

Lessons Learned from the Fight for \$15 and a Union Movement

Reflections from the
Institute of Global Politics
Worker Leader Convening

By Mary Kay Henry and Dylan Baca



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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement as one of the most consequential worker-led campaigns of the 21st century. What began in 2012 with a few hundred fast-food workers striking in New York City for a \$15 minimum wage and union rights grew into a nationwide movement that helped raise wages for millions of workers, reshape public debates about economic justice, and redefine what was considered politically possible. Drawing on a November 2025 convening of worker leaders hosted by the Institute of Global Politics at Columbia University, as well as research and reflections from worker leaders, organizers, scholars, and advocates, this paper captures the experiences and lessons of those who helped build the movement. It highlights key themes that emerged from the convening and outlines lessons for the next generation of labor and worker movement leaders. At a moment of rising inequality, corporate consolidation, democratic backsliding, and political uncertainty around the world, the paper explores how workers at the grass roots built power, secured meaningful change, and what their experiences can teach those seeking to strengthen worker voice, economic opportunity, and democratic participation.

INSTITUTE OF GLOBAL POLITICS WORKER LEADER CONVENING ON THE FIGHT FOR \$15 AND A UNION MOVEMENT PARTICIPANTS

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FOREWORD

from Mary Kay Henry, IGP Carnegie Distinguished Fellow and former international president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU)

After stepping down as president of SEIU in 2024, I began thinking more about the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement, which began in 2012 when 200 fast-food workers in New York City went on strike, demanding a \$15 hourly wage and union rights, and spread across the country to hundreds of cities and to new industries, including home care, higher education, air travel, and more.

I heard from the worker leaders whose lives had changed profoundly and in ways that went well beyond their paychecks. They told me that participating in this movement expanded what they believed was possible—for themselves, for their children, and for their communities. Many thanked me for standing firm with a movement and strategy that in its early years was dismissed as unrealistic and reckless.

I felt gratitude, but I also felt that my work on the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement was not yet complete. Although the measurable successes of the movement are clear—79 jurisdictions—cities, states, and counties—will reach or exceed a \$15 minimum wage, and 57 jurisdictions, including California, New Jersey, New York, and Washington, will reach or exceed \$17 an hour by the end of the 2026¹—the lived experiences of the worker leaders who built this campaign remain largely untold.

When Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton invited me to serve as a Carnegie Distinguished Fellow at the Institute of Global Politics (IGP) at Columbia SIPA, I recognized an opportunity. The fellowship allowed me to step back from the daily urgency of organizing and attempt to document what we had learned and how we could apply these lessons to future campaigns.

In November 2025, around the 13th anniversary of the first Fight for \$15 and a Union movement strike, I convened a group of 11 Fight for \$15 and a Union worker leaders from across the country at IGP to reflect together on what had unfolded, what built power, what constrained it, and what must come next. The federal minimum wage remains at \$7.25, unchanged since 2009 and worth less in real terms than at nearly any other point in modern history, but the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement has brought about real change for workers. Tens of millions of workers have received raises. Governors have signed laws once considered politically impossible. Corporate wage norms have shifted. Presidential candidates have adopted our demand.

The Fight for \$15 and a Union movement showed that bold demands, worker-led direct action, and sustained union investment over many years can redefine political possibility. The movement also revealed limits. Policy wins can outpace durable organization. The visibility creates leverage and can also create vulnerability. Electoral systems can marginalize the very leaders that movements cultivate. Corporate consolidation results in ever more concentrated power.

Over 40 years organizing service and care workers across the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico, I often measured success in contracts won and members organized. The Fight for \$15 and a Union movement forced me to widen that lens. We moved from organizing thousands of workers in one hospital to imagining power for the 64 million kept underpaid and unheard. Less than 10 percent of those workers belong to unions. The scale of the challenge required reimagining how worker power could be built.

One lesson stands above the rest for me: Treat leadership development as a strategic outcome.

For much of my career, I treated leadership development as a prerequisite to winning a union election. The Fight for \$15 and a Union revealed something larger. When workers stepped into public leadership—risking retaliation, speaking openly about poverty wages, and returning to work together after striking—they were not simply advancing a campaign: They were transforming themselves and the terrain around them. Leadership became one of the movement’s most important outcomes.

“Worker-led” is not the same as “amplifying worker voices.” Letting workers lead means trusting working-class brilliance. It requires those of us with institutional power to rethink how leadership works and to commit deeply to practice. It means placing worker leaders in positions with real resources, decision-making authority, and long-term investment.

This paper is a product of the November 2025 convening and was informed by research conducted by Professor Stephanie Luce, insights from Professor Deepak Bhargava, my own experiences as president of SEIU, a November 2025 IGP webinar on the Fight for \$15 featuring leading economists, and, most importantly, insights from the worker leaders themselves. It provides a firsthand account of the lessons learned from the worker leaders who attended the convening, offering these lessons for the current generation of worker movement and labor leaders for their consideration in the next phase of worker organizing.

