"A Sense of Possibility and a Belief in Collective Power": A Labor Strategy Talk with Karen Nussbaum

Lane Windham

How can America's working people leverage real power when unions are so weak? Karen Nussbaum has been on the cutting edge of this question for more than forty years, reliably building fresh structures for labor well before the rest of the movement even understood the depths of its decay. Scholars and activists are familiar with 9to5, the groundbreaking women office workers' group Nussbaum cofounded in 1973. Fewer recognize the significance of Nussbaum's latest project—Working America—a community-based AFL-CIO group for working people who do not have a union, founded in 2003. Working America has already earned its political stripes, effectively mobilizing its 3 million members to vote more progressively in swing states like Ohio. Nussbaum's next big challenge is to use Working America to help workers challenge outsized corporate power in twenty-first-century workplaces.

I got to know Nussbaum when I worked at the AFL-CIO and she headed the federation's first Working Women's Department. I have since come to understand both 9to5 and Working America in the context of what is increasingly known as "alt-labor," labor groups not based in traditional collective bargaining.[1] Today's taxi drivers, restaurant staff, homecare workers, day laborers, freelancers, and others are ushering in an era of broad, working-class experimentation not seen since the Progressive Era. Nussbaum is, in a sense, a foremother of contemporary alt-labor. She and her 9to5 cofounders were among the first to experiment outside the firm-based collective bargaining system that held such mid-century sway. They rode the momentum of the women's movement as today's workers ride the waves of the immigration, sustainable food, and global justice movements. What follows is a discussion of Nussbaum's trajectory and the development of Working America, based on two

1. The term *alt-labor* refers to a range of new worker organizations that seek to boost workers' power outside the traditional collective bargaining process. See Josh Eidelson, "Alt-Labor," *American Prospect*, January 28, 2013, prospect.org/article/alt-labor.

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recent interviews at her Washington, DC, office.[2] Her reflections offer an intriguing vision for tomorrow's labor movement rooted in her more than forty years of experience in social justice leadership.

Nussbaum insists that if you want to get to know her, you must understand that she turned eighteen in 1968. "Revolution was in the air" just as she hit adulthood, "and that was totally available to people." She found activism within this zeitgeist far more interesting than college, and fled the University of Chicago after a year for Boston, where she organized with other women to end the Vietnam War. The rent soon came due and groceries were not free, so she got a job at Harvard as a clerical, the profession of one out of three working women at the time. "It took me awhile to figure out that I had this job to support this activism, but that I could do my activism on my job." Two events nudged her in the direction of labor work. First, during a massive antiwar mobilization in 1971, a dozen activists chanted, "What are the unions for? General strike to end the war!" Labor leaders' support for the war made unions anathema to peace activists like Nussbaum, yet something clicked as she watched the protestors: "Oh, that's an interesting notion: unions as a tool for social change." Second, when she joined a picket line of working-class waitresses near Boston, she discovered the women's movement bubbling through: "I realized that there was this power in the ideas of women's liberation which could be exercised against the authority of the boss."

A predictable next step would have been for Nussbaum to pursue one path or the other, channeling her activism into traditional unions or the women's movement. Instead, Nussbaum joined up with like-minded women to forge an entirely new space for addressing women's issues at work and so created one of the nation's first alt-labor groups. Nussbaum and her friend Ellen Cassedy brought together a group of ten women who worked as clericals in various workplaces in Boston and started handing out a 9to5 newsletter at subway stations in late 1972. Under such headlines as "We DO Have Rights" and "'Girls' till We Retire," they aimed to change the lens through which female clericals saw their own jobs.[3] The young women pooled their pennies to send Cassedy to the first community organizing training held by the Midwest Academy in Chicago in 1973, and she returned with ideas of how to build an organization of women office workers that would "apply community organizing tactics to the community of downtown workers." On one hand, they saw themselves as part of the women's movement, but they were frustrated with its lack of lasting, collective action. They were also very interested in the power of state-backed collective bargaining, which was still strong in 1973. "Unions are the only form of organization that can win concessions from bosses, allow workers to make changes at their workplace," they

2. This article is based on interviews by the author with Nussbaum at her office in Washington, DC, on December 18, 2013, and June 11, 2014. The interviews have been rearranged in minor ways for logical flow and condensed for space considerations. The digital recordings are in the author's possession.

3. *9to5: Newsletter for Boston Area Office Workers*, Summer 1973 and December 1973 / January 1974, folder 20, box 1, SEIU District 925 records, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit.

Figure 1. 1975 National Secretaries Day Rally, *9to5 Newsletter,* May 1975, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University

wrote in the 1973 foundational planning memo for the organization.[4] Yet they feared getting swallowed up by the mostly male unions and ran into many unions' rampant sexism. They concluded that they needed something in the middle, an association of sorts that would allow them to "build the women's movement in the working class with the boss as the target for change" while also allowing them to "use the momentum of the drive for women's equality to build class power." Eventually, they believed, many women would move toward unions, transforming unions as they did so, and there would no longer be a need for the association.

