

WESTERN NEW YORK AND THE NEW WAVE OF LABOR ORGANIZING

DEREK SEIDMAN

Western New York is a union stronghold. Around 23.5% of workers in the Buffalo Niagara region are union members. As the rate of union density has declined in the U.S. and even in New York State as a whole, it climbed over three percentage points in the Buffalo area from 2021 to 2022.

The region has a strong institutionalized labor movement. The Western New York Area Labor Federation represents 165 unions with 140,000 members across five counties in the region. The annual Labor day parade in Buffalo is a huge event. In recent years, homecare workers have unionized and nurses waged a successful major strike. From auto to telecommunications, construction to grocery stores, labor unions are entrenched throughout Western New York.

But the big story in the Buffalo area over the past half-decade -- and the local story that has had truly national repercussions for labor -- is the rise of a new, bottom-up unionism, led by a layer of young and militant worker-

organizers, that has swept through the coffee service industry and is spreading to other sectors.

Democratic and worker-led, this wave of new unionism has gained its greatest fame by kicking off the historic and ongoing union drive at Starbucks, a global corporate behemoth that is the eighth biggest private employer in the U.S.

The emergence of this new unionism has been driven by a network of radical activists, including a fresh generation of "salts" who took jobs with the intention of organizing their workplace. They have been supported by steeled advisors like Richard Bensinger, the former organizing director for the AFL-CIO and founder of its Organizing Institute. This new union wave has found a home within Workers United, a plucky affiliate within the mammoth Service Employees International Union.

There was promise and excitement when, around a decade ago, the Fight for \$15 ascended in New York State. In Buffalo, the campaign took off, gaining a foothold in several fastfood shops, especially a downtown Wendy's. But while the Fight for \$15 campaign was arguably victorious in New York State in terms of the wage demands, fastfood workers remained almost entirely unionized.

The half-decade from 2015 to 2020 saw a major politicization of thousands of young people. Those years witnessed two Bernie Sanders presidential runs, the 2020 uprisings after the murder of George Floyd, and the explosive growth of the Democratic Socialists of America. Meanwhile, many so-called millennials saw futures that promised mostly endless student debt payments, rising rents, and precarious work.

Amidst this conjuncture, a new organizing boldness emerged in the Buffalo area around a very specific sector: coffee shops. In 2019, workers at SPoT Coffee, a local chain well-known to many Western New Yorkers, decided to unionize. Some were inspired by the 2017 example of Gimme! Coffee baristas in Ithaca, just over a two drive from Buffalo. The SPoT union drive, affiliated with Workers United, reached several stores in Buffalo and Rochester.

But SPoT was just the beginning. Several veterans of the SPoT union drive were on the ground floor of efforts beginning in 2020 to organize Starbucks. According to Labor Notes, "Buffalo Starbucks workers, including several who had helped organize SPoT Coffee, started talking about organizing early in 2020. They reached out to Workers United and gradually formed a committee of about 50 workers from almost all of the 20 stores in the area."

For example, Jaz Brisack, who had become a "protege" of seasoned organizer Richard Bensinger, and who would emerge as perhaps the most visible figure of the Buffalo Starbucks union drive, had worked on the SPoT union drive with Workers United before getting a job at Starbucks in Buffalo with the intent of organizing.

Brisack was among at least ten "undercover activists," wrote *Bloomberg* reporter Josh Eidelson, who "landed jobs at Starbucks cafes in the Buffalo area, where they quietly laid the groundwork for the first successful organizing campaign among the company's US employees in decades."

The Starbucks union drive in Buffalo, which stretched across several stores in the area, immediately captured national attention, but few expected the initial spark in Western New York to transform into a blaze that engulfed the nation. As of late November 2023, 463

Starbucks stores in 46 states have filed for unionization.

None of this could have happened without the example that Buffalo baristas established. With inspiring boldness and media savvy, they punctured the seeming invincibility of a corporate giant and modeled what a new wave of store-by-store, worker-driven unionization in the service sector could look like. For radicalizing young workers across the nation, the model was irresistible. With stores across the U.S. reaching out to Starbucks Workers United's Buffalo headquarters, it spread nationwide.

Behind the scenes, Buffalo area baristas and organizers cultivated and supported a growing number of worker leaders to spread the union drive far and wide. As labor scholar John Logan wrote, the success of the Starbucks campaign "was always dependent on the dynamism of rank-and-file worker-organizers," with Bensinger, Brisack, and others "mentor[ing] and support[ing] worker-organizers in other coffee shops, primarily through Zoom."

A critical thing that continues to drive Western New York's new wave of union organizing is the growing layer of seasoned organizers -- the region's own "militant minority" -- who have accumulated experiences and lessons that they can pass on to others. Through word-of-mouth, criss-

crossing employment patterns, and shared social circles, they find each other.

For example, workers at the iconic Buffalo food shop Elmwood Taco and Subs, who announced their union in October 2023, were supported by Workers United organizers who themselves had been Starbucks workers who organized the first wave of union Starbucks stores in Buffalo. ETS workers also had friends at the Lexington Co-op, a grocery store down the street that unionized in 2022.

This self-reproducing network of organizers, ranging from salts to the newly converted, and committed to worker self-organization, has not just kept Buffalo and Western New York's new union movement growing, but spread its influence nationally.

The union surge has not been without significant challenges. Starbucks has used its billions in revenue to engage in a truly epic union-busting campaign. Because of this, a first contract still eludes Starbucks Workers United. Many of the early leaders of the Starbucks union drive have been illegally fired. A union drive at the Buffalo Tesla plant fizzled out. Tensions exist between Buffalo's old guard of labor leaders and the new generation of Wobbly-style organizers.

But the new wave of labor organizing continues in Western New York. Elmwood Taco and Subs workers won their union in

November. And workers at the city's flagship art museum, the Albright-Knox, are unionizing with -- who else? -- Workers United.

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