If there is one hope I carry from this work, it is that future organizers—the next generation of dreamers who refuse to believe that what they want is impossible—will build broader, deeper, more durable worker-led movements. That requires commitment across a broad multitude of organizations. It requires unions, foundations, and community institutions willing to finance movement infrastructure for the long term. It also requires hundreds of thousands of working-class leaders stepping forward as strategists and decision-makers.

The Fight for \$15 and a Union movement proved that bold demands and worker organizing can redefine what is politically possible. The task ahead is building worker power at the scale required to defend democracy, confront authoritarian drift, and secure economic justice for generations to come.

The work remains unfinished. And as it always has, the work belongs to workers themselves.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Mary Kay Henry". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Mary" and last name "Henry" clearly legible.

Mary Kay Henry

IGP Carnegie Distinguished Fellow and Former International President of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU)



“I learned how much power I really had. Look at what we have done together. The starting pay moved from \$7.25 an hour to \$15 an hour and it keeps increasing. WE DID THAT.”

**Adriana Alvarez, Chicago Fight for \$15
(Now with SEIU, Local 73)**

SECTION I

Introduction



INTRODUCTION

On November 29, 2012, a group of approximately 200 fast-food workers in New York City walked off the job.² They worked for Burger King, Domino's, KFC, Papa John's, Taco Bell, and Wendy's.³ Predominantly Black and brown workers were tired of earning \$7.25 an hour—less than a living wage—and juggling multiple jobs; being reliant on public assistance; and being unable to afford rent, health care, or childcare.⁴ So they demanded a \$15 hourly wage and the right to unionize.⁵ Their protest launched what became the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement.⁶

Over the course of 2013, workers staged similar strikes across the country: In August 2013, workers launched strikes in 60 cities across the United States.⁷ By 2014, other workers, including home health aides, federal contract workers, childcare workers, and airport workers, joined the movement and participated in the daylong strikes and protests in 190 cities.⁸ And on April 15, 2015, tens of thousands of low-wage workers, students, and activists in over 200 US cities participated in strikes and protests, demonstrating the campaign's evolving identity.⁹ What began as a sector-specific fight over wages had grown into a broader social justice movement for working people, tied to inequality, education, and civil rights.

Nearly 14 years after the initial walkout, the movement has brought about transformative labor policy change. Although the federal minimum wage has been stuck at \$7.25 since July 2009—an amount especially inadequate in the current affordability crisis, in which basic costs of living outpace wage growth—the movement has galvanized many state and local jurisdictions as well as multinational corporations to raise their wage floors.¹⁰ According to the National Employment Law Project, by the end of 2026, 79 jurisdictions—cities, towns, and counties—will reach or exceed a \$15 minimum wage, and 57 jurisdictions, including California, New Jersey, New York, and Washington, will reach or exceed a \$17 minimum wage.¹¹ In addition, the movement has resulted in more than \$150 billion in raises for 26 million workers, helped narrow the racial wealth gap, and increased union membership in states that raised their minimum wage.¹²

To understand the impact of this movement, Mary Kay Henry and IGP convened a group of 11 worker leaders from across the country in November 2025 to reflect on key themes and lessons learned from the past 14 years. The Fight for \$15 and a Union movement transformed the national conversation about wages, worker power, and the role of collective action in the modern economy. This paper draws on discussions from the November 2025 worker leader convening at the Institute of Global Politics, research by Professor Stephanie Luce, insights from Professor Deepak Bhargava, a November 2025 IGP webinar featuring leading economists, Mary Kay Henry's experience as president of SEIU, and, above all, the perspectives of worker leaders who helped build the movement. Together, these reflections examine how the campaign achieved lasting impact, the challenges it encountered, and the implications for the future of worker organizing.



“The first strike had a big impact on me. I learned that even if I was scared, I had to do this or do nothing. Things were as bad as it can get.”

**Greg Reynoso, NYC Fight for \$15
(Now with New York State Nurses Association)**

SECTION II

Background



BACKGROUND

From its early days, the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement secured important policy wins at the state and local levels. Following the initial wave of strikes and protests in November 2012, in 2013, New York adopted legislation to incrementally increase the minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$9.00 by 2016. In the same year, voters in the city of SeaTac, Washington, passed Proposition 1 to raise the minimum wage to \$15.¹³

In June 2014, Seattle became the first major city to adopt the \$15 minimum wage target when the Seattle City Council unanimously approved a phased-in \$15 minimum wage annually over three to seven years, depending on employer size.¹⁴ Later in 2014, during the November elections, voters in jurisdictions including Alaska, Arkansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota approved ballot measures to gradually increase their minimum wage, and voters in San Francisco approved a ballot measure to incrementally increase the city's minimum wage to \$15 by 2018.¹⁵ On July 22, 2015, the New York State Department of Labor's Fast Food Wage Board announced its recommendation to increase the state's minimum wage for fast-food workers to \$15 an hour.¹⁶ And in 2016, New York and California became the first states to raise their minimum wage to \$15 over the course of several years.¹⁷

