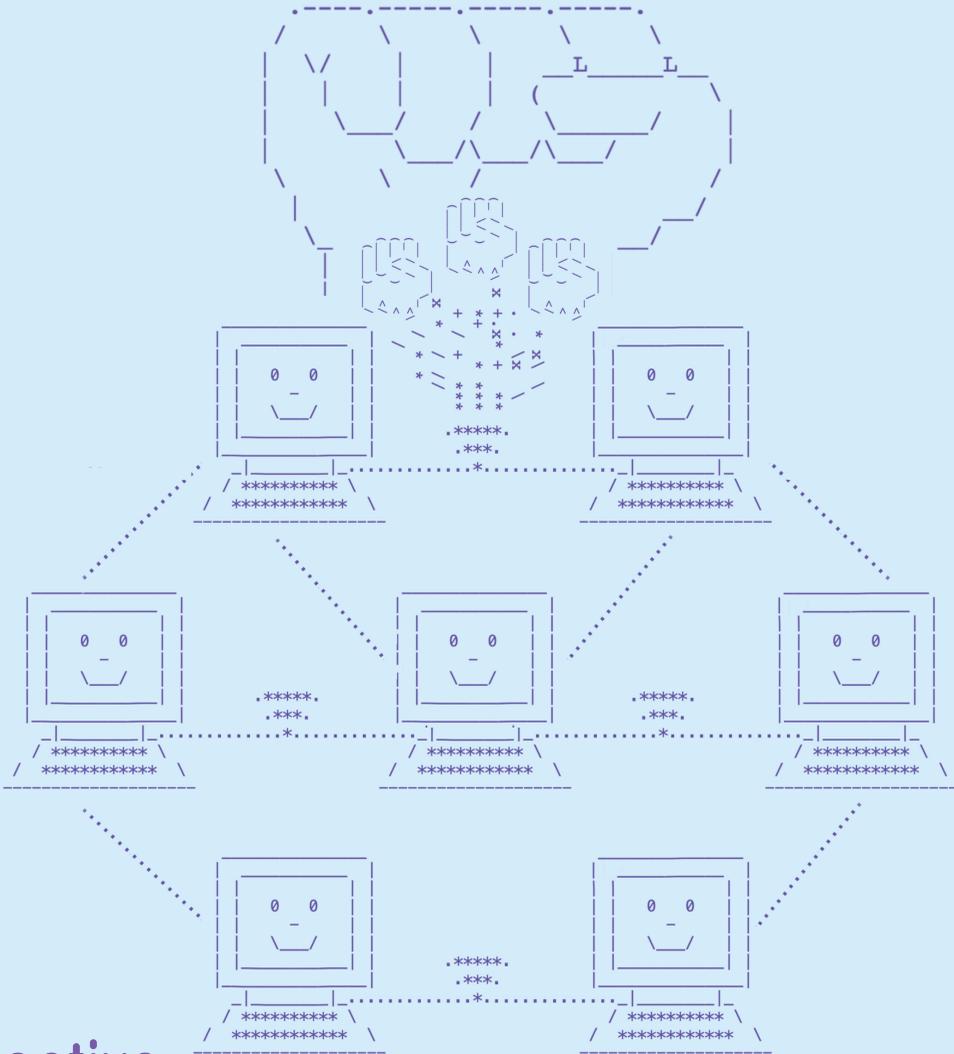
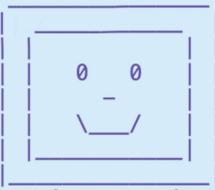
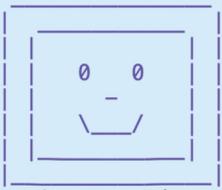
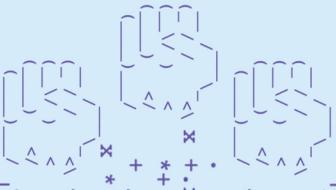
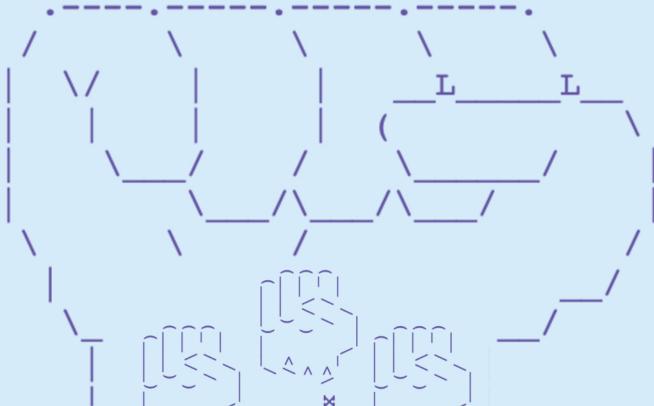


