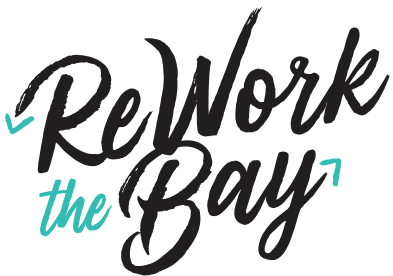


# Power is at the Root:

**How Funders and Workforce  
Leaders Can Center Workers  
in the “Future of Work”**

**MAY 2021**

*Executive Summary*



**WORKING  
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USA





# Executive Summary

This project began in 2019 with a single question: what are the challenges and opportunities presented to Bay Area residents by the changing nature of work?

At the time, the national “future of work” discourse centered on robots, automation, artificial intelligence and big data. Little attention was being paid to people’s experiences on the ground, and the voices of workers and communities were largely drowned out by tech corporations, pundits and professional futurists.

Two years later, seismic shifts around us have further exposed huge and widening cracks in the foundation of our economic and social structures. Gig corporations such as Uber, Lyft and Doordash are engaged in a billion-dollar battle to fundamentally undermine employment laws and eliminate the social contract between workers and businesses. Climate catastrophes have become a regular occurrence, with alternate floods and wildfires ravaging California, destroying whole towns and threatening livelihoods. The Black Lives Matter movement has put a spotlight on how centuries of structural racism continue shaping our lives today. And COVID-19 laid bare how many essential workers — particularly workers of color, immigrants and women — are under-paid, over-worked, and lack the most fundamental protections for themselves and their families.

Over the course of this project, we scanned over a hundred Bay Area initiatives responding to changing aspects of work, interviewed philanthropic funders, worker advocates and grassroots organizers, and dove deep to ask worker and community leaders: What are the key “future of work” issues that we collectively need to tackle, and what roles can and should philanthropy and workforce development play? The following report is a synthesis of the collective wisdom, experience and insight that they generously shared with us, structured as action-oriented recommendations organized around five themes:

## Center workers as decision makers

The conversation around the future of work is an opportunity, not only to understand how work is changing and what are the drivers of change, but for workers to engage in the conversation, to project themselves and their needs into that future, to hold a conversation about the *potential* of work, for workers. The potential of work lies ahead in improving job quality, sustainability, and

equity. And in order to fully realize those potentials, organized workers must be at the table as equal partners where policies are being designed and decisions made.

Centering workers also means that analysis of and investments in the “future of work” should be driven by workers’ lived experience: not just as a data point, but as ongoing engagement with workers and organizers that positions them to evaluate the work and course-correct as it goes. Working people have the most valuable insights about what needs to change inside workplaces and in our economy to deliver more equity. Whether we work as a plumber or a program officer, we know the ins and outs of our daily work, and we understand what changes could help us do things better. People who work at a job should have a say in how to get the job done.

## **Forge a racially just future as essential to building worker power**

Systemic racism has been embedded in the U.S. economy since the enslavement of Black people and the seizure of land from indigenous peoples. Today, communities of color and undocumented immigrants are often working in fields where their work is undervalued or unseen, excluded from financial stability and mobility. When workforce initiatives do target historically marginalized communities, the structure and incentives built into those programs often serves to perpetuate, rather than challenge, existing inequities.

To achieve more equitable outcomes, we need to do a better job at valuing the skills, knowledge, and labor of people of color, immigrants, and women in the jobs they are already in. Respect for workers’ skills and assets should be the center of any strategy. The COVID-19 pandemic has forcefully brought home both the critical importance of the work done by “essential” workers, and the enormous undervaluing in our society of that work and the people who do it.

There will always be blue-collar and service sector jobs and a need for people to do those jobs. How do we transform those into desirable, high-skilled careers? How can workforce development empower people to transform their own workplaces? More broadly, can we re-envision both workforce development and economic policies to focus on eliminating systemic barriers to an inclusive economy; undoing patterns of occupational segregation; and valuing the work done by people of color, immigrants and women?

## Build collective power

Centering working people includes supporting workers' own approaches to organizing and improving their lives. Millions of working people in the country today organize and bargain collectively through a labor union as one of the most effective ways of building power and achieving lasting change. At the same time, many workers are unable to unionize due to legal barriers or other power imbalances, and have developed alternative forms of collective organizing such as workers' centers, associations or mutual aid groups.

What does it mean to support collective power, as opposed to individual? Building individual power is a zero-sum game; increasing one person's power within the existing system implies reducing someone else's power. Building collective power, on the other hand, means changing workplace dynamics, political frameworks or social structures so that communities of people collectively can all have a say over issues that affect them.

Unions and worker organizations help change the incentives from individual to collective. By applying the same rules and pay structure to all employees, and by bargaining similar contracts across multiple employers, they can help take pay and benefits out of the race to the bottom, allowing employers with good practices to flourish by creating an incentive to invest in worker retention, skill-building and advancement.

Systemic change that enables collective power will require greater collaboration and a collective approach from all of us: worker organizations, workforce development practitioners, employers, funders and more.