The Fight for \$15 and a Union movement soon gained traction at the federal level as well as in the private sector. In 2015, Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) and Representative Robert "Bobby" C. Scott (D-VA) introduced legislation, the Raise the Wage Act, to raise the federal minimum wage to \$12 by 2020.¹⁸ The movement helped elevate the issue in the 2016 presidential elections, as the Democratic party adopted a \$15 minimum wage as part of its party platform.¹⁹ Several companies also increased their wages for their lowest-paid workers. In 2015, McDonald's increased starting wages for employees at its company-owned U.S. restaurants to \$1 above local minimum wage levels.²⁰

Over the next several years, the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement continued to gain momentum and to secure policy and corporate change. In 2017, Target became the first low-wage chain to commit to raising its minimum wage to \$15 an hour by 2020, and in 2018, Amazon announced that it would raise its minimum wage to \$15 for all U.S. employees, including full-time, part-time, temporary, and seasonal workers, a move the company said would benefit more than 250,000 Amazon employees as well as over 100,000 seasonal holiday employees.²¹ In 2019, the US House of Representatives passed an updated version of the Raise the Wage Act to increase the federal minimum wage to \$15 by 2025.²² And by the end of 2019, Connecticut, Illinois, Maryland, and New Jersey had joined California, the District of Columbia, and New York in incrementally raising their minimum wage to \$15, resulting in 30 percent of the entire US workforce being employed in jurisdictions that were on track to attain a \$15 minimum wage.²³ In 2020, Virginia became the first Southern state to approve a phased path to \$15 in a region historically characterized by anti-unionism and systemic racism.²⁴

UNION INVESTMENT

Early on in the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement, local SEIU leaders in Illinois sat down with representatives of the State to negotiate a new contract for 25,000 home care workers. Before the union could present its proposal, former Governor Pat Quinn said, “I know you want \$15 an hour; we can’t get there right away, but that’s where we want to go, too.”²⁵

The union had actually planned to ask for \$13 an hour, but the State’s actions showed that the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement was already beginning to transform the politics of wages in the country. It also became evident that in addition to obtaining minimum wage increases and seeing companies voluntarily raise their pay, SEIU members would be big winners at the bargaining table. In 2014, 33,000 SEIU members who worked for the Los Angeles Unified School District won \$15 an hour in their contract, one of many examples of how the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement was affecting bargaining across the union.²⁶

The direct wins for SEIU members helped soften some of the criticism inside the union over the massive investment SEIU was making in the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement, given that there was no clear path to winning new members. At the movement’s peak, from 2015 to 2019, the union spent over \$50 million a year to maintain and grow the movement in cities across the country.²⁷ There were loud internal voices that questioned that spending. In one early debate, some leaders wondered whether it was right to make the largest investment to back fast-food workers, when home-care workers—representing a significant portion of the union’s membership—were also stuck at near minimum wage and were excluded from city and state minimum wage increases.

Union leaders took great risk in proceeding in the face of that internal resistance. They argued that the union had to challenge corporate power. According to the leaders, the fast-food campaign was part of a larger union goal of making the economy work for everyone: according to the workers McDonald’s was a US-based multinational corporation with a large gap between CEO pay and that of frontline workers, whose low wages were subsidized by taxpayers in the form of food stamps, housing aid, and health-care support, all while the company’s shareholders were rewarded handsomely via hefty buybacks.

When, on the same day in 2015, Governors Andrew Cuomo of New York and Jerry Brown of California signed \$15 minimum wages into law, it started to become clear that the returns on that substantial investment would far exceed leaders’ most optimistic hopes.²⁸ By 2021, the National Employment Law Project reported that 26 million workers had won \$150 billion in raises as a result of the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement.²⁹

UNION INVESTMENT (continued)

On top of that, as was seen with Illinois childcare workers and Los Angeles school workers, the union's local bargaining power grew in every sector. As local unions experienced the positive impact of the movement in their contracts, even the most skeptical of the union's elected leaders and staff members agreed that the investment was smart, even if it remained uncertain whether the investment would ultimately lead to more union members.

The movement succeeded because workers led with a bold demand and robust, direct action. But one of the underappreciated lessons of the movement is that organizing is expensive. And without the great risk taken by SEIU in the face of considerable resistance, one of the most successful social movements of the last 50 years would not have gotten off the ground.

The scale of investment required to make the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement a success should prompt donors and foundations that finance social change to question whether the scale of their investments is capable of producing the scale of change they seek.