# DMs OPEN

WINNING REMOTE ORGANIZING



Collective  
Action in Tech

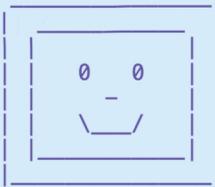
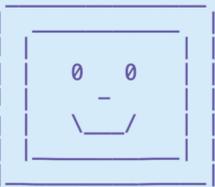
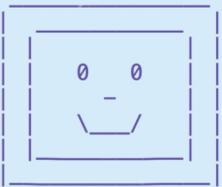


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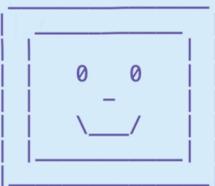
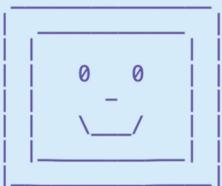
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# ***DMs OPEN***

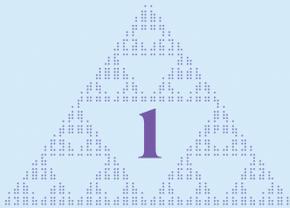
## ***WINNING REMOTE ORGANIZING***

The conditions we organize under are constantly shifting. For generations, our workplaces, working conditions, and roles have shifted to the demands of capital. Still, generations of workers have come together to fight for better conditions and a seat at the table. The rise of remote work is no different. Workers continue to build trust, share experiences, and win.

It's true that more remote work comes with more surveillance, more isolation, and fewer moments when we can escape the gaze of the boss and build trust with our fellow workers. But our fundamental strength remains. Together we have the power to overcome these new obstacles and win more than we could ever even imagine alone.

This is a practical guide to organizing that should feel familiar. All of these tactics, tips, and learnings have roots that stretch back before Zoom, before Slack, long before computers were a part of the workplace. The next few pages provide best practices for remote organizing at each step in the process of moving your coworkers to action. It is filled with insight from workers across the tech industry who have experiences organizing remotely.

Solidarity (and open DMs) forever.



# ***REACHING OUT TO YOUR COWORKERS***

**“As we went remote, everyone’s experience became drastically atomized.”**

**–Ben (Code for America: CfA Workers United)**

Outreach is a crucial aspect of building a democratic, representative, and powerful union. Without talking to every single worker in the unit, it’s impossible to understand the issues that will move your coworkers to action and build a union that can truly stand for everyone. The more coworkers you engage and understand, the stronger your campaign will be. But how do you have that first touch when you’ve never met in person?

On a university campus, warehouse, or in an office, outreach can take the form of doing targeted walkthroughs to spark conversation, meeting people at the water-coolers, and even knocking on doors to reach your coworkers at their homes. When you’re in person, there’s the tried-and-true method of getting a coffee or going for a walk with a coworker. Each of these tactics are effective and can be deployed at different stages of your campaign. However, in a remote workplace where your coworkers are potentially working from different parts of the country, these options may not be available.

So, what are some of the best tactics we've seen remote organizers use for outreach? Messaging platforms like Slack are your friend. You can learn a lot about the people who are active in different channels and see lists of your coworkers in the channel members view. Keeping track of who speaks up is critical to identify potential organizers, organic leaders, and strong supporters.

**“One of the people who had worked with me on Kickstarter’s creator outreach team noticed that I had spoken up in a company-wide email thread when HR took away our anonymous reporting tool. He put my name on a list and then called me to ask if I would be down to join a union. We weren’t super close, just friendly acquaintances who worked on different sides of the US and saw each other irl maybe once a year. When I messaged him to say I was in, he said “I knew we could count on you.” It was a great introduction to the process of organizing and it started with essentially a cold call.”**

**–Clarissa (Kickstarter United)**

It’s important to remember that the principles guiding IRL outreach also apply to remote organizing. Keep in mind what you already know:

- **Outreach is not a working group. Every organizer should be talking to their coworkers.**
- **Keep a (secure) list and track each conversation.**
- **Practice, review, and workshop outreach conversations with other organizers.**
- **Continue to be creative with how to reach your coworkers, keeping their communication preferences in mind.**
- **Making outreach social and fun will help keep your organizing committee energized.**
- **Carefully divide up your unit so you know which organizer is responsible for building relationships with specific workers.**

- **Don't waste capacity on workers who continue to be anti-union. Instead, invest your time in developing relationships with the folks that have been identified as supporters, potential organizers, or undecided.**

It may feel the most natural to talk to your coworkers via existing channels like Slack or email, but text messages and phone calls are by far the most reliable way to reach people, especially when you have a specific ask of them.

