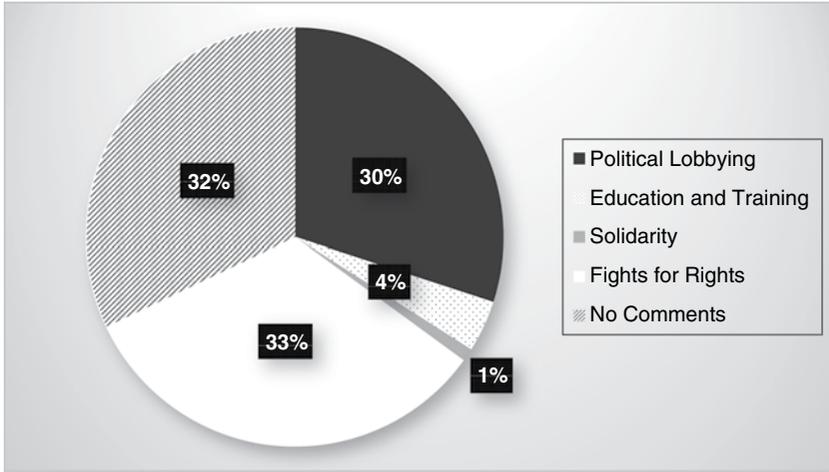


Fig. 2. What Is a Role of a Labor Union?

(Source: Author Survey of 69 Denver Taxi Drivers)

expressed no comments on the question, implying that many workers were not familiar with the role of a labor union and had no opinion about what role the union should play. Relatedly, most workers did not believe that a primary role of a labor union should be to build solidarity with other workers, as only 1% of Denver taxi workers pointed out the importance of building solidarity.

In this regard, Denver taxi workers' perception of the labor union being a political institution that works on political lobbying suggests a view that union professionals are the ones who do the real political work, independent of worker mobilization. In critiquing such a view, the first general secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) argued that political lobbying by a union was not enough to empower workers. Rather, what is needed are union commitments to provide worker education campaigns to "build worker control, collective experience and understanding, deepening working class consciousness. Education should ensure fullest discussion amongst workers, thus building democracy. Education is a weapon for shaping mass struggles of the present and the future of our class" (COSATU, 1986, cited in Cooper, 2007, p. 185). From this perspective, an important role of labor unions is to encourage workers' participation in ongoing union activities to help workers deepen their political understanding and develop their class consciousness, which helps them to build and sustain their own

identity as workers (Cooper, 2007, p. 183). Furthermore, through such efforts, worker labor consciousness and worker identity can be strengthened through “participation in a community of practice” (Cooper, 2007, p. 190) or through “active engagement in organization as a collective political project,” in Marx’s phrasing (Reedy et al., 2016, p. 4).

Unfortunately, in Denver, CWA 7777 did not take on this kind of leadership development role but rather presented itself as a professional business partner to the taxi-drivers’ cooperative – able to win specific goods for workers (such as a business license) but not focused on catalyzing a grass-roots campaign to fundamentally challenge the existing taxi-driver system. By undermining the importance of rank-and-file leadership development and by “explicitly *limiting* the field of contestation to a narrow field of concerns” as Perlman (1928) argued (cited in Dubb, 1999, p. 94), CWA 7777 also limited the range of possible changes that the unionized cooperative might introduce to Denver.

The limited role of a labor union in supporting workers on the ground may have played a role in the growing skepticism toward the union that Denver taxi cooperatives owners have expressed over time. In spite of the fact that 59% of immigrant workers (41 members) interviewed by this author early in their organizing campaign expressed receptiveness and a positive attitude toward the labor union, some taxi workers from Union Taxi union-cooperative in Denver have since changed their positive view to disappointment and skepticism about their labor union as time has passed (thus, replicating a common trajectory among workers in terms of their changing views toward unions, as described by Milkman and Ot, 2014). In the second wave of interviews by this author, many workers at Union Taxi expressed discontent that “[the union] did not contact us. The union provided us with nothing. No education. No contact. Nothing” (Interview: September 11, 2015).

Another worker claimed that “they did nothing to stop Uber. While Uber gets what they want, the labor union could not stop them from doing business in Denver.” Another worker from Union Taxi argued that “the union did nothing for us for the past six years after we opened the cooperative. They only took my money (\$360) per year. Why should I pay the money, when they do nothing for us?” (Interview: September 11, 2015). Thus, workers at Union Taxi were pessimistic about their roles in the union, and perhaps unrealistically expected the labor union to resolve many problems related to their taxi business – such as preventing the rise of Uber (see Fig. 3). In any case, it appears that some workers felt neglected by their union and did not believe that the union was interested in deeper engagement with workers other than taking membership dues and helping the company receive a business license to operate.