Working alongside community partners and advocacy organizations, leaders of the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement ensured that their demands included other important labor protections beyond a higher minimum wage. They pressed lawmakers and employers to adopt predictive scheduling laws and policies for low-wage workers; to ensure safe, harassment-free workplaces; and to provide paid sick days and paid family and medical leave in the absence of federal guarantees.³⁰ States and localities across the country soon introduced and enacted these measures.³¹

The COVID-19 pandemic was an important catalyst in the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement as fast-food and health-care workers became essential frontline workers, and health and safety hazards became more visible. Across the country, fast-food workers staged strikes to demand better wages and COVID-19 safety protections.³² As part of his \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package, the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, President Joe Biden included a proposal to raise the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour.³³ Although the Senate parliamentarian ultimately ruled that the wage increase violated Senate budget reconciliation rules, it kept the issue of a federal minimum wage at the center of national policy debate.³⁴ In April 2021, President Biden signed an executive order requiring federal contractors to pay a \$15 minimum wage to workers on federal contracts beginning in January 2022, with the amount adjusted annually for inflation.³⁵ On the state level, in California, Governor Gavin Newsom signed the landmark FAST Recovery Act (Assembly Bill 257) into law in 2022, which guaranteed fast-food workers a seat at the groundbreaking Fast Food Sector Council policymaking table to set statewide minimum wages and standards across the industry.³⁶

While the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement has achieved tangible policy victories, these successes face challenges from the second Donald Trump administration and from conservative states. In 2025, President Trump revoked the Biden-era executive order noted above, impacting 327,300 workers.³⁷ The Trump administration also proposed a rule that would eliminate minimum wage protections for millions of in-home health-care workers in 2025, rescinding the 2013 home health-care worker rule, and in March 2025 President Trump issued an executive order revoking the collective bargaining rights of more than one million federal workers.³⁸ Conservative states are increasingly using preemption to block local minimum wage laws: As of 2019, 25 states had passed preemption laws, prohibiting localities from setting a minimum wage higher than the state minimum wage.³⁹

UNION OF SOUTHERN SERVICE WORKERS

Historically, the South has been characterized by anti-unionism and systemic racism.⁴⁰ This attitude has been manifested through: (1) right-to-work laws, which prohibit union security agreements that require employees to pay dues or fees as a condition of employment (thereby diminishing the financial resources and collective bargaining power of unions), and (2) preemption of local pro-labor laws, such as minimum wage increases, fair scheduling, and paid sick days ordinances.⁴¹ As a result, Southern states have some of the lowest rates of union membership: In 2023, union coverage rates were between 3 and 5 percent in Southern states, compared with the national average of 11 percent.⁴² Despite these challenges, the Union of Southern Service Workers (USSW), founded in 2022, is organizing to transform low-wage retail, food service, and care jobs in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama.⁴³ Backed by SEIU and led by Southern service workers who helped champion the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement, USSW is building a community through corporate campaigns, responsive grassroots workplace fights, mass political education, and novel organizing strategies.⁴⁴ By 2030, USSW hopes to build a base of one million activists and secure at least one transformational victory that raises standards for tens of thousands of low-wage service workers, such as abolishing the sub-minimum wage for tipped service workers in at least one Southern state by 2028 and winning union recognition for Duke University workers.⁴⁵



“Solidarity makes
change, all ethnicities
coming together.
Can’t stop, won’t stop.
I named my son
Justice in honor of the
movement.”

Naquasia LeGrand,
NYC Fight for \$15; now residing in North Carolina

SECTION III

Key Themes and Lessons Learned



KEY THEMES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The Fight for \$15 and a Union movement is one of the most significant 21st-century labor campaigns. As the previous section illustrates, it did more than fuel a nationwide campaign for higher wages and union rights, it shifted the public discourse on decent pay and working conditions in the United States and revealed the power of grassroots worker organizing.

The worker leaders from across the country who convened at IGP reflected on the origins of the movement, identified moments that built real power, crystallized lessons learned, and defined what working people need if they are to build a stronger future. The leaders reviewed this paper and provided their feedback. Their reflections serve not simply as retrospective commentary, but as analytical insight into how power was experienced, understood, and sustained by those who built the movement.

BERTHA (“MAMA COOKIE”) BRADLEY’S STORY

The story of “Mama Cookie” (Bertha Bradley), elected regional leader of the USSW in Durham, North Carolina, captures both the fear and the eventual transformation that defined many participants’ journeys. Now 66, she recalls being 19 during her first strike. Her grandfather, a union worker, had taught her how to stand up for herself. At her first union meeting, she realized the power of collective action. “My mouth is more powerful than my fist,” she said. She wrote a simple message on a placard — “I need my check” — and brought it to work at Waffle House.

But fear was never far away. As a Black woman in the South, Bradley worried about violence at protests. At one point, she stepped away from the movement altogether. Yet the conditions that had drawn her in — caring for her grandmother without support, working multiple jobs while raising children — remained unchanged. She returned. “I kept going to the meetings and watching the struggle,” she said. “It means a lot when you see young people stand their ground.” For her, the movement was not just about wages, but about reclaiming time, dignity, and family.