## Focus on the changes most affecting people's lives

In order to center workers, analysis of the "future of work" must focus not just on technology, but also address other trends with equal or greater impact on workers and communities, including:

- Expanding contingent and nonstandard work arrangements, such as subcontracting and gig work
- Changing demands for skills
- The growth and decline of industries
- Economic shifts resulting from climate change;
- The introduction of workplace technologies other than automation

We also must recognize that the issues that affect workers extend past their role at the workplace. Workplace issues are intertwined with issues of race, gender, climate change, mass incarceration, childcare, health care, housing, immigration, and more. Working people are people first — a “whole worker” approach recognizes the intersections of all of these issues in our lives.

## **Shape technology to serve people**

There is great opportunity in new technology. We can choose to use technology to enhance work, reduce drudgery, and move towards equity and empowerment. However, new technology can also be deployed in ways that replicate existing power imbalances, and amplify social and economic inequities.

To integrate technology into work in a way that empowers workers and increases equity, we need to design and deploy tech in ways that are informed by workers’ real-world expertise in their field, and that seek to make work better for people. The impact of a new technology on working people and their communities depends on whether workers are able to exercise collective power to shape the terms under which it is introduced and used.

# Conclusion

The events of 2020 and the ongoing global pandemic could have previously appeared to be the material of a dystopian fiction, but is instead our present and grim reality. 2.8 million people have died worldwide of COVID-19 and our failures to prevent its spread and treat those infected. In the United States, Black, Latinx and indigenous people are dying at far higher rates than white people from COVID-19, and are suffering more deeply from the economic fallout, much as they have already felt the disproportionate impacts of police shootings, impoverishment and structural violence. Tens of millions of workers lost their livelihoods and their employer sponsored healthcare during a pandemic, and found little or no public safety net to catch their freefall, especially if they were undocumented, “gig” workers or otherwise excluded from recognition and protection.

The fractures of a society built along the fault lines of economic injustice and racial inequity only became more acute, and more revealing. What dystopia reveals to us is less the invention of a far flung and unknown future than what happens if the disregarded crevices in our world grow into chasms.

What is an alternative vision for our future and the future of workers? The California Future of Work Commission has proposed a “new social compact for work and workers.” For each of their five recommendations, they lay out “moonshot” goals for the next decade:

- Providing a guaranteed job for all Californians who want to work;
- Eliminating working poverty especially in the service and care sectors;
- Doubling the share of workers who have access to safety net benefits;
- Creating 1.5 high quality jobs for every low quality job; and
- Identifying future jobs — jobs needed in technology, climate change and public health — and doubling or tripling the share of workers employed in those future jobs and the number of workers prepared for those jobs.

What would be needed to take those moonshots from something ambitious and imaginative, into an achieved reality? Leaders from the commission called for stakeholders to work together from businesses and industry associations, workers and worker organizations, educational and training institutions, nonprofit organizations, philanthropy, government and others.

We agree it will take all of us. And fundamental to the success of any stakeholder process is for workers and worker organizations to have the collective power and voice to take part in making that future. If workers are essential, so is their power to make change.

This report, built on the voices and visions of worker advocates with decades of grounded experience, shows the ways in which other stakeholders can join workers and worker organizations in their ongoing work to build a future for all of us. To do so, we have to reckon with and shift historic power imbalances between workers and corporations and undo persistent racial and gender oppression. We have to act as allies to workers and communities of color organizing collectively. We have to choose collective, pro-worker strategies over zero-sum approaches where one individual's advantage comes at another individual's cost. We have to prioritize approaches that build collective power and contribute to structural changes that benefit people as a whole.

The future of work is not a question of technology. It needs to be a visionary question, a question of what we think is a good future: a future where work meets our societal needs for public health, caring for children or climate resilience, where all people can achieve their full potential and agency at work and where the value of work is shared by all.

Workers are essential to this future. Workers are essential, not only because they fed us, healed us or cared for our loved ones during a pandemic. Workers are always essential in a world where the full potential and dignity of work lies in recognition of its power to create, reshape and relate to our world and its future. Dockworkers in the Bay Area had an impact on bringing down the apartheid state in South Africa by refusing to unload South African cargo from ships. Housekeepers in Oakland have helped create a future where women are safer from sexual assault on the job. Union bus drivers in Minneapolis refused to drive buses transporting police or arrested protesters during the George Floyd protests last summer. Retail employees won hazard pay for thousands of grocery store workers. What would the future of work look like if workers had the power to organize and create a future they can live in? We invite you to join us imagining this future and making it real.





ReWork the Bay brings together leaders in economic justice, education and training, business, and philanthropy to take bold, urgent action to create a prosperous Bay Area for all, especially working people.

## **WORKING PARTNERSHIPS**

USA

Working Partnerships USA is a community organization bringing together the power of grassroots organizing and public policy innovation to drive the movement for a just economy.



Jobs with Justice San Francisco is a long-term, strategic alliance of labor, community, faith-based, and student organizations working together to build a strong, progressive movement for economic and social justice locally and nationally.