The resulting organization—9to5, Organization for Women Office Workers—used a combination of public pressure, savvy media outreach, and strategic affirmative action suits to help upend workplace gender norms and challenge the terms under which the female workforce would grow by 12 million women in the 1970s. The group held its first mass meeting in November 1973 and soon began to put together an Office Workers' Bill of Rights calling for fair treatment, job descriptions, and an end to undignified coffee runs. Rather than focusing solely on lawsuits, like many

4. Ellen Cassedy, Karen Nussbaum, and Joan Tighe, "The Future of 9 to 5: A Proposal for an Independent Women Office Workers' Organization," September 8, 1973, folder 1, box 1, 82-M189, papers of 9to5: National Association of Working Women, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Boston.

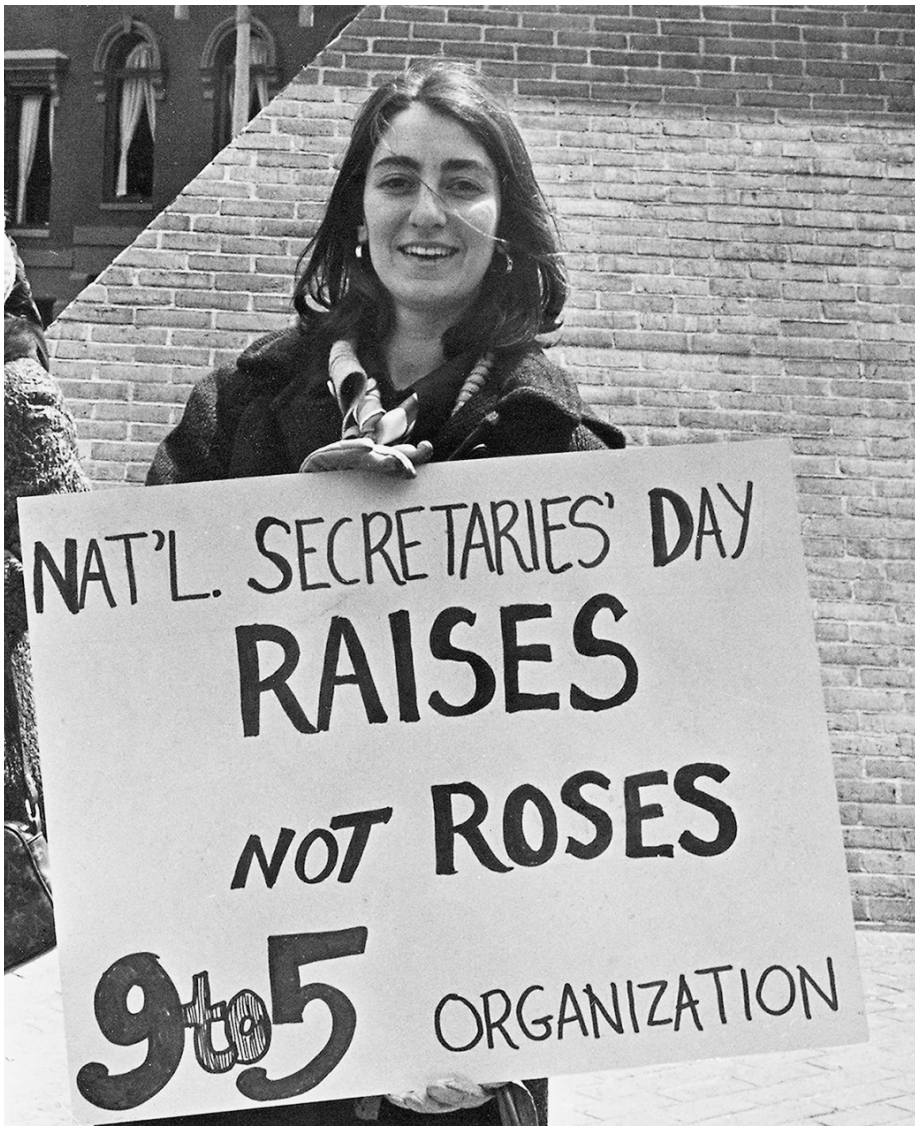

Figure 2. Karen Nussbaum at 9to5's first National Secretaries' Day Rally at the Government Center in Boston (1974). Karen Nussbaum private photo collection

contemporaneous working women's organizations, 9to5 dove into workplace organizing, bringing together women from publishing, banking, and insurance to support one another as they took on individual employers. For example, "We didn't just target the John Hancock [insurance company]. We put the picture of the CEO of the John Hancock on the leaflets that we handed out," which gave women "the pigeon breast, the power, that came from calling out the John Hancock, and making fun of him . . . it changes the balance enough so that it changes the person." Nussbaum and the women of 9to5 quickly found "we could get in the newspaper for anything. Because we were shockingly new and had nothing to do with anyone's story . . . we were really fresh." They launched the annual "petty office procedure" contest and won national attention for "the woman who had to clean her boss's dentures, the boss who made his secretary sew up the hole in his pants while he still had them on," or the executive who sent his secretary to a bar with instructions to let him know when pretty women showed up. They also forced the Office of Federal Contract Compliance (OFCC) to turn its attention to affirmative action standards at Boston's largest corporations, prompting a series of investigations that forced wide hiring changes in the industries.[5]