KEY THEMES

The following **key themes** emerged from the worker leaders at the convening:

Theme 1

Truth-Telling and Community Catalyzing the Movement

Worker leaders described joining the movement when organizers named conditions they had long been taught to accept as normal: wage theft, erratic scheduling, unsafe workplaces, harassment, and the daily indignities of trying to survive on poverty wages. One worker at a fast-food chain joined after hearing that during the pandemic, employees had resorted to strapping dog diapers to their faces for protection when proper equipment was unavailable. At Domino's, according to workers' testimonies, delivery drivers used their own cars, absorbing the costs and risks; some were even assaulted on the job. Another worker described routinely working off the clock, a form of wage theft so normalized that it barely registered as illegal. Publicly naming these realities transformed individual frustration into shared grievance and changed individual fear into collective resolve.

Theme 2

Walk Backs and Public Visibility Sustaining Worker Power

Worker leaders repeatedly identified public walk backs—returning to their workplaces together after striking—as moments when abstract notions of solidarity became materially real. These actions clarified that retaliation was not inevitable, that isolation could be broken, and that collective action could alter the balance of power, even in highly controlled workplaces. Worker leaders also noted that public visibility such as media attention, demonstrations, and confrontations with corporate headquarters helped make abstract power feel more tangible. For many, participation in the movement fostered a sense of belonging to something larger. “I could have never imagined that it would become a nationwide thing,” one worker reflected. “We weren’t just fighting for a minimum wage, but for respect, globally.” Another described the first strike he joined as “life-changing”: “Seeing that we were not alone ... it hits different.” Workers who had once feared losing their jobs discovered, often to their surprise, that collective action offered a degree of protection. “Everyone was afraid,” one recalled. “But nobody got fired.”

Theme 3

Morality at the Core of the Movement

Moral issues were central to the effort. Workers rarely described the movement solely in economic terms. Instead, they framed it as a fight for dignity, safety, gender and racial justice, and a future in which their children would not inherit the same struggles. This moral core gave the campaign resonance across communities and sustained participation through setbacks and slow progress. Importantly, workers identified that this framing emerged organically from workers' lived experiences and was reinforced through shared rituals, faith practices, and intergenerational narratives.

Theme 4

Community Care as an Informal Movement Infrastructure

Workers emphasized how care within the community functioned as an informal infrastructure that allowed workers to sustain engagement despite their economic precarity and personal risk. Long before formal victories were secured, workers built systems of mutual aid—sharing food, caring for children, checking in after late shifts, and ensuring no one faced retaliation alone. These practices were not ancillary to the campaign; they were foundational to its resilience.

Theme 5

Race, Immigration, and Safety as Structural Conditions

Worker power cannot be understood apart from race, immigration status, and safety. For many leaders—particularly Black, brown, and immigrant workers—economic exploitation was inseparable from racial profiling, discrimination, and fear of retaliation linked to immigration enforcement. These conditions shaped strategy and determined where and how workers could act collectively. The movement revealed that any effort to build durable worker power must contend directly with the intersecting structures that shape workers' lives, rather than treating them as secondary or peripheral concerns.

ANGELICA HERNANDEZ'S STORY

When Angelica Hernandez's manager at McDonald's found out she had signed up for the Fight for \$15 and a Union campaign, she warned her bluntly: Don't do it. The union would rob her, and Hernandez "would end up living under a bridge." Unions did not help their members, her boss warned, and they took too much money. Besides, the corporation had better lawyers.

That was the moment Hernandez summoned her courage. For three years, she had resisted joining the movement, fearful of retaliation or being fired. But she also had seen coworkers pushed to the brink, like a friend who fell ill and was "abandoned," left crying in the lobby while management looked the other way. The warning from her boss had the opposite effect. "The union has some pretty good lawyers too," she recalled thinking. "And if I end up living under a bridge, I'm going to fight to make sure it doesn't happen to others."

After she joined, something shifted in how her coworkers treated Hernandez. They treated her with a kind of respect that had previously been absent. The risks remained, but were joined by a growing sense of purpose. "The only way they're going to kick me out of the fight is dead," she said, not as hyperbole, but as a statement of resolve.

LESSONS LEARNED

The worker leaders coalesced around the following **lessons** learned:

Lesson 1

Bold Demands Can Shift the Boundaries of What Is Politically Possible

The Fight for \$15 and a Union movement's insistence on a \$15 minimum wage was initially dismissed as unrealistic. Yet the clarity and ambition of the demand helped reset expectations among policy-makers, the media, and the public. What began as an aspirational goal became a new baseline in wage debates across companies, cities, and states. "Politicians are working from an area of comfort," a leader noted. "There is a need for elected officials to be more radical and willing to work with people on the ground." Another put it more bluntly: "They don't know what it's like to open their fridge and find it empty."

Lesson 2

Durable Campaigns Require Worker Leadership and Sustained Organizational Investment

The campaign's power rested on the leadership of low-wage workers themselves, particularly Black, brown, immigrant, and women workers whose lived experiences gave the campaign moral and political resonance. At the same time, the campaign relied on sustained union investment, staff support, and leadership development programs that enabled hundreds of workers to emerge as organizers, spokespeople, and movement leaders.

