

The Perils of Delayed Conflict

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LABOR & ECONOMY

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Against Labor Peace

Though we found the Recognition Playbook particularly ill-suited to the conditions of many tech workplaces, even beyond tech, it was never the silver bullet we had once thought it to be. As we later learned, the conditions in which that playbook was born had been shaped by the desire for labor peace, not labor militancy. And the internationals we had looked to for guidance were largely operating within a set of constraints and norms designed to prevent working-class ambitions—the same ones that had breathed life into the tech worker movement in the late 2010s—from materializing.

Like any organization, internationals have an imperative to expand and grow. For them, this means growing their membership, usually in leaps and bounds, as they help workers win recognition shop by shop. More members means more dues, which in turn means more resources to organize new campaigns, fueling a virtuous cycle. Traditionally, internationals start collecting dues from new members after the union ratifies a contract with management. Each successful campaign, each new contract, each new wave of dues not only strengthens this virtuous cycle but also expands the organization's leverage within the industry and, in some cases, across the broader economy.

With each burst of growth, internationals expand worker power across their slice of the working class and the organization's responsibility to the membership grows. As more dues roll in, the leadership must demonstrate this funding is being applied wisely in the service of making every worker stronger. But in order to grow sustainably, they are compelled to follow US labor law closely, and they tend to reinforce

labor norms in service of that obligation. Because dues are typically only collected after a union wins formal recognition and successfully ratifies a contract, internationals are structurally incentivized to prioritize legal recognition and contract ratification over more confrontational tactics that carry unpredictable results.

Militancy introduces risk—risks of decertification, loss of recognition, or legal backlash—all of which jeopardize dues collection and long-term viability. As a result, internationals tend to institutionalize labor norms that emphasize legal procedure, grievance processes, and collective bargaining within the bounds of the NLRB. The very design of the system discourages disruption and pushes unions to act more like licensed negotiators than insurgent movements. In this way, the logic of growth embedded in labor law subtly, but powerfully, orients the entire model toward preserving industrial stability rather than escalating workplace conflict.

The roots of the problem stem, in fact, from the entire legal framework in which international unions operate. At its most basic level, labor law is a tool of the capitalist state to suppress workers' most powerful weapon: economic disruption. For example, the NLRA—the statute that forms the legal basis for most organizing today—states in its own preamble that it intends to “diminish the causes of labor disputes burdening or obstructing . . . commerce.” In other words, the bureaucratic legal apparatus is designed to keep class conflict from boiling over into mass working-class mobilization—to substitute the capacity for open class conflict with mediation, arbitration, and legislation. The consequence is that the ability to disrupt production is removed from workers' hands, and instead the power and agency to improve their own lives is outsourced to bureaucratic procedure and expert negotiators—all while profits continue to flow.

The playbook's final prize—the contract—encapsulates the very issue. Under the standard labor contract, the grievance procedure, and the fact that such contracts are negotiated every three to four years with the expectation of complete labor peace between renewal (due to no-strike clauses, which are standard), strips workers of their access to *immediately* fight for demands. This means that workers are, in effect, only allowed by law to exercise their power and experience the transformative effects of class conflict in the brief moments between contracts. The entire *raison d'être* of the Recognition Playbook is, in fact, to deliberately delay conflict: asking workers instead to focus first on securing legal recognition, thereby deferring the moment when workers challenge the boss directly and see their opposing interests laid bare.

This approach means that the promise of any concrete win could be so far off that one-on-one conversations often become frustratingly abstract—especially at large tech companies where winning recognition could take years. In such cases, a worker may raise an urgent issue, but organizers would have to tactfully redirect these concerns toward the goal of winning a union. The implicit message that workers are thus given is: *We hear your concern, but right now, we need to focus on winning the union—then we can bargain for the changes you're asking for.* This, for instance, was how we ran the campaign at Twitter despite knowing of Musk's imminent takeover.

This is not to say a contract or even formal union recognition has no place. They remain powerful

tools—and, in the right circumstances, indispensable ones—for protecting workers, codifying gains, and sustaining a labor organization over the long term. But they are tools, not end goals themselves. They should be picked up when they strengthen workers' leverage and put down when they constrain it. For instance, when workers already have the leverage they need, then the pursuit of recognition is a barrier, not a buoy.

Throughout the various campaigns we've each been a part of in the tech worker movement, we've heard over and over from dedicated, thoughtful workers that learning to organize in the style of the Recognition Playbook—for example, through the highly structured AEIOU conversations—feels like you're being taught to manipulate your coworkers into joining a multilevel marketing scheme with no payoff in sight. What the standard script forgets is that for workers to build their power, they must engage in class conflict, first at a small scale, in order to build both the solidarity and experience needed to win at a large scale. In other words, the playbook asks workers to build a bonfire without learning how to light it. So, by the time the tinder is piled high enough, no one knows how to spark it.

When we look back at the tech worker movement's most successful cases, what we noticed is that small fires are a prerequisite to building spectacular ones. Moments of class conflict *always* preceded the effective buildup toward majority pressure. Before Google workers launched a solidarity union, thousands, including contract workers at the company, had walked out to protest systemic sexism and executive misconduct at the company, earning concessions from leadership. Before winning the first wall-to-wall union in tech, workers at Kickstarter fought management against their decision to deplatform an antifascist comic book called *Always Punch Nazis*, which we saw in chapter 4. After the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, workers at Bandcamp came together to demand that management provide abortion access and gender-affirming health care—well before winning recognition. Each instance of conflict, where workers came together to demand material changes from their boss, forged tighter bonds and greater confidence in collective action that would become the foundation of tech's first unions.

Like many workers who have entered the labor movement believing in the promise of a united working class, we've realized that experiencing conflict is an essential part of union building. Delaying conflict does more than diffuse agitation; it also robs workers of the key moments that teach them what tactics are effective against the boss and how the boss might respond to a challenge. Conflict also forges lasting solidarity in moments of stress that can withstand harder hits down the road, thus building confidence in the effectiveness of worker power. When we look back at the major wins and major losses of the tech labor movement, the costs of the deferred conflict recommended by the Recognition Playbook are painfully apparent. And nowhere is this clearer than in the story of Mapbox.



Photos of the Organize Amazon Workers contingent in the 21st Annual Peoplehood Parade in Philadelphia, PA. Photo source: [Joe Piette](#)/Wikimedia Commons.

Big Bad Tech Boss

The union drive at Mapbox showed just how fragile the playbook is when the boss fights back. In sectors with stronger traditions of solidarity or conditions more favorable to organizing, workers can lean on long-standing networks of trust to resist management's barrage of captive audience meetings and manipulative antiunion talking points. For all the reasons discussed above—such as the fragmented and atomized workforce and high attrition rate—tech workers rarely have that foundation before experiencing conflict with the boss. In an industry where management already frames unions as incompatible with innovation and agility, even small doubts about how a union would impact working conditions can spread like a cancer and fatally fracture solidarity.

This, in fact, was how the Mapbox campaign met its end. To outside observers, the loss could easily be chalked up to management's deep pockets, ruthless consultants, or the inexperience of first-time organizers. And, as we discussed at the end of chapter 5, Mapbox's compensation structure, which heavily rewarded employees in equity, blurred the lines between worker and owner, making it difficult for them to develop class consciousness. But a closer look at the drive reveals that the organizing had

been strong, the CODE-CWA staffers supporting the campaign were experienced, and passionate worker leaders had done everything by the book. The problem was not the diligence of the workers but the Recognition Playbook itself—unable to withstand the combination of tech’s unique workplace dynamics and a scorched-earth employer counteroffensive.

After several years of watching the tech worker movement develop, management was not taking any chances. When Mapbox workers publicly celebrated reaching a supermajority of support for the union and looked ahead to the election, management unleashed a level of opposition beyond their workers’ wildest nightmares. The moment Mapbox leadership got wind of organizing, they hired the toughest union-busting consultants money could buy. Part of their strategy was to build up a vocal group of antiunion employees (known as the “no committee” in labor lingo) and then amplify their voices, framing opposition to the union as coming from within the ranks of workers themselves. Then, in captive-audience meetings, executives cast doubt on the character and intentions of the core organizers. At one point, leadership even claimed that a major investment was lost because of the campaign, solemnly explaining that if the union won recognition, the company might be starved of venture capital indefinitely, threatening the firm’s very survival.

In this pressure cooker environment, the solidarity workers had built unraveled. After management made the idea of a union radioactive, simply talking about the union would be met with vocal opposition—unless such discussion took the form of public diatribes against union organizers on the company Slack, where members of the no committee could score points with management. Because Mapbox was a remote workplace, organizers also couldn’t rely on organic and more discreet encounters in shared offices to do outreach. If someone didn’t reply to a direct message over Slack, it was nearly impossible to reach them, let alone arrange a one-on-one. Out of desperation, some organizers posted union updates in company-wide channels, hoping to reach workers who had stopped responding in DMs. But what they hoped would be an effective outreach strategy and a good faith show of transparency quickly became another surveillance mechanism for management’s antiunion campaign or taken as an invitation for more personal attacks from anti-union coworkers.

The foundation that the organizers had managed to build with remote colleagues completely broke under the pressure of the antiunion campaign. Many Mapbox workers had never met in person or even discussed pushing for better working conditions with their closest coworkers before the union drive. This solidarity and confidence in collective action among workers was still new and untested for a large portion of the workforce, and the culture of individualism cultivated in tech meant that a couple of one-on-one conversations could rarely cement bonds strong enough to withstand management’s counterattacks. When the work environment soured because of management’s antagonism toward the union, many workers simply left for another job, spiking an already-high attrition rate.

The most devastating blow to the campaign came when Mapbox leadership weaponized the existing divisions within the workplace—especially between US-based employees and their internationally based counterparts. While their campaign was still underground, Mapbox workers stayed laser-focused on speaking to every worker who would be eligible to vote in an election. Under US labor law, this excluded their international counterparts, so outreach to international coworkers was deprioritized. In the end,

this left international workers highly susceptible to leadership's anti-union campaign.

Co-opting social justice language, management framed the union as a project of privileged US-based workers who were out of touch with the struggles of their colleagues abroad—many of whom were based in countries with weaker labor laws and subject to more precarious working conditions. Soon, the company Slack was filled with emotional appeals from international workers, some pleading for the union to disband, others denouncing it outright as an entitled distraction. For many US tech workers already conditioned to think of unions as tools for less privileged workers than themselves, this narrative was persuasive and successfully framed the union as harmful to both the company and its most vulnerable workers. Pretty quickly, the organizing committee saw core supporters leaving the group and joining the no committee. Years later, Kara Mahoney, a core organizer, told us, “If I could go back a month before going public and speak to every worker at the company, eligible or not, I think that would have changed the course of the union drive.”

In the end, the union was defeated at the election. The same supermajority that had signed cards weeks earlier collapsed under the weight of management's union-busting campaign. And once the campaign was lost, management wasted no time firing organizers, sending a clear message to the rest of the workforce. Only then, when management's mask was off, did workers express regret over voting against the union.

Looking back, Mapbox workers' defeat was not just about the ruthlessness of the anti-union campaign—it also exposed how the Recognition Playbook, when deployed in tech, isn't robust enough to withstand a strong counteroffensive. On paper, the assessment process had delivered a supermajority; in practice, those numbers were brittle. Even tech workers who signed a union card still believed the boss was on their side. For many of the union organizers and supporters at Mapbox, the hardest boss fight was also their first, and that is a recipe for failure.

In the era of tech austerity, this Mapbox-style counteroffensive reads almost like a prelude for the larger movement. When Musk took over Twitter and unveiled his antiworker crusade, he expanded the horizon of what executives dared to do to reclaim management authority and squash dissent. Even the strongest campaigns must now expect to be met with a level of union busting so ruthless that the playbook appears obsolete.

Gone are the days when management fired only a handful of organizers to quell dissent. In this new chapter of union avoidance, tech companies have put down the scalpel to pick up a hatchet. Just as Musk prioritized control over profit, leadership teams have fired vast swaths of their workforce to crush worker power. Immediately after winning their union drive, Grindr United was hit with an increasingly familiar ultimatum from management: return to the office or face termination. But, unlike other RTO mandates where workers were asked to return to their closest office, Grindr's leadership maliciously ordered workers back to locations they knew were the farthest from workers' homes. When staff refused to relocate, management accepted their refusal as resignation, cleaving 46 percent of workers from the very union they had just won.^[1]

Stories like these became commonplace over the following year. Shortly after workers at Bandcamp won recognition and sat down with management at the bargaining table, leadership sold the entire company, and its new owner cut the bargaining unit in half. The workers at Code for America—which at the time partnered with states and counties to use technology to improve access to food benefits and other social safety net programs—faced similar retaliatory layoffs. Reflecting on the painful irony of this moment for coworkers who built the very tools for accessing government food programs, Code for America organizer Ben Calegari said that when layoffs hit, “[employees] were applying to food stamps on the day after they had worked to help people get them.”^[2] And when Google workers occupied the office of the Google Cloud CEO Thomas Kurian to protest the company’s cloud computing contract with Israel’s government, management fired some fifty workers, some of whom weren’t even involved in the sit-in but merely observers.^[3]

Yet, amid the rising acidity of the tech industry, there was one place where the stars seemed to align. At *The New York Times*, tech workers inhabited an environment that had eluded so many other campaigns—a cohesive workforce, a militant organizing committee, and an existing culture of unions. They had watched their newsroom counterparts function as an effective union. They also faced a management that wasn’t steeped in Silicon Valley groupthink, where Musk’s antiworker model had become the standard approach for dealing with dissent. If the Recognition Playbook could succeed anywhere for tech workers, it was here. And the moment of truth came when the union voted, overwhelmingly, that it was time to strike.

Footnotes

- 1 As a keynote speaker for the 2024 Circuit Breakers conference, Grindr United organizer Quintessence McGee explained the extent of management’s RTO order. Management structured the mandate to force workers on certain teams to return to a specific office. If a designer was living in San Diego, they were ordered to join the head of design in NYC rather than return to the LA office closer to home. The keynote pointed out the arbitrary nature of the location orders and cheekily reflected, “It’s almost as if they designed it that way.”
- 2 Cella Sum, “Tech Instigators: Highlighting Worker Experiences of Organizing Across the Tech Industry,” June 1, 2026, <https://instigators.tech>.
- 3 Michael Sainato, “Workers Accuse Google of ‘Tantrum’ After 50 Fired over Israel Contract Protest,” *The Guardian*, April 27, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/apr/27/google-project-nimbus-israel>.