Yet by 1975, Nussbaum and the founders of 9to5 became frustrated when without the power of a collective bargaining agreement, "we would get meetings with top management and they would say we'll get back to you on that. And then we would be really surprised when they didn't." They decided to build a bifurcated structure, maintaining 9to5 the association while also launching their own union—Local 925 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU)—in order to "maintain the leverage that the outside organization provided for a little bit of autonomy within the labor movement." The organizations forged close ties, often coordinating and supporting one another's campaigns. Nussbaum pushed to replicate this bifurcated structure at a national level, helping form a national working women's organization in 1978 and a nationwide union in 1980, District 925, both of which she led at an executive level. She remembers the Hollywood smash hit *9 to 5* (dir. Colin Higgins, 1980) as the "apex" of the organizations' reach, which just "blew the lid off public opinion." Starring Dolly Parton and Jane Fonda, the runaway hit allowed the organization to combine "popular culture, institutional power and . . . public engagement" to fundamentally reshape the way the public understood gender discrimination on the job.

Yet the 1980s would quickly lay bare the organizations' limitations when "everything just came crashing down, and no one was really quite prepared" for the "massive attack on the trade union movement and the right-wing backlash personified by Reagan." Soon the union hit tremendous employer resistance on union elections: "The big wake-up call was when we organized a small radio station and it turned out to be owned by GE, and Alfred deMaria, the biggest union buster on earth, was the lawyer." District 925 shifted to organizing mainly in the public sector.

5. The OFCC's name was changed to the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) in 1975.

Meanwhile, the association saw foundation and government funding dry up, forcing reliance on volunteer-based chapters over staffing. "9to5 was never self-sustaining," remembers Nussbaum. "We didn't find a substitute for the dues-paying power that exists only in unions," pointing out that today's nonunion organizations like Working America struggle with this issue today.

Nussbaum continued to direct both organizations through the 1980s, using the dual structure to pivot when blocked on either front and "building brick by brick." When in 1993 SEIU President John Sweeney approached Nussbaum about heading the Clinton administration's Women's Bureau, she originally declined in order to continue focusing on the organizations, but "he forced me to take a bigger view." As the US Department of Labor Women's Bureau director, she would "force the debate and take on campaigns," holding meetings nationwide with all kinds of women workers—temps, grocery clerks, small business owners and low-wage workers. She used the survey template developed by 9to5 to do a national Working Women's survey, generating responses from three hundred thousand women. In 1996, she brought "much of the spirit and structure and campaigning" from the Women's Bureau to launch the AFL-CIO's new Working Women's Department after John Sweeney won the organization's first contested election. Though "there was a hunger to solve the dilemma around organizing," the Sweeney administration lost momentum "when first the [presidential] election was stolen by Bush and then in 2001 when 9/11 happened and the entire political debate just cratered." Under pressure from affiliate unions and budget cuts, the AFL-CIO eliminated the stand-alone Working Women's Department in 2001, a decision that Nussbaum believes reflects a larger eclipse of the women's movement in an economy where women have "more responsibility yet "fewer resources and less power."

By the turn of the twenty-first century, Nussbaum had spent thirty years working on issues of women and work from nearly every possible seat, yet the economy and jobs themselves had changed around her. She and her 9to5 cofounders had once tried to open doors for women into the more robust economic security enjoyed by men, especially white men. By the 2000s, however, it was clear that the entire landscape had changed for all working people. Work had both intensified and become far more precarious, with temporary, part-time, and low-pay jobs far more common than when Nussbaum started organizing. The average American worked two hundred hours more each year in 2000 compared to 1973, and wages stagnated even as workers' hourly productivity nearly doubled.[6] Workers today are far less likely to have good, employer-provided health care and pensions, and income inequality has soared. Unions, meanwhile, have lost the sway to equalize the economy in the face of increased global competition, weak labor laws, and employer resistance.

Working America seeks to be a new kind of community-based labor organization for today's economy. Building out from the resources and solid structures

6. Arne L. Kalleberg, *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States, 1970s to 2000s* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011), 106, 150.