Lesson 3

Strategic Experimentation Accelerates Movement Growth

The campaign succeeded in part because it continually tested new tactics—one-day strikes, walk backs, city-by-city escalation, digital organizing, wage boards, and coordinated corporate campaigns targeting major companies, such as McDonald's. This willingness to experiment allowed the movement to adapt quickly and scale nationally.

Lesson 4

Broad Coalitions Deepen Legitimacy and Expand the Scope of Organizing

The campaign's most effective partnerships with community organizations, faith leaders, and social justice movements were grounded in shared purpose and mutual trust. These coalitions helped situate wage demands within a broader struggle for dignity and equality, linking them to fights for racial justice, gender equity, and worker safety. Efforts such as organizing against sexual harassment at McDonald's further expanded the scope of the campaign, demonstrating that workplace issues are inseparable from broader systems of power and inequality. These alliances strengthened the movement's legitimacy and extended its reach across communities and constituencies.

Lesson 5

Workers Can Exercise Power Even Without Formal Union Recognition

Although the campaign did not achieve traditional collective bargaining rights in the fast-food sector, workers nonetheless secured substantial gains. Through strikes, public pressure, and policy campaigns, they raised wages, influenced corporate behavior, and helped advance legislation in cities and states across the country. In doing so, the movement showed that collective power can be exercised beyond traditional union recognition frameworks.

Lesson 6

Sustaining Worker Power Requires Building Lasting Institutions

Large-scale mobilization can shift public debate and win important policy victories, but long-term impact depends on building durable organizational structures. Ongoing efforts, including California's fast-food sector initiatives and organizing among service workers in the South, represent attempts to translate the movement's energy into institutions capable of sustaining worker power over time.

Lesson 7

Policy Follows Organized Power

Nearly every major victory associated with the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement was preceded by sustained organizing and public pressure. Wage increases in cities and states did not emerge from legislative goodwill. They were the result of years of strikes, protests, media campaigns, and coalition building that shifted public opinion and altered the political cost of inaction. In this sense, the movement did not simply advocate for policy change. It reshaped the political terrain on which those decisions were made. This dynamic carries important implications for the future. When movements weaken, policy gains become fragile. Without organized worker power to defend and expand them, reforms are vulnerable to repeal, preemption, or erosion. Building and sustaining organizing capacity is foundational to making policy change possible.

Lesson 8

Policy Campaigns Can Be Used as Organizing Tools

The Fight for \$15 and a Union movement illustrated how policy campaigns can serve as powerful organizing vehicles. Ballot initiatives, wage board fights, and citywide minimum wage campaigns did more than secure legislative outcomes. They created opportunities to mobilize workers, knock on doors, hold public conversations about inequality, and bring new people into collective action. Rather than treating policy proposals as purely technical solutions, the movement used them as organizing frameworks that connected individual workplace struggles to broader systemic change. This approach blurred the line between policy advocacy and grassroots organizing, allowing each to reinforce the other. This lesson remains central for the next phase of worker organizing. The strategic task is to design campaigns that expand participation, deepen leadership development, and strengthen community ties. When policy efforts are rooted in organizing, they become engines of sustained movement growth rather than isolated legislative battles.

Lesson 9

Worker Power Should Be the First-Order Priority

The movement showed that workers can win higher wages. More importantly, however, it showed that organized workers can reshape the political and economic terrain itself. Over the past decade, the movement has demonstrated that when working people act collectively, they can force institutions to respond, shift public narratives, and redefine what is considered politically possible. The task ahead is to ensure that this power endures. Making worker power the first-order priority requires a fundamental shift in how success is measured. Too often, movements are evaluated primarily by the passage of legislation or the size of individual policy wins. Although these outcomes matter, they are not sufficient on their own. Without sustained organizing capacity, leadership development, and institutional presence, even hard-won reforms remain vulnerable. The next phase of the movement must place equal emphasis on building the structures that allow workers to exercise power consistently over time. This includes investing in organizing infrastructure that reaches beyond traditional strongholds and into regions and sectors where worker power has historically been weakest; expanding leadership pipelines so that workers serve as architects of strategy and holders of public office; strengthening cross-movement alliances that connect labor struggles to broader fights for gender and racial justice, housing security, health-care access, and democratic participation; and continuing to experiment with new organizational models capable of meeting the realities of a fragmented and rapidly changing economy.



“We have to figure out
how to make the
organizing sustainable.
How to keep the
money to be able to keep
organizing people.”

Terrence Wise, Stand Up KC
(now with Missouri Workers Center)

SECTION IV

Looking to the Future



LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Today, the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement stands at an inflection point: The question is no longer whether workers can win change—it is whether those wins can be consolidated into durable power capable of shaping the economy in an era of democratic backsliding, political volatility, corporate consolidation, and deepening inequality. This moment is defined by tensions: Labor law continues to exclude large segments of the workforce; corporate power has grown more concentrated; political polarization has made even widely supported reforms difficult to secure and harder to sustain; and institutions meant to protect workers remain fragile.