**“[We] called everyone the day before we went public: ‘we’re going live tomorrow, can you commit to hitting the union emoji on our Slack announcement?’ It took 5–7 hours, but we called 80 people.”**

**–Ben (CfA Workers United)**

Security is crucial when it comes to organizing remotely. Virtually all online communication has the potential to be surveilled. Management will use online communications channels to identify and retaliate against organizers.

**“Don't have union Slack on your work computer, don't open your outreach spreadsheet on your work-computer.”**

**–Kathy (New York Times Tech Guild)**

**“After a while, we got confirmation from our GSuite admin in the office that our Google Hangouts are end-to-end encrypted. We decided that was safe enough. Once we got that confirmation, we just started having those organizing calls on the work Google Hangout. And then on the video call, we would ask for their personal cell phone number and email address where we'd send our FAQ document and Union Slack invite links. Sometimes, before we got off the call, we would drop those links in the chat box in the Google Hangout itself.”**

**–Angela (New York Times Tech Guild)**

Outreach is a marathon, not a sprint. Keep a steady drum beat of relationship building and make it a habit that you and your other

organizing committee members do regularly.

**“[We kept a] steady drip of 1–2 conversations a week for 4–5 months. [We used] Zoom—they used it for work already. Then we got [their] personal email and phone numbers at the end of an outreach convo.”**

**–Ben (CfA Workers United)**

Doing outreach in a remote setting creates challenges, but it also has some upsides (like not having to sit next to your boss). Remotely, you don’t have to worry about an anti-union member of management looking over your shoulder and you have more flexibility for when outreach can take place.

**“When I was in the office and I was trying to get time with people, I would get coffee with them, and we would leave the office. But when you’re working in an office you can only leave so many times a day and still do your job. For the most part, there were very few days that I could set up organizing conversations with more than two people, or even more than one person. And so I think one of the nice things about the remote setup is that there are several days of the week where I have a block of an hour and a half and I just set up a bunch of 30 minute meetings with people check-ins.”**

**–Kathy (New York Times Tech Guild)**



## ***STARTING AN ORGANIZING CONVERSATION***

It can be tempting to do outreach only on messaging platforms like Slack. This can be great for keeping your contacts up-to-date or for sharing event details. However, Slack conversations should not be seen as a substitute to having an actual conversation via secure video chat or IRL. It might feel like striking up a conversation about organizing virtually is even more daunting than IRL, but you might be surprised.

**“The anxiety of hitting people up virtually out of the blue was a lot, but people were generally very receptive to ‘you got time for a quick chat?’”**

**–Derrick (stealth-mode union)**

**“Before we knew that it was safe to talk on Google Hangouts, the first touch was getting people on a call. What I used to do was schedule the Google Hangout meeting, and then five minutes before our meeting, I would slack the person and be like, ‘I’ve been in back to back meetings since nine. Is there any way we could make this a phone call? I’d like to take a walk.’ And then I would get their phone number, call that up and then do it that way. I would usually sort of cut to the chase and just be like, ‘there’s a group of people at work. We’re talking about a union. What’s your gut feeling on that? And then sort of take it from there.’”**

**–Anglea (New York Times Tech Guild)**

“We would ‘cold-call’ people towards the end of the campaign, sending a Slack DM like “Hey, I want to talk to you about a work thing, can I call you after work or tomorrow?” and then have the conversation with strangers like that. We were surprised by how positive it went – the majority of people we cold-called were supportive of the union.”

–Kathy (New York Times Tech Guild)

Try to prepare people for the entrance into a living, breathing, existing movement so they’re not surprised by the momentum they encounter.

“I remember one of my coworkers had a meeting on my calendar like, ‘hey, let’s chat.’ And I went and I was so excited because, like, ‘aw somebody cares about me and wants to talk to me.’ And then in the middle of our conversation, he brought up the union, and I kind of felt bad, as though they didn’t actually care about getting to know me. And then they invited me to the meeting immediately after our meeting, and I joined and I saw my other coworkers there, and I felt as though all this was already going on without me knowing. And then someone else sent me a message on Slack, and she was like, ‘Hey, how are you doing?’ She said something so warm and welcoming, and it made me feel like she cared about me. And I said, ‘oh, I got sick, my family is sick.’ And she was like, ‘oh my god, is there something that I can send to you? Can I help you?’ No coworker has ever messaged me with that much enthusiasm and genuine care. So she brought me back into the effort because I felt support from her. That was a big turning point for me. It really speaks to the importance of one-on-ones and genuinely caring about your coworker. Even if your coworkers have the same political ideas as you, it’s more important to care. Nothing is more important.”