Figure 3. Karen Nussbaum as director of Working America (2014). Karen Nussbaum private photo collection

of traditional unions, it offers to all working people the kind of associate membership that 9to5 pioneered for women clericals. At first, Working America's effectiveness was seen in political elections as it widely canvassed and mobilized the white working-class vote in about ten swing states. More than ten years after its founding, Nussbaum has her sights set on experimenting with building workplace power and expanding to all fifty states. In fact, the 2013 AFL-CIO convention in Los Angeles explicitly mandated Working America's role of expanding new forms of worker organizing. Nussbaum sees Working America's relationship with traditional unions as symbiotic, each offering working people distinct footholds as the economic sands shift, much as 9to5 the association and union once offered such footholds to women. Many in labor see Nussbaum's vision as ambitious and creative, yet some have trouble envisioning worker power outside the realm of firm-based collective bargaining. Other critics see Working America mainly as a labor political operation with little tangible effect on other aspects of workers' lives. What follows is a frank discussion with Nussbaum about Working America as it tries to expand its reach. She considers the organization's development, her hopes and disappointments, and the challenges of building a cornerstone of the AFL-CIO's strategy for the twenty-first-century economy.

Lane Windham: *Can you discuss the founding and the initial vision of Working America?*
Karen Nussbaum: There had been a group of us in the staff leadership at the AFL-CIO, starting from 1995 or 1996, who wanted to do something with associate member programs. We were trying to solve the problem of how we were in an isolated labor movement that was growing smaller every day. It was one of a number of strategies about how do you build the labor movement. The main strategy had to do with better organizing and putting more resources into organizing. And a lot of effort went into that. But there was still a group of us that felt like that's not going to solve the whole problem. We've got to be in conversation with workers who aren't in a union. It just has to be part of what we do.

I was very interested in that because it's what I'd always done. So we'd have these episodic conversations about it. But the affiliates [unions that are members of the AFL-CIO] didn't like it, they didn't want to do anything that wasn't affiliate-based. Why create membership somewhere else? There was no appetite for it. And the breakthrough for us in early 2003 was that we were going into the 2004 elections, and the labor movement and progressives were horrified by what had been happening under Bush. And we had to make gains in the election. The affiliates had always seen the AFL-CIO's role around elections as being legitimate and crucial. I felt we could use the opening of being effective in elections to create the space to build an organization of nonunion workers. So that was the opportunity we took. But the view of some of us was always, "We are not building an election organization, we are building a workers' organization that will be effective in elections and other things." I think that is what always allowed us to develop Working America. We've been able to meet the interest and the needs and the comfort level of the affiliates; that gives us just the next bit of space to expand out.[7]

What problem was Working America trying to solve initially?
The central question was could you reach white working-class voters who had been voting Republican for a generation or two. The interest on the part of the AFL-CIO political department was we've got this membership, a lot of white workers. Two-thirds of them, 70 percent, vote for our endorsed candidates and are already up at like 80 percent voter turnout. We can't get voter turnout much higher and we can't get their voting for our candidates much higher. The only thing we can do is get more members. And we are not getting more members. Could you reach other white working-class workers and voters and change their votes? Could you do it on scale?

We believed that the reason that union members were voting for union-endorsed candidates was that they, for one thing, had the experience of having some effect on the economy. They voted for their contract every three years, they could see that if they joined together, they could actually change their families' well-being. So

7. At the time, election laws mandated that unions could only talk to their own members. Working America launched a door-to-door canvass in working-class neighborhoods that signed up members among people who did not already have a union, thus legally allowing the organization to talk to them about politics.

they had a personal experience of collective power in one way or another. The economy was not off the table for them when they thought about political issues the way it was for other workers, who were largely voting on social wedge issues.

And secondly, they got good information, they weren't just hearing from Fox News. They were getting information from a trusted source, which was their union. And so could we replicate that in some way? And we found that we could. And our results were stunning, really. We could go through any working-class neighborhood in this country and get two out of three people to sign up as a member of Working America. And then when we looked at the results, when we did the research after the elections, we found that we basically flipped their votes. We were a trusted messenger that gave them good information. We went door-to-door and preached the gospel of strength in numbers and gave people something to do that night—write a letter, sign a petition, call your state legislator. We got under their skin and reawakened a nascent belief that there was something they could do about jobs and the economy. And that that was enough, apparently, according to the poll results, which then turned out to be repeated in election after election after election. Our members, on this massive scale, voted two-thirds or three-quarters in some cases for our endorsed candidates. And these were white working-class voters for the most part. Eighty-two percent of our members are white, a third are gun owners, a third are evangelicals. They come from communities where the average household income is about $40,000.

There were a lot of ways in which this was like 9to5, but one of them is this notion that we can do anything. "Oh yeah, we can go into these neighborhoods and we can organize these people." This feeling of "yeah, sure we can do anything."

