



# Producing Power

Applying Framing Recommendations  
about Work to the Manufacturing Sector

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# Introduction

Manufacturing provides the material foundation of everyday life and is widely thought of as the backbone of the economy. Yet manufacturing jobs are marked by low wages, dangerous and exploitative conditions, persistent racial and gender inequities, and weakened worker power. This brief offers framing recommendations that can shift public thinking about manufacturing and build support for transformative change.

In a moment of political upheaval, we have a powerful opportunity to tell a better story about manufacturing. The sector is feeling the impacts of new policies on labor, trade, and immigration—including tariff policies that have come with a steady decline in manufacturing jobs. Workers across the sector are being impacted by the dismantling of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs and the rapid introduction of new technologies.

However, the way the American public thinks about manufacturing tends to obscure the structural forces that shape the sector. While people often think of manufacturing jobs as dirty and dangerous, they typically assume that workers are responsible for making their own success in life. If someone wants a better job, they just need to work harder. This individualistic mindset also shapes how people understand racial inequity. Instead of seeing the structural barriers and discrimination that people of color face in manufacturing, success is still seen as a product of effort and determination. There is also an assumption, particularly among white Americans, that people of color now have an unfair advantage due to “reverse racism.” These assumptions hide deeper problems in the system and make it harder to build support for changes that would give workers more power.

We can meet this moment by showing how political and economic choices shape manufacturing work. We can explain how profit-driven systems produce exploitation and inequality, and we can call for collective worker action to rebalance power and create a better world. By changing public thinking, we hope to build the political will for policy changes in manufacturing. That includes improving the quality and safety of manufacturing jobs, strengthening worker protections, making it easier for workers to unionize, minimizing pollution, transitioning to more environmentally sustainable industries, and creating more equitable pathways for people to train in green jobs.

In this brief, we identify five key challenges in public thinking about manufacturing and how they can be addressed. For each challenge we offer framing recommendations that can help people think about manufacturing through a structural, systemic, and collective lens. These recommendations have been empirically tested to build understanding of the problems workers face and to motivate people to demand change. With proven framing strategies, we can move conversations beyond simply emphasizing the importance of manufacturing toward calling for systems that better serve workers, communities, and the natural world.

**About this project:** The FrameWorks [WorkShift project](#) advances new ways of talking about work and labor. The goal of this project is to build public support for reshaping labor systems in ways that counter exploitation and create a just and sustainable society. This brief accompanies [Reframing Work, Rebalancing Power](#), a strategic brief for communicating more effectively about work in the United States. Our [Methods Supplement](#) contains detailed information about the research methods behind these framing recommendations. This project is generously supported by the Square One Foundation.

## CHALLENGE 1

# Manufacturing Is Seen as Essential but Not as Part of a System That Can Be Redesigned.

People widely recognize manufacturing as foundational to the economy. It is associated with producing tangible goods, sustaining communities, and “real work.” Manufacturing is often discussed as a national priority and treated as a proxy for the strength of the whole economy. Unfortunately, this does not translate into support for a vision of manufacturing that is better for workers and the environment.

Instead, people tend to think about manufacturing jobs in individualistic ways. Success or failure in manufacturing—like other work—comes down to personal effort, grit, and determination. Because manufacturing is often seen as a job for working-class people, this individualism is connected to class. Manufacturing is considered both a last resort for people with limited options and a place where someone can strive to better themselves. As a result, even when people acknowledge that the work is difficult, dangerous, or poorly paid, they are unlikely to connect those conditions to broader systems of power, ownership, and class. In other words, people think of manufacturing as a working-class job, without seeing the need for workers to come together to demand change.

In contrast to this individualistic thinking about *jobs*, people think about the *economy* in much more structural ways. The economy is often recognized as a designed system that can and should be governed through effective policy but is currently rigged by those with extreme wealth and power. The challenge and opportunity for communicators is that manufacturing is associated both with deeply ingrained individualistic ways of thinking about jobs *and* with more structural thinking about the economy. This means there is an opportunity to widen and deepen understanding of how systems of power and class shape manufacturing. But there is also the risk that people default to putting the onus on individuals to make their own success.