The result is an environment in which worker mobilization is necessary, but no longer sufficient alone. The movement built organizing infrastructure, developed new leaders, reshaped public narratives about work, and illustrated that sustained grassroots pressure can move even the largest corporations and most resistant political systems. These experiences now form the foundation for what comes next. The task ahead is to adapt past strategies, moving toward sustained power building, and moving from winning individual campaigns toward transforming the conditions under which those campaigns are fought.

The Fight for \$15 and a Union movement emerged from workers' determination to expand their power, defend their dignity, and reshape the conditions of low-wage work. Its success stemmed from workers' refusal to accept the constraints imposed on their power and dignity. That same spirit must guide the movement forward. The next era will demand creativity, courage, and persistence if workers are to defend existing gains in an uncertain political landscape. The enduring strength of worker power rests on working people's capacity to build organizations, institutions, and relationships that can carry collective power across generations. Lasting worker power is built when collective action is translated into durable institutions and influence within the structures that govern economic life.

STRATEGIES

Looking ahead, worker organizing will require the following **strategies** to be successful:

Strategy 1

Naming Power and Confronting Corporate and Institutional Targets

Worker leaders stressed that the next phase of organizing must directly confront the institutions that profit most from underpaying workers. For many in the room, McDonald's remained an unfinished fight, a symbol of corporate practices that rely on franchise structures to evade accountability while maintaining centralized control over wages and working conditions. Others pointed to powerful actors beyond fast food, including major corporations that invest little in the communities where their workers and neighbors struggle to survive. Participants emphasized that movements require visible targets around which to organize, institutions whose practices embody broader economic injustice. Naming responsibility, they argued, is a strategic necessity. It transforms diffuse frustrations into collective action, clarifies lines of accountability, and ensures that structural harm is not miscast as individual failure.

Strategy 2

Identifying a New Unifying Demand with National Reach

Participants consistently emphasized the need for a bold, shared demand. They argued that movements need rallying points that are ambitious enough to inspire action, clear enough to resonate widely, and expansive enough to unite diverse struggles under a common cause across industries and communities. Workers also stressed that the next demand must reflect the realities of today's economy. Rising housing costs, persistent racial and gender wealth gaps, and widening inequality have reshaped what *economic security* means. Any future campaign, they contended, must speak to dignity, stability, and a broader vision of justice, in addition to wages.

Strategy 3

Rebuilding Community Through Organizing

Workers must rebuild social connection and collective identity through organizing. Participants described the fragmentation facing many communities, where isolation, economic stress, and declining public investment have weakened social bonds. They believe that organizing must extend beyond the workplace. Neighbors, families, faith communities, and local networks were all identified as sites of potential power. Participants emphasized the importance of creating spaces where people feel connected to something larger than themselves, a community rooted in mutual support and shared struggle. In an era when housing insecurity and mental health crises are tearing at the social fabric, rebuilding solidarity was viewed as both a moral necessity and a strategic imperative. Durable worker power depends on winning demands and renewing the relationships that make collective action possible.

Strategy 4

Creating Leadership Pipelines and Pathways to Power

Worker leaders underscored the need to expand pathways from organizing into civic, political, and institutional leadership, particularly for women and workers of color who have historically been excluded from decision-making roles. Many emphasized the importance of developing pipelines that allow workers who organize their stores, neighborhoods, and cities to become professional organizers, movement leaders, nonprofit executives, policy advocates, candidates for office, and elected officials. Participants described this as essential movement capacity-building, centered on investing in people rather than only in campaigns. Increasing the number of leaders with organizing experience inside institutions of power was seen as essential for sustaining long-term influence and ensuring that movements remain rooted in the communities they represent.

Strategy 5

Acting with Urgency and Embracing Experimentation

Participants felt the need for urgency. There was a shared recognition that progress depends on acting in imperfect circumstances and adapting strategy as conditions evolve. Workers called instead for reinvention, experimentation, and a willingness to test new models of organizing, bargaining, and coalition building. Many described uncertainty as an opportunity. The Fight for \$15 and a Union movement itself

emerged through experimentation, including early efforts to use digital tools, such as Facebook ads and platforms like Twitter and Instagram, to broadcast worker stories from strikes and walkouts in cities. These campaigns reached workers in communities that lacked an on-the-ground organizing presence, including rural areas. Many of these workers went on to participate in coordinated national days of action in more than 300 cities. Digital engagement also helped organizers identify where momentum was building, shaping decisions about where to deploy resources and leadership. Workers who had already taken action in one city were able to support organizing in others, traveling from city to city, to help expand the large-scale efforts to translate online engagement into offline organizing in the labor movement. That same spirit, participants argued, must guide the next phase: learning in real time, adapting quickly, and refusing to allow institutional inertia to slow the movement.