–Brenda (CfA Workers United)

Sometimes you’ll be the first coworker to ask for a personal phone number or email address. Not everyone has built relationships that reach beyond work channels. Many people don’t use apps like Signal or Discord in their day to day lives. Keep people’s comms preferences in mind when you speak to your coworkers.

“There are people that I know who are mine to reach out to (and we called them dibs because I named a column in the spreadsheet “dibs” when we first started and it took off). I have a bunch of dibs who are never going to be on the Slack, and they have a hard time keeping up with email. But whenever I text them, like ‘hey we’re going to have a meeting about this,’ they’ll be like, ‘oh, I’m really excited, I’m going to go!’”

–Kathy (New York Times Tech Guild)

“I was one of Kickstarter’s first remote workers. The first time I heard of Signal was when I was invited to an early organizing meeting. It was a very small group and the tone of the conversation felt even more secretive as many of us logged into an encrypted messaging app for the very first time. Shortly after, the small group of active union organizers decided tools like this can be an unnecessary barrier and decided to migrate the general group to a more familiar platform, Slack. Sometimes it’s better to meet people on the platforms they’re already comfortable and familiar with.”

–Clarissa (Kickstarter United)

“We used Slack at work, so we made a Discord for the union chat because we were paranoid about security and thought it would protect against anyone accidentally opening union Slack on their work computers. But most of our coworkers had never used Discord, didn’t have it on their phones, and never checked it, which meant it was really really hard to use it for union comms. If we could do it again, we’d probably use a chat app everyone already was familiar with, and rely on socializing the ‘never open union slack on your work computer’ rule.”

–Brooke (stealth-mode union)



## ***BUILDING COMMUNITY***

**“[In a remote setting,] you have to be much more intentional about building relationships.”**

**–Ben (Code for America: CfA Workers United)**

Building a sustainable organizing committee is crucial for your campaign, but in a remote-only setting, this can be challenging. Each of us can only join so many Zoom meetings before burning out. In an IRL workplace, integrating social activity is much easier; you and your coworkers can easily drop by a pub or go out for a meal after an organizing meeting. In a remote setting, it’s hard to replicate these kinds of social activities that build strong bonds and can provide the energy you need to make it through a tough moment. This means that organizers working in a remote setting need to devote even more energy and time to building relationships among organizing committee members.

In order to build connections between organizing committee members, you can try tools like the *Slack bot Donut* which automatically pairs individuals with each other for 1:1 time. This way, each member of the committee can get to know each other on an individual basis. Having a meme channel on your Slack can also boost morale and is good fun. Sometimes simply having a vibes checker who pumps good vibes into Slack or Discord can make a huge difference.

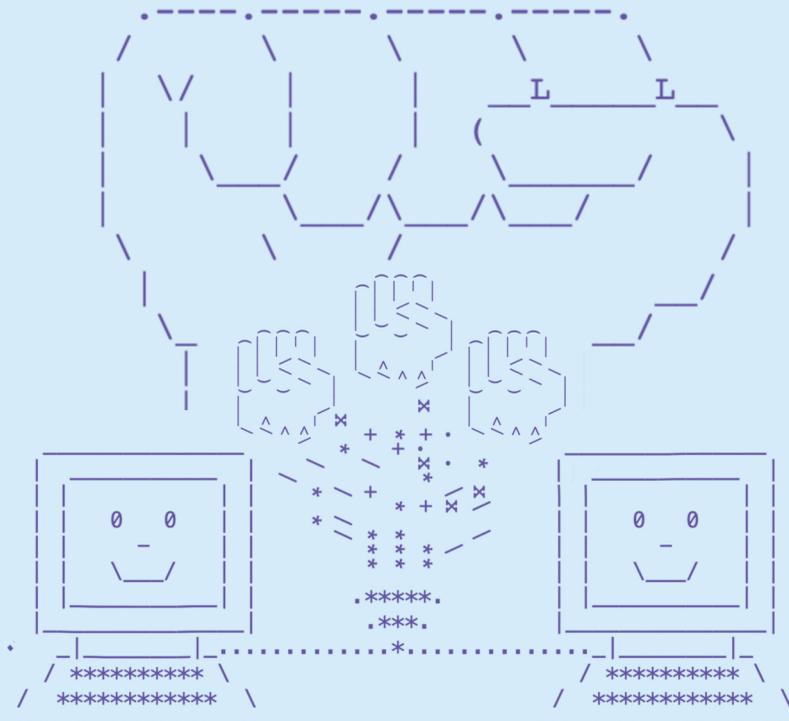
**“Setting up a zoom-call for your organizing committee to phone/text/Slack bank together can completely change the tone of the activity.”**

**–JS (MIT-UE)**

Building a trusted community starts with having a strong security practice. Every member should feel that their organizing committee is a safe space for each other. Sometimes the most successful security practices are very low tech.