One way that it was very different from the 9to5 experience is that we were organizing the hardest people. We weren't organizing the people who were beginning to experience a raising consciousness, a sense of opportunity. We were organizing the very people who felt everything closing in on them. The easiest way to measure the effect has always been elections, because you can count. And so we could count that in Minnesota, where one out of ten voters is a Working America member, and we had 250,000 conversations during the election in 2008. That was when [Al] Franken got elected [to the Senate]. We had this massive effect on Franken winning by 231 votes, along with other groups. We helped elect Mark Dayton two years later by a handful of votes. [Dayton was first elected governor of Minnesota in 2010 and was reelected in 2014.]

This is a discussion, so far, of Working America using one lever, which is political—the ballot box. Talk a little bit of how you see Working America using other levers to address some of the foundational problems of the labor moment, the union movement, the working people's movements.

The beauty part of Working America was that the political imperative opened the door for Working America to operate, and the constraints under the election laws required us to build a membership. So we had these disciplines that we needed to build membership. So you needed to be able to talk to people. If you went to the door

and said, "I'm here to talk to you about electing Democrats," would you sign up here and become a member? No, no one would do that—that's, like, stupid. So the very things that we needed to do were the very things that we wanted to do—build an organization that speaks to people's deepest concerns and gives them a sense of social efficacy. So we do politics but we only do politics ten weeks of the year. The rest of the forty-two weeks we are out in those communities talking about how come the schools are underfunded. How come the hospital doesn't take walk-ins anymore? Or how there's not enough money for safety patrols in our neighborhood. Or why are they privatizing all of our social services? So we are out there talking to people about jobs and the economy and how that breaks down to their own state or neighborhood and getting them involved. The key to success is reawaking a sense of possibility in people and a belief in collective power.

The labor movement fails without that. There will be no labor movement if people don't have a sense of possibility and a belief in collective power. We are at a stage in our country and in our culture where we have to repair that one by one. We are at such a low ebb that there is nothing that is naturally reinforcing about a sense of collective power. The hopeful thing is that you can go door-to-door and people still want to believe it just enough. They want to believe that there is some kind of counter to corporate lobbyists and Wall Street, [enough so] that they will sign up, they will write the letter, they will call their state legislator. And every time they do one of those things, they get sucked in a little bit more, a little bit more, and a little bit more. So we were about having the broadest influence, but on these principles, the principles of collective power and jobs and democracy. We wanted to build the infrastructure to make that happen enough on scale that you could ignite something that then takes on its own life. That's the theory.

Unions have traditionally been able to tap the kind of social agency that enabled people to vote more progressively than their demographic might suggest. Unions have also played a role in getting people involved in some of the larger struggles in their community. Yet unions also have this unique role of collective bargaining—negotiating with employers in order to build workplace power. Do you see Working America's role as building power solely in the political and community realm, or do you believe there should be a role for Working America in specific workplace building and organizing?

I think there are several tasks. The structure through which workers can exercise power has changed. The economy has changed. The role of workers in their workplace has changed. Even though we always had one of the worst labor codes in the world, one that reduced power to the smallest arena—by organizing enterprise by enterprise or bargaining enterprise by enterprise—it was still enough in the postwar period. It was good enough for workers to feel power, to exercise power. But it's not anymore.

We have to develop new ways to exercise power in a vastly changed political economy. The strongest form is collective bargaining. That's where you actually raise your wages, it's where you set the daily definitions of your work life. And it's

also the place where you confront the boss, it's where you confront the opposite—[the one] who benefits from your labor. You don't do that in the ballot box, you don't do that through civic engagement. We need to retain the ability to fight corporate power, because it's corporate power that's distorting our economy and our democracy. We won't do that if we're doing something that's not effective; you know, organizing the flower shop down the street and bargaining with the flower shop owner. We are losing our bargaining power in the older strongholds. We've got to find ways where we still, as a worker's movement, are confronting our opposites in the economy and we can exercise power. So we've got to find that, we have to strengthen collective bargaining, but we also have to be agnostic about what other forms that's going to take. I don't think it can be only through passing legislation, but that's one of the things that needs to be out there. I think the predicate is getting workers in motion, getting workers flailing about—mad about minimum wage, fighting around health and safety, voting for the right person. There must at least be that, "Yeah, I've got to be on a crusade about this and I'll figure out how to do that." But we need to build that bubbling up, and then the more successful organizational forms will emerge out of struggle.

Given that, tell me what you see as Working America's accomplishments, some of your victories, some of your richest work.

Let me give you the example of New Mexico, where we've been organizing for about six years. In New Mexico, we've got about 110,000 members, we are a big part of the electorate. New Mexico is a place where there is a very small labor movement, so there is a lot of room to operate. Some people would think, "Oh, what are you going to do there?" But we feel like "Whoa, this is great."