THE STRUCTURAL LIMITS OF THE CURRENT LABOR LAW FRAMEWORK

Despite its successes, the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement exposed the structural limits in the existing labor law and regulatory system — limits that help explain why widespread wage gains did not translate into widespread collective bargaining rights. Large segments of the workforce remain excluded from meaningful protections, including domestic workers and care workers. Additionally, franchise models, subcontracting, and agricultural and gig work arrangements continue to diffuse responsibility and weaken workers' ability to bargain collectively. Even where formal protections exist, their interpretation and enforcement fluctuate with changing political conditions. Weak enforcement allows employers to violate workers' organizing rights with impunity.

This reality presents a sobering challenge. Reliance on traditional labor law pathways alone is unlikely to generate the scale and durability of power required in today's economy. The Fight for \$15 and a Union movement responded to these limitations by experimenting with alternative strategies. Looking forward, movements must prioritize building power that is not dependent on fragile legal structures alone. Changes are also needed in the legal and normative framework governing labor relations. Current labor law (1) offers insufficient protection for workers seeking to organize, (2) tolerates employer resistance that would be unacceptable in other democratic contexts, and (3) provides no straightforward pathway for sector-wide bargaining in industries defined by franchise models, subcontracting, and gig work. Until those barriers are addressed, workers will continue to face steep obstacles to securing the lasting institutional power necessary to sustain gains over time.

CONCLUSION

The Fight for \$15 and a Union movement proved that power can be built in terrain designed to prevent it. Fast-food workers — dismissed as too transient, too replaceable, too atomized to organize — stopped work, forced corporate concessions, and shifted the wage floor across entire regions. They did not wait for favorable conditions, but instead created them. Those victories emerged from bold demands, worker-led disruption, sustained union investment, and campaigns that linked narrative change to policy change. As a second Trump administration and conservative states are undercutting progress, this moment demands our collective reflection on the lessons learned from the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement and on how to turn movement gains into institutional infrastructure capable of surviving election cycles, economic contractions, and political backlash. Workers now confront old obstacles in new forms: franchise structures that water down responsibility, gig models that deny employment status, and technologies that intensify surveillance while weakening bargaining power.

The Fight for \$15 and a Union movement changed what workers believed they could demand, what employers believed they could ignore, and what policymakers treated as politically viable. Holding existing wage floors while building new sectoral unions and training the next generation of worker leaders will be essential. The next phase cannot rely on episodic mobilization alone; it must translate protest into governance, momentum into membership, and wage wins into permanent worker power. That means building institutions equal to the scale of the challenge, including sectoral bargaining systems, durable worker organizations, leadership pipelines, and political structures accountable to working people. The work ahead is to ensure that what was proven possible becomes structurally permanent, that collective action is not remembered as something that worked once, but recognized as the force that continues to shape the economy. What began with 200 workers walking off the job in New York City became a reimagining of what labor power could look like in the 21st century and into the 22nd century. Those victories must now become the foundation of a labor movement capable of shaping the future of work. The task ahead is to carry forward the lessons learned from the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement and build the next generation of worker organizing with equal ambition, discipline, and courage.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

MARY KAY HENRY

Mary Kay Henry is the former international president of the two-million-member Service Employees International Union (SEIU), a role she was the first woman to hold. An activist, labor organizer, and social justice leader, Henry has had a career spanning over 40 years, defined by a principled and transformative vision for workers rooted in racial and economic justice. She has championed inventive organizing, grassroots engagement, and bold political advocacy, leading groundbreaking initiatives, including first-of-their-kind national hospital bargaining agreements and historic wins for home-care and childcare workers. Her decade-long leadership on the Fight for \$15 and a Union movement helped deliver more than \$150 billion in raises for more than 26 million workers.

Throughout her tenure with SEIU, Henry defended workers in the United States, Puerto Rico, and Canada from escalating legal and political attacks and directly challenged systemic racism. She stood shoulder to shoulder with workers on strike, at national actions, and while knocking on doors, demanding change and creating authentic and meaningful connections.

Henry's vision for justice is entwined with her Catholic faith and a clear calling to work that serves others. She grew up outside Detroit, Michigan, and saw early on the difference unions made in her community. She graduated from Michigan State University with a degree in urban planning and labor relations. Mary Kay has retired to her home in San Francisco with her spouse, Paula Macchello.

DYLAN BACA

Dylan Baca is a citizen of the Navajo Nation and White Mountain Apache Tribe and a graduate of Columbia University, where he studied political science and American studies. A Udall Scholar, his work has focused on public policy, political organizing, and coalition-building across Indigenous advocacy, democratic engagement, and economic opportunity. Over the past several years, Baca has advised elected officials, nonprofit organizations, and national political efforts on voting rights, education, tribal governance, and community development issues. Raised in Arizona and now residing in New York City, Baca served as a research assistant to Mary Kay Henry on this project, supporting research and convening efforts examining the Fight for \$15 and a Union campaign and its broader implications for worker power and economic justice.



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