**“For every person who wanted to join our Slack instance, we had a designated OC member make sure by hand that it was the name and email address of someone in our unit, and not a manager or external person. And we did require people in general body meetings over video chat to let us know what their name was.”**

**–Angela (New York Times Tech Guild)**





# ***TRACKING CONVERSATIONS AND MEASURING SUPPORT***

Keeping track of conversations and measuring support are key to winning your campaign. Barring any limitations from security best practices, being as detailed as you can when it comes to tracking support is crucial. For each worker in the unit, here are some things you'd want to track:

- **When was the last conversation they had with an organizer**
- **An up-to-date assessment of their support level**
- **The timing of the last meeting or training they attended**
- **Detailed notes about the issues they care about**

Keeping track of this data helps you understand who will stand with you and who may be falling through the cracks, allowing you to re-engage and continue to build that relationship. Remote and online tools can be extremely helpful in these situations because they allow workers to capture details while the conversations are fresh. A regular outreach cadence is the foundation for all of this tracking work.

**“It’s hard to gauge how people feel if you don’t see them all the time.”**

**–Ben (Code for America: CfA Workers United)**

**“Even when you do build that trust and they say they would vote yes, it’s still work to maintain that relationship because you aren’t actually seeing them”**

**–Derrick (stealth-mode union)**

**“When someone ghosted us, we got another person on the OC to reach out to them, or had them tag along to a meeting with them, to re-engage.”**

**–Derrick (stealth-mode union)**

Organizing conversations aim to build something different than friendship. These are structured, purposeful conversations with the goal of understanding your colleagues’ issues at work and getting them engaged in collective action as a solution. While doing this, it’s important to be mindful of your own bandwidth as a remote organizer.

**“Someone thought I was being disingenuous after hitting them up with ‘hey how are you’ and then it turned out I had an ‘end goal,’ to talk about the union, and they were really hurt. Relationship building is really hard, building the connection is hard, but I’m not trying to be friends with every single one of them (I don’t have that much capacity).”**

**–Nora (stealth-mode union)**

Meeting and communicating virtually also offers the opportunity to use creative technology to identify the issues people care about, and talk about your struggles. Visualizing issues that are brought up in organizing conversations can help build a bird’s eye view of what matters most to their coworkers.

**“I think our most powerful tool was [a virtual whiteboard tool called] Miro. It’s asynchronous, so people can go back and look at it and see everything. It’s anonymous, too, which means people can see what other people are thinking, like, ‘oh, I didn’t know that.’ Or, ‘oh, we actually do have it bad in some places, there are areas for improvement.”**

**–Brenda (CfA Workers United)**

Surveillance has always been part of the bosses’ strategy, in all

workplaces. They use cameras, key-card swipes, key-loggers, browser history logs, social media monitoring, and more to track our time in and out of the office, who we talk to and what we talk about, how much time we spend on-task, and whether we complete every task “correctly.” They do this to wring extra productivity out of every worker, making working conditions worse. They also do this to profile and monitor potential union organizers, turn workers against each other, and collect information about tiny, meaningless “infractions” they can use to justify firing someone at a later date.

It is important to keep your efforts out of sight of management until you have the strength in numbers to all publicly stand together. Real security comes from a super majority of union supporters. Keeping your efforts a secret from your bosses for as long as possible gives you more time to talk to your coworkers on your own terms, without anti-union propaganda flooding the workplace

Once workers are united, anything is possible. For instance, a few unions are already negotiating groundbreaking anti-surveillance clauses into their first contracts.

