



## Winning Hearts and Minds

### Making the Case for the Labor Movement

For the United Food and Commercial Workers

Union membership in the United States has steadily declined for decades despite evidence that higher union density yields important benefits for the public – from higher wages and a greater share of income for average workers, to higher voting rates in states with higher union percentages, more residents with health insurance coverage, and better public institutions for residents. Certainly one reason for this decline is a public dialog regularly marked by anti-union rhetoric that obscures the fundamental advantages of a healthy labor movement. There is a battle for the hearts and minds of the American people that anti-union interests appear to be winning, given decreases in union membership and long-term downward trends in attitudes towards unions and their value.

Over two years, the Topos Partnership has been engaged in research to identify approaches to revive a constructive national conversation about the importance of organizing and supporting unions. For advocates and communicators on a variety of economic and national policy issues, the research presents important lessons about how to help Americans grasp fundamental ideas they have lost sight of, and how to begin to shift the culture in a more productive direction.



### What We're Up Against

While many of the following patterns are familiar to communicators, it is important to be fully aware of their power to derail a conversation – as audiences mishear or dismiss messages based on their own assumptions:

**Off the radar:** Unions are basically off the cultural radar screen. Aside from high-profile controversies related to public employee salary and pensions, American workers rarely think about unions, or see them as relevant players. When they note unions' importance, this is typically in terms of historical accomplishments rather than contemporary ones – they achieved things in the past and are no longer needed.

**Violating basic priorities:** Unions are sometimes perceived as working against common sense and against workers' most basic values. People often worry that unions protect bad workers, create unnecessary tension between employees and bosses, and make unreasonable demands that threaten companies' survival, and therefore workers' own futures.

**Outside institution:** Perhaps the greatest challenge unions face is the common perception of unions as an institution outside the workplace and separate from workers. Even those who favor unions often see them as a “service provider” - something like an insurance company that collects dues in return for providing a particular service, but is invisible most of the time.

## A New Cultural Common Sense

The goal for communicators and union leaders should be to create an echo chamber that begins to establish a “new common sense” that wins hearts and minds - that changes the culture. Fundamentally, what engaging simple truth about the labor movement can we re-establish to remind people about what it is and why it matters?

A number of typical approaches don't change fundamental understanding, but the research identified one simple but powerful idea that, when treated as the focus of communication, helps create a much more engaged, informed and constructive conversation:

***Workers have the right to stick together, and powerful interests want to strip us of that right.***

When expressed effectively, this idea gets workers' attention, teaches something important, and engages support. The following is one example of how to convey the idea, similar to successful language used in testing:

*“Collective bargaining” means employees sticking together as a group so they speak with a more powerful voice. In order for employees to be heard, it's often necessary to band together so companies take them seriously. And many employers try to prevent this so they can limit workers' power.*

This is the fight the labor movement wants – it moves public discourse onto labor's terrain. When used as the focus of communications, this organizing idea has a number of important strengths that make it sticky, compelling and effective:

- \* It strikes workers as a fundamental right, on a par with religious freedom or the right to free speech. The idea of “limiting” or “taking away” this right violates deeply held values. Most critically, even when workers are not sympathetic to the activities of a particular union, they defend the basic right of workers to stick together.
- \* It serves as a commonsense explanation of how labor power actually works. Prior to hearing the message, workers tend to be very vague and unclear about where a union's power comes from. The idea empowers workers by explicitly pointing out to them that they can and should act (together) to make a difference.
- \* It shifts people's focus from unions as an “outside institution” to the workers themselves.
- \* It realigns who workers identify with. Instead of identifying with their employers, it successfully puts workers on one side, and employers who try to prevent them from sticking together on the other side.
- \* It transcends politics, by focusing on a fundamental idea that all workers can agree on.

Importantly, the idea of the right to stick together is easily adapted to a variety of more particular topics and controversies – from collective bargaining to “open door” policies, right-to-work struggles and support for the National Labor Relations Board. With this strategy, communicators have the opportunity to create a new, winnable front in the battle for hearts and minds, reminding Americans of a basic dynamic they have largely forgotten about how workers create better prospects for themselves.

## Methodology

This project incorporated several complementary methods in an iterative process, including in-depth interviews (“cognitive elicitations”), ethnographic field research, focus groups, and “TalkBack” testing of individual messages.



Founded by veteran communications strategists Axel Aubrun and Joe Grady of Cultural Logic, and Meg Bostrom of Public Knowledge, Topos has as its mission to explore and ultimately *transform the landscape of public understanding* where public interest issues play out. Our approach is based on the premise that while it is *possible* to achieve short-term victories on issues through a variety of strategies, *real change* depends on a fundamental shift in public understanding. Topos was created to bring together the range of expertise needed to understand existing issue dynamics, explore possibilities for creating new issue understanding, develop a proven course of action, and arm advocates with new communications tools to win support. For more information: [www.topospartnership.com](http://www.topospartnership.com)