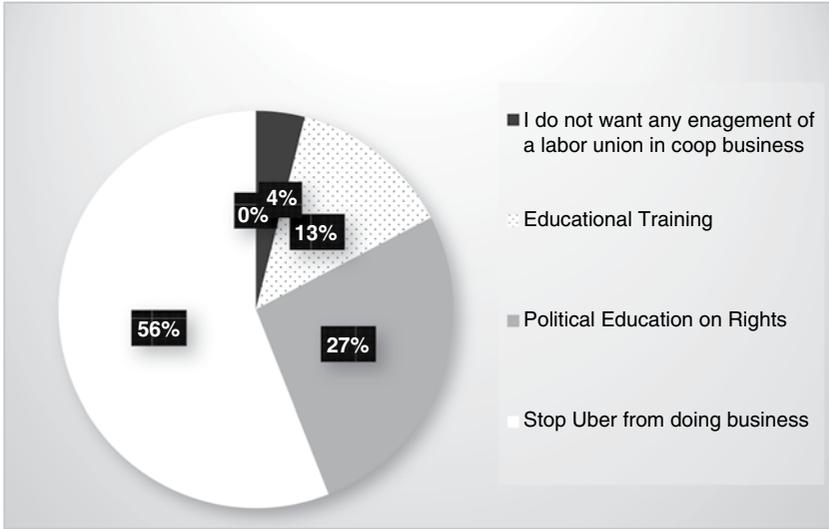


Fig. 3. What Would You Like a Labor Union to Do the Most?

(Source: Author Survey of 69 Denver Taxi Drivers)

Although Bruno and Jordan (2005, p. 466) argue that “education should emphasize a discourse of class and insist on class as the organizing reality of contemporary life,” this kind of class consciousness education certainly was not offered by CWA 7777 at either Union Taxi or Green Taxi. Thus, the deteriorating relationship between union leaders and cooperative workers became the predictable result of a situation in which “a business union reserves all decision-making action to labor leaders – the rank and file are not to engage in independent activity...” (Neal, 2011). This outcome is also reflected in the tendency of the union to overvalue the union organization itself, “which from a means has gradually been changed into an end in itself” rather than valuing democratic worker participation within the labor union (cited in Holt, 2007, p. 99).

This lack of education of rank-and-file workers fosters excessive dependence on professional organizers in getting things done. CWA 7777 heavily utilized a professional organizer in the creation of two union-cooperatives. Although there was a genuine effort among workers to explore the option of democratically creating a taxi cooperative in the beginning stage of development, CWA 7777 took over the entire process once members decided to approach CWA 7777 to ask for help in creating a union-cooperative. It is

true that professional staff efforts are, at times, necessary to move forward organizing campaigns, but too much reliance on professional union staff can become a problem, because “in many cases, the staff became the be-all and end-all of organizational change” (Fletcher & Gapasin, 2008, p. 61). In this case, taxi drivers’ expressed desire for a deeper relationship between union organizers and cooperative owners never came to fruition because the now-defunct Union Taxi–CWA partnership was nothing more than instrumental and mechanical (for case studies of similar limited “instrumental” unionism, see Bacharach et al., 2001 and DeMartino, 1991).

CONCLUSION

CWA 7777 was critical in the formation of two union-cooperatives in Denver, with union organizers joining with workers to show innovation and persistence in organizing independent taxi workers. Their innovation in organizing workers has received a good deal of national attention from unions working with taxi workers or other transportation workers (Palmer, 2015). However, the successful creation of a unionized taxi drivers’ cooperative does not necessarily mean that the resulting union-cooperative will be a progressive form of labor organizing. Rather, one possibility is that this union-cooperative alliance can fit within the conservative framework of business unionism, without being connected with other community or social justice issues. In just this way, Denver’s Union Taxi members were not mobilized by union leaders to become active in any other political causes other than running their own taxi business. In this case study, neither union organizers nor taxi drivers themselves prioritized the development of working-class identities or solidary class power among the drivers. Neither party saw the drivers’ cooperative as “the bedrock on which wider political action is built” (Spear, 1989, p. 566), and unsurprisingly such wider political action never came to be. In short, a union-cooperative relation cannot be assumed to be politically oriented or economically transformational when there is little attention to broader notions of class conflict and worker solidarity, and little education or opportunity for political engagement is offered to workers.

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