**“When the contract is concluded, we will have a legally binding agreement that our bosses can’t key-log you and then be like, ‘hey, you spent an hour doing union stuff during the work day.’”**

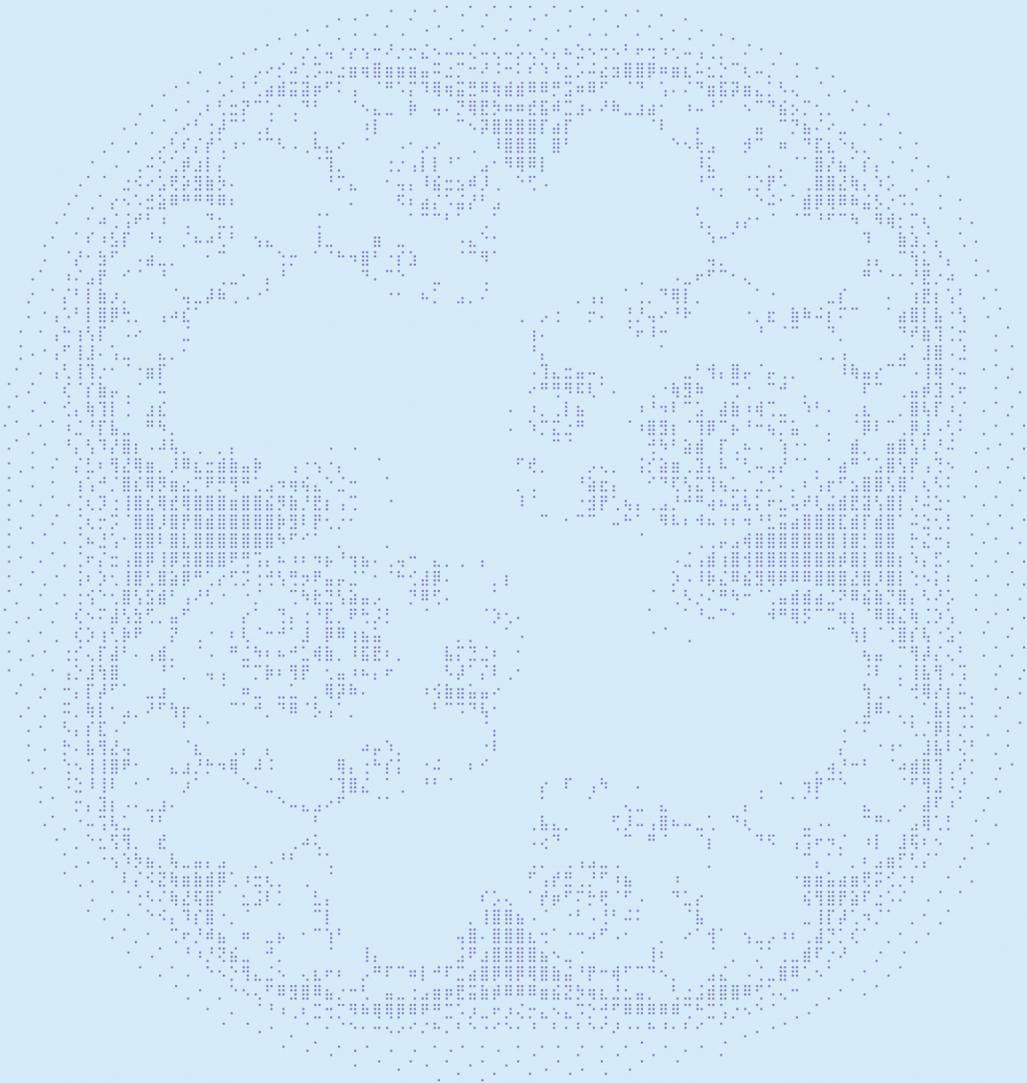
**–Bjorn, Digital Media United (NPR)**

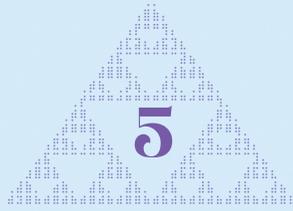
The safest thing to do is never open union documents or chat applications on work devices. Different workplaces use different levels of surveillance software on their workers so your safest bet is not to bring that data within reach of your bosses.

**“We had this big union shared Google Drive folder. That’s just for the OC [organizing committee]. And access to that is managed via the OC google group, and form responses and internal documents are all restricted to that google group. Our meeting notes and stuff were open to everyone. We were very strict about telling people ‘Don’t open this on your work laptop.’”**

**–Angela (New York Times Tech Guild)**

Be careful with what data you are storing and who has access to it. When saving notes about outreach conversations, don't save anything that could hurt someone's feelings if it leaked. When everything is written down, anything can become public.