We always had a very active engagement with our members. If we did phone call nights with members, we would have a party that night. We would have floats in the Dia de los Muertos festival every year. Members would come in and make Kleenex carnations to put on the float. We decided to run a campaign, a ballot initiative for raising the minimum wage. We ran a big massive get-out-the-vote campaign and we won by two to one; it was a big victory affecting a lot of people. Then the city council decided that it wasn't going to enforce the law, so we created the Fair Wage Defenders, the committee of Working America. The Fair Wage Defenders sent members to the city council meeting every single week to ask the question over and over again, "Why aren't you going to enforce this law?" After nearly a year, the city council capitulated.

We organized in the hotels where we would go through the hotel starting at the top floor and talking to all the maids on the way down, asking them if they were getting the minimum wage. I asked one organizer, "Aren't they worried about getting caught by management?" She said, "Yeah, one women wrote her phone number on a bar of soap and told me to call her after work." A group of dairy workers heard we were working on the minimum wage, and they didn't have a minimum wage problem but they had a health and safety problem. So now we've got a dairy worker's

committee, and we've got a tip worker's committee, and you know, we've got workers who are in motion in New Mexico.

At this crucial moment, the discussion is finally being raised again—about what workers need in order to get what they want, the kind of organization. We bring to the table assets that are delicious. We bring this massive scale. We've got more than 3 million members, and we know a lot about all those members. We know the kind of jobs they have, and the issues they care about, and where they live, and what their phone number is, and whether they answer the phone, look at email, and whether they have ever written a letter to an elected representative or to the editor. We've got this unbelievable staff, we've got this huge infrastructure that can put people on the ground and have wonderful conversations with people at their doors. These are not canvassers who are just delivering a rap off of something that they got told they are supposed to say. These are organizers who are having a real conversation with you. They know that you've got a daughter who is in grade school and you are worried about public education, and they will talk to you about that, and what we can do together to fight for public education. So we've got this staff that knows how to do their work, that is trained to do the rescue mission work, the one-on-one, "Trust me, we can do this together." That is what they are doing every single night at those doors and they are succeeding.

We can have those conversations around workplace issues, we can do it around immigration, we can do it around gay marriage, we can do it around right-to-work, we can do it around anything. And getting back to the first one of those, we can do it around workplace issues. So we've got scale, we've got this organizational infrastructure, we know how to talk to people. And we've got this spirit of experimentation, where we can just say, "Let's go in and try stuff and see what floats to the top." To our mind, the whole purpose of building this massive political capital, political with a small *p*, this organizational capital, is to see whether we can be a part of unlocking the central dilemma for the labor movement, which is how it is going to exercise power in the new era.

It strikes me of all the other labor leaders in the country over the last decades, it is perhaps no accident that the person who came to the labor movement through the women's movement and founded 9to5 is the one who comes up with this model. Can you talk a little bit about how you understand what you are doing now as having grown out of your experience at 9to5? You've already had many years of building a different sort of labor movement, and one that perhaps had different roots.

For me, the themes are the same from when I first started to now. You start with workers. You don't have in mind what you want workers to do, you start with where workers are. And then you build an organization that is going to make sense to them. You always have to have the discipline of being relevant to your members and your potential members.

Next, we have to do the work collaboratively. There can't be a star. Everybody has to feel like, "I come to work and I get to give my all and people appreciate me for

that." We are experimental. If something doesn't work, don't keep doing it. But you have to be reflective about it. The freedom to be experimental is tied to being collaborative. We all have to feel like we are in this together and that as long as I do my part, work hard, and treat my coworkers with respect, whatever we do that succeeds belongs to all of us. Any failure is all of ours as well. No one gets tagged with the failure. That is what gives people the freedom to be experimental. Then I think the last thing is that you have to be about power. This isn't just an exercise. We have to try to figure out how we actually change power in this country.

That's what we always wanted to do with 9to5, and those things come out of the women's movement. The notion that you would have conversations with people, that people want to organize with you not just because you've got the right position on an issue but because they feel supported by you. There is a relationship that you are building, not just a set of adherents that you are amassing. Being collaborative, that comes out of the women's movement. But you need to have the discipline that the labor movement brings on institutions and measuring what you really deliver.

Do you think your experience with the women's movement helped to situate you to deal with the dilemma that unions face—the breakdown of the Wagner Act, of collective bargaining? Unions have found themselves limited to some extent by the same laws that allowed them to grow. Do you think that your experience with 9to5 put you in a position to be able to think beyond some of those limitations?

I've always had one foot inside the labor movement and one foot outside the labor movement. But there's a lot of people like that now. And people can come to that experience in different ways. It's what a lot of the worker centers are doing. They started with the foot outside of the labor movement but now they have a foot inside the labor movement. People come to mashing up strategies and loosening up institutions from different disciplines.

