Justice in the Workplace
Students in FYS 21 & FYS 22
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Approach:
We formed groups and, as a group, chose one worker rights organization as the subject of our research. We tried to contact them and talk to them about their work. We looked into the history of the organization and the issues that the organization addresses in its activities. We also talked to young and old people about what they thought about unions, working people and the organizations we studied. We quickly discovered that talking to people can be difficult.

Exploratory Questions:
1. Can unions reinvent themselves, perhaps as labor rights organizations, to come back, as strong advocates for the rights of working people, in this “new” economy?
2. As organizations, what would the new defenders of “rights at work” look like?
3. What are some previously overlooked constituencies that worker rights organizations are now trying to organize?
4. How can we think, in new ways, about working people as we interact with them in our everyday lives?

History:
• The history of labor unions, show their rise and fall. They once had a big place in the U.S. economy.
• Big industrial base with large factories that were relatively easy to organize. Entire industries fell under the sway of collective bargaining agreements negotiated by labor unions on behalf of the workers they represented.
• 1970’s → unions went into decline. (White, male dominated, unions ignored women, immigrants and people of color as potential members)
• Successive changes in labor law limited the ability of unions to both organize and defend themselves politically.

Biggest Blow: Changes in Technology
• Changes in Technology → The digital revolution; computers and the internet
• Made it feasible for companies to send high paying industrial jobs offshore while building up an ancillary service sector here at home. That’s why you see so many sales jobs when you look at the “help wanted” ads in the newspaper.
• Union jobs were lost to off shoring and the new jobs that were created were only partially recouped by unions.
• Digital revolution facilitated subcontracting and freelancing and temp work.
• Idea of an everlasting job, doesn’t exist anymore, unless you’re on a career track with a government agency, you may well find yourself scrambling for health insurance and a secure retirement.

Workers Rights Organizations:
1. Starbucks Workers Union: A union for baristas? Aren’t unions for “old” people?
2. NYC Taxi Workers Alliance: Yellow cab drivers rent their cars from medallion owners. So as subcontractors, who are like “independent” businessmen, should they have a union?
3. Freelancers Union: A union for all those “go it alone” rugged individualists? Can it be that you can’t really “go it alone” in today’s economy?
4. Domestic Workers United NYC: Have you ever thought of the maids who work for wealthy people as members of a union?
5. Sex Workers Outreach Project SWOP NYC: OK this is really unconventional; but shouldn’t anyone, who works for a living, have rights.
6. Workplace Project Hempstead NY: What about those immigrant workers who are here “illegally”? You know, the ones that gather on street corners looking for construction and landscaping work. Should they also have rights at work?
7. PSC CUNY: Who would think that our professors would ever want to form a union? Do they serve wine and cheese at their meetings?
8. Labor Notes: Have you ever imagined unions as honest advocates for a new kind of democracy; starting with democracy at work?

The world of work today is A LOT different than the world of work when unions were strong!