## ***INOCULATION***

**“We would say [the union is] just, all your colleagues that you care about, versus the lawyer-designed messages that are coming from senior leadership that you could tell they didn’t even write.”**

**–Kathy (New York Times Tech Guild)**

Inoculation is an important way to get ahead of the boss’s anti-union messaging. We should all expect that management will hire (or has already hired) expert union-busting consulting services to squash your union. Union busting tactics rely on sowing fear, doubt, and confusion among workers. In a remote workplace, messaging platforms like Slack are common places where management’s anti-union campaign can spread unabated.

One feature of these messaging platforms is that they often automatically add everyone into some “general” channel that everyone has access to. While these virtual gathering spaces can seem like an open/democratic place for everyone to voice their concerns, it can often result in the opposite dynamics. In fact, the analog equivalent to these virtual gathering spaces is a town-hall meeting, which to the eyes of management is a common tactic to deliver anti-union rhetoric. As these spaces get too large, management (or anti-union

workers) can take advantage of the openness of these platforms to sow doubt and confusion across the unit and bate union organizers into reactive, circular debates.

**“Eventually we started an external Slack, but invited everyone we told about the union, not just 1’s and 2’s. There were some harsh conversations there that were not well moderated. That made it hard to use the tone we were trying to take with people over text. We did it because we wanted everyone to know everything that was going on, but maybe that was a mistake the way we did it.”**

**–Ben (CfA Workers United)**

While messaging platforms like Slack are essential tools for remote organizing, they can also be a distraction from doing the actual organizing work. In a vibrant organizing community, it’s easy to spend your time reading every post and responding to every anti-union message. But this is also part of the boss’s strategy—having organizers occupied with rebutting messages takes time away from having the crucial 1:1 conversations needed to build a representative, powerful and democratic union.

**“Slack debates with anti union workers are rarely worth the time and energy. Usually they are not good faith discussions and are a bottomless stack of rhetoric echoing anti worker talking points from management. And worse, usually these spaces, just like irl captive audience meetings, amplify management aligned perspectives and discourage more vulnerable workers from being part of the conversation.”**

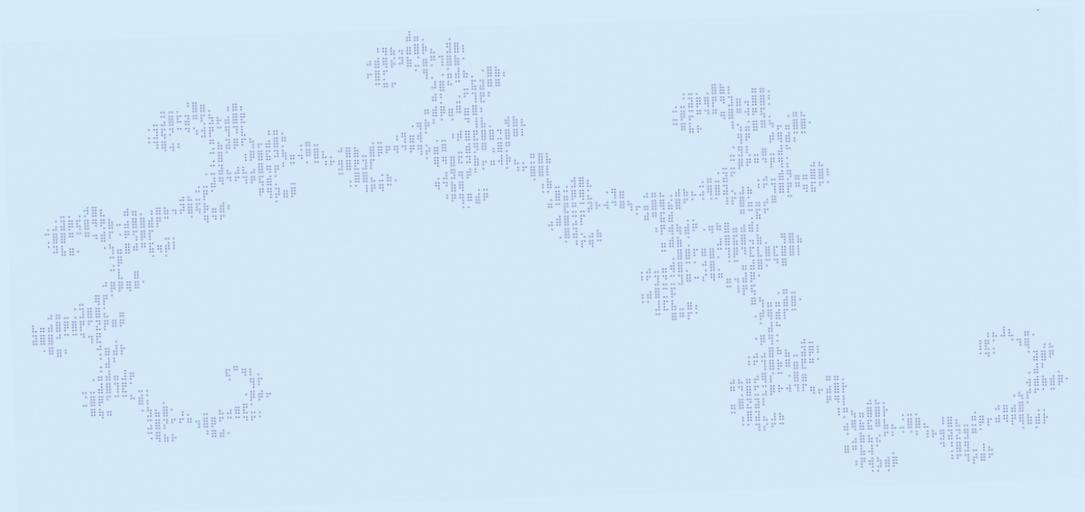
**–JS (MIT–UE)**

That said, an online format can be a really useful way to quickly dispel management’s misinformation during meetings or offering deeper education to interested workers. As organizers become adept at working remotely, we can take advantage of this and share information asynchronously during meetings.

**“We would always have a Q&A section in the google doc**

we used for our meeting agendas, and there would be a designated Q&A facilitator who encouraged folks who have questions to post them in there instead of in the Zoom chat so that the questions didn't get lost and we could address them properly. Organizing committee members would also be in the doc, asynchronously answering Q's during the meeting.

–Angela (New York Times Tech Guild)





## ***TAKING COLLECTIVE ACTION***

All organizing work up to this point is building the solidarity you'll need to come together and take collective action. The strength of your union lies in your shared position as workers, and your ability to win hinges on your ability to stand together and take action. Depending on your circumstances, this may look like campaigning around a specific issue, diving into a union drive, or negotiating a contract. Specific actions can look like showing the size of the support for your union and your demands through visibility campaigns or petitions, or applying direct pressure using walkouts or strikes.

Talking about taking collective action is important to do throughout organizing to prepare your coworkers for what it means to be in a union and what it takes to win. Talking to your coworkers about what you want to win together is a great step in asking a coworker to commit to a specific action.

**“We would hear this phrase, ‘this is the best nonprofit I’ve ever worked at.’ However, we still work within the labor status quo. How does the labor status quo we follow affect the most vulnerable workers? What if our contract sets the blueprint for a human-centric workplace, much like Code for America’s Safety Net Blueprint? In my personal conversations, I would always say, ‘hey, what if we had a four day workweek? What if we had a therapy budget?’ This would kind of hype them**

up. I would say ‘what if we had this’ and the people that I talked to were like, ‘oh, we could do this.’”

–Brenda (CfA Workers United)

“With a lot of our strong supporters, I literally ask, ‘What would you like to work on?’ I keep telling them, like, ‘literally write down your ideas as to what are things that you think would make your workplace better? What do you want to fight for? A four day workweek, a three day workweek?’ Literally write that down because at a certain point, we’re going to need everyone to brainstorm all this together. I don’t know maybe if we’re going to end up holding some sort of brainstorming with a Miro board or something. But you know, there are ways in which you actually plan what we’re going to fight for.”

–Kathy (New York Times Tech Guild)

Once campaigns are underway (whether a unionization campaign, issue campaign, or contract campaign), unions will usually need to take collective action to pressure the boss into agreeing to demands.

Some remote workers take visibility actions that can be seen on Slack or in video meetings, like changing their Slack avatars or Zoom backgrounds to the union logo or uploading union-related emojis to Slack, and using them on pro-union Slack messages. These kinds of actions can be used in the same way a sticker or button campaign could be used in a physical workplace and should be used when you already have a strong majority of support. Other classic actions and structure tests, like signing petitions, making supportive photo mosaics, and marching on the boss to deliver demands can also be done virtually. You just have to get creative and center the action on the power of withholding your collective labor.

“The structure test that we did when we found out we were going to have an election was to put together a really simple, one line form. Everybody put their “my name is X, and I’m voting yes for the union because...” We were able to get a solid majority of people to put those reasons in within about

a week. Looking back, it would've been nice to also give a couple of multiple-choice options like "I'm voting yes because of pay equity" or "because of DEI improvements" or "because of whatever" or "write your own", because a lot of the people that I think otherwise would have signed it were just like, "Oh, I looked at this form. Why am I voting yes... I can't think of one line" and then just never did it."

-Kathy (New York Times Tech Guild)

[Now that some of them are going back to the office in NYC occasionally] "We've done more social events that are in person. There was a rally in support of the Wirecutter Union in November [2021] and a lot of us came into the office for that, to help to put pressure on the Wirecutter strike."

-Kathy (New York Times Tech Guild)

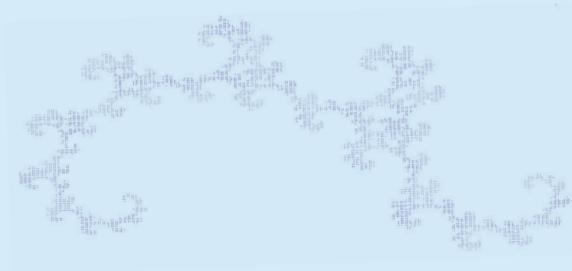
# ***ABOUT US***

*DMs Open* was made by members of Collective Action in Tech, a collective of tech workers, organizers, and researchers whose goal is to advance the tech worker movement. We would like to thank the tech workers who shared advice and quotes on how they've organized remotely. This zine was designed and printed by Taehee Wang.

If you found this guide useful, you might also like to see the hundreds of collective actions in our archive, stats on dozens of tech unions in our Tech Union Compendium, or maybe you want help organizing your workplace from our Embedded Organizer program.

Keep an eye on the movement by following @tech\_actions on Twitter or support our Patreon ([patreon.com/collectiveaction](https://patreon.com/collectiveaction)) so we can continue to produce this work and support the tech workers movement.

You have everything to win. DM in solidarity.



*Note: This guide is not a comprehensive overview of organizing a workplace. The intent of this guide is to provide insights on how we might adapt existing practices about labor organizing to a remote setting.*

WRITTEN AND COLLECTED  
BY

# Collective Action in Tech

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