In the 1980s, you put a lot of the focus of your energy into the union side rather than the association side, and then you hit that wall of Reaganism. Given the struggles of unions today, is there a way in which you think you are revisiting some of the association's paths?

That's a chilling thing to say, Lane. [Laughs.] But it does remind me of the other key point of all of this. Working America will have been important even if we never do another thing. We have reclaimed the white working class. We have shown that these are people with aspirations who need a road into the progressive movement, and it's our obligation and our opportunity to provide that. We can win elections, and that is not unimportant. That is really important. So there is a lot that we can do, and even if we never evolve one more bit, and we would just do those things, that would be great.

But the success of building a new kind of labor movement, a movement that is beyond collective bargaining, depends on building self-sustaining worker organizations. Working America is largely funded by current dues payers to the AFL-CIO. Our members don't pay the bulk of the freight for our organization. And all of the other organizing that is going on out there, the new forms of organizing, is all paid for by somebody else—whether it is foundations that are paying for the workers'

centers, or SEIU, which is paying for the fast-food workers, or whatever. There has not been a path for building self-sustaining workers' organizations. Unless you solve that problem you don't solve the central challenge of the labor movement. What I'm thrilled about is I think we've got a path on that right now.

So when you say does it feel like 1980 all over again, that's why I'm chilled. In 1980 we are about to start the national union, we've got the Jane Fonda movie, we've got twenty-five chapters around the country, we are like cooking with gas. And we are feeling that way right now too. So I'm hoping that it all doesn't collapse underneath us as well. [Laughs.]

So tell me what your plan is for financial self-sustainability.

From the beginning of Working America, we knew that the provision of benefits was one angle for realizing income from members. The Affordable Care Act [ACA] gives us the opportunity to deliver health care to our members in a way that then results in self-sustaining membership.

The health exchange is confusing and chaotic, but 25 million people are going to end up on it. And it's also going to erode the provision of health care through employers over the next five years. We have figured out how to provide a real service to members that allows them to get individual help on the health exchange to choose a health insurance product that meets their needs. As we say to them, we can help provide you with an advocate within your insurance but also provide you with an advocate on health care policy through Working America. As people sign up, in order to take advantage of what we bring, they become a member of Working America, and then they become exposed to the mission as well as the benefits.

This is how labor organizations have always grown. I came out of SEIU. Nearly a hundred years ago, SEIU started in Chicago by having people pay a nickel a week for a death gratuity. The public-sector unions developed in the mid-twentieth century around providing health insurance. In this country, this is how unions both were initiated and how they found financial stability, through the provision of basic benefits through the negotiated collective bargaining agreements. Even more significantly, if you look at Europe or Latin America, they are more stable than US unions because the labor movement is a gateway for social protection programs. So we finally have an opportunity to be that gateway, to find the financial stability to become supported by our own members that unleashes the potential to building a long-term workers' organization.

You mentioned earlier, when we were discussing the trajectory of 9to5 and Working America, that today there are lots of organizations that are doing worker power issues, like the worker centers, etc. What is Working America's relationship with some of the other worker groups? Do you have formal relationships? Do you envision that this health care piece could be a part of that?

Right now we mostly work with allied organizations on the ground. We're part of all the coalitions on the national level, and we have good relationships. But I think if the health exchange project works, then we will have formal relationships with these

groups that will be affiliated with us in some way. We want to make this available to the other organizations that are also trying to create their own self-sustaining base.

Everybody talks about dues and no one knows what to do about it, but I feel that we've got a path—and it has to be developed over some years. That is the first opportunity I've seen in forty years to solve the problem of how to have member-supported organizations outside of collective bargaining.

We've talked about how Working America links back to all these other groups, but how does Working America link back to the unions?

Part of our discipline is to find the starting point with lots of unions and go from there. Find the point where we can do something that is new and that works for the union, and then build some space and then you can do the next thing, and the next thing. It's when the affiliates start coming up with their own ideas about what to do with us, which is what is happening right now, that is so cool. I got a call from the Ironworkers union [International Association of Bridge, Structural, Ornamental, and Reinforcing Iron Workers Union] a couple of years ago where a forward-looking director wanted to create an associate member program. First he made his proposal to the union's board, and one of the board members said, "Wait, isn't that what Working America does?" So now we've got the Ironworkers Associates of Working America.

One of our unions, the stage hands union [International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, Moving Picture Technicians, Artists and Allied Crafts], loved the vitality of Working America, and so we came up with the idea of creating an organization for unorganized workers in the film industry in New Mexico. We've got a thousand members, in what we call REEL Working America. We run casting calls and members sign up there and then they fight for the minimum wage. It's a hothouse for organizing experiments. And now we are doing that all over the country.

Critics argue that Working America is just a political arm of the AFL-CIO, it just does politics, that's really what it is. They say its members aren't really connected to the organization. Can you address this issue?

So, you know what? We run the best political field operation in the country, no one comes close. We have the highest persuasion rate that has ever been measured. We had a persuasion rate of fifteen points in the 2012 election. Our work is persuasion, not turnout, which is twice as hard. We do it better than anybody else, and we go after the very people that everyone else has written off. That's great. So let's own that. We've got an 80 percent win record on down-ticket elections [such as gubernatorial and state legislative races]. We only get sent in where the election is so close that people are really freaked that they are going to lose it. And we win them. So, wow, that is great. And who wouldn't want that?

At the same time we are building a labor movement—we are not just winning elections. We are gaining members, we are delivering a message, we are getting people involved. And that political work is as good as it is in the ten weeks that it goes on *only* because for the rest of the year we are doing organizational building and "fight the man work" all year round. Otherwise you couldn't have that unbelievable

leverage during elections. So if people want to call us a political arm, go for it. But it's such a small part—it misses why we are as effective as we are and what else we do.

Let's go to the members then, because that kind of dovetails with this. Do members have a connection with the organization, or is it an inch deep and a mile wide?
So we've got something over 3 million members. The original goal was to get big and have an influence. So we achieved that goal. Are there members of Working America who don't identify as members? You bet. Are there a lot of them? Probably. Do we influence those people? Do they remember who we are when we contact them about an important issue? Yes, we do influence them, we can measure it—we measure it over and over and over again. We are just about like every other organization on earth. We've got a core of committed activists who love the organization and spend a lot of time on it and talk about it to their friends and family, and then we've got a group, a concentric circle around that, of people who will come out and do something occasionally and say, "Yeah, I like those folks, they do good work." And then we've got a much bigger circle of people we influence.

We have, in the last six years, changed where we put the focus of our work. We've moved organizational resources to developing the member attachment, to getting our members more active, to creating leadership among our members. So we knew that needed to be developed, but we were busy recruiting 2 million members in the first five years. With that base, we've now gone deeper. So yes, we went wide first, now we are going deeper. And we are doing that work, we know how to do that work and we are doing it.

How is Working America building worker power in the context of global capital?
Labor federations around the globe are struggling with these same questions about form and power in the new global economy. They are really interested in what we are doing in Working America and I'm really interested in what they are doing in Colombia and Argentina and New Zealand and the Netherlands. We are all in this together, not just in a neighborhood in Pittsburgh. It's a global project. One of the principles by which Working America does its work is that we are part of a global labor movement, and even though that may not be what we talk about at the doors every night, it informs what we do at the doors every night. So no solution that we propose can be at the expense of workers in another country. As we think about taking on the significant employers going forward, one of those questions is going to be the role in the global economy. So it operates both at the level of a campaign around stopping outsourcing and how do you talk about that with members, to bigger strategic questions about where you are going to put your organizing resources—and doing that collaboratively in a global labor movement.

In the months since our discussions, Working America has begun to delve more deeply into what Nussbaum calls "experimenting with tactics and worker consciousness and applying them to the tasks at hand." Organizers are building concentrated "communities of interest" among retail workers by leading a Minneapolis campaign on work scheduling and by organizing Chicago workers at the workplace level. Licensed massage therapists

are the focus of a Portland experiment to organize licensed workers—a full 20 percent of the US labor force works in such licensed occupations.[8] *Working America has also begun to implement its plan to help members navigate the health care marketplaces created by the ACA. Organizers are reaching out to working people in seventeen metropolitan areas, signing up new members for health care and, in return, receiving a small fee from a health care broker. They hope to be able to extend this model for financial sustainability to allied organizations.*

Nussbaum points out that in the recent sweep election of 2014, Working America had a measurable effect on working-class swing voters. Polling shows that non–college educated white men contacted by Working America were eighteen points more likely to vote for their endorsed candidates, and the organization even moved former Romney voters by ten points. "But the problem with the American electorate is deep," reminds Nussbaum, pointing out that many voters in red states supported Republican candidates even as they voted for minimum wage and sick day initiatives. Nussbaum says Working America wants to "change the minds of working people, not just flip votes . . . political strategists call it 'changing the frame,' and in another day it would be thought of as building class consciousness."

In the end, can Working America begin to fill the void left by weakening traditional collective bargaining institutions? It cannot do so alone but rather is part of what Nussbaum terms "an exciting mash-up of experiments with new organizing," some of which involve traditional unions. Nussbaum believes there are three key questions new labor groups must address: What form of organization will workers be most inclined to join? What real power can workers leverage? And how will the organization be sustained by members' dues and governed by members' votes? Her hope is that Working America will serve as a "laboratory for change" for organizations to wrestle with these questions, bringing its sizable membership and infrastructure to bear as assets for today's transforming labor movement.

Readers can find out more about Working America at www.workingamerica.org.

8. Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 39.