## **Recommendation: Make Manufacturing a Systemic Issue by Talking about How the 99% Can Respond to a System Rigged by the 1%.**

To overcome this challenge, zoom out from manufacturing jobs to the economic system that shapes them. We do this by emphasizing the shared interests of the 99% against a small, powerful few who rig the system in their favor. Talk about the economy as a system that's rigged by the 1% against the 99%. Explain how this system is rigged to exploit workers generally and how it results in low pay and poor working conditions for manufacturing workers. Describe how the 1% use the tactic of “divide and rule” to weaken solidarity—for instance, by making people compete for jobs.

Talking about the 99% cultivates a sense of common cause among manufacturing workers and between those in manufacturing jobs and workers in other sectors. This conveys broad class solidarity without needing to use the words “class” or “solidarity.”

### **Why It Works**

This frame works because it helps people zoom out from individual success stories to the bigger systems of power and class that shape manufacturing. It achieves three important shifts simultaneously. First, it links manufacturing to the structural mindset that the economy is designed through laws and policies. Second, it offers a villain (“the 1%”) that is easy for people to rally against across different identities and demographics. And third, it builds the belief that change is possible and that people are more likely to succeed if they work together.

When we talk about the 99%—across job type and sectors, including manufacturing—we open the door for collective solutions. We can go beyond the tropes of dirty, dangerous working-class jobs and instead position manufacturing workers as part of a much larger group of people whose labor sustains an economy that is rigged against them. This helps connect manufacturing to a broader dynamic of power in the economy.

By calling out the divide and rule tactics of the 1%, communicators can overcome the racialized scapegoating that is used to pit workers against each other in manufacturing. The explanation is important because it clarifies *who* is rigging the system, *how*, and against *whom*. Without this, people can understand “rigged systems” in unproductive ways—for instance, in terms of liberal elites rigging the system to benefit immigrants at the expense of middle-class white people.<sup>1</sup>

By explicitly naming the role of the powerful in shaping labor laws, investment decisions, and wages, this frame is clear about the *who* and the *how*. It also makes it clear that manufacturing outcomes are the result of deliberate choices about how the system is designed.

Frames that focus more narrowly on solidarity among workers versus bosses are less effective than talking about the 99% versus 1%. This may be because people are more likely to feel sympathetic toward the “villain” (described as “our bosses” and “big business owners”), particularly if they themselves are, or aspire to be, bosses or business owners. If we talk about “our bosses,” we also risk personalizing the problem. We can make people think of particular people and how they might be replaced by better bosses. By naming the villain as the 1% rather than individual employers, we avoid locating the problem in particular individuals and instead locate it in a powerful, wealthy class.

## How to Use It in Manufacturing Communications

- **Emphasize that as part of the 99%, manufacturing workers share common interests with all workers** and that working people can overcome challenges by coming together.
  - Make it clear these shared interests are across race or background. By reframing the sector as a site of broader economic injustice and calling for solidarity across difference, the “divide and rule” tactics in manufacturing are revealed as part of a bigger pattern of undermining collective action.
- **Make the motives of the wealthy few visible in the story** by talking about how they hoard wealth, pit us against each other, and force us to compete.
  - Name groups of villains, like billionaires or the 1%, and talk about how systems allow for and are designed for their accumulation of wealth and power.<sup>2</sup>
  - Avoid naming individual people or companies. This can personalize the problem.
  - Because the current story of manufacturing emphasizes bootstraps individualism, it’s important to make the villain clear when framing the problem so blame is placed where it belongs instead of on working people.
- **Explain that the system is rigged and can be unrigged.**
  - Name the ways the powerful few are rigging the system by shaping laws and policies to their advantage at the expense of the rest of us.
  - Talk about policy solutions in terms of unrigging the system.
- **Be explicit that current manufacturing outcomes are maintained through policy decisions,** such as weakened labor protections, trade rules favoring corporations, and barriers to collective bargaining.
  - Avoid reinforcing the idea that the economy naturally creates haves and have-nots.
  - Emphasize the way policies and laws allow the hoarding of wealth.
- **Emphasize the collective power of workers** by calling for the recognition that we are the majority and making it clear we can unrig the system if we join together, demand change, and fight back.

### What this looks like:

*Whether we work in manufacturing, own our own business, or look after loved ones at home, we all want to live well and be treated well. But right now the 1% are pushing to keep manufacturing wages low so that workers have to compete against each other for jobs. They fund politicians who pit manufacturing workers against each other by race and use fear about immigration to sow division. But when we the 99% come together, we have the power to change the system. When we join together—wherever we work and whatever our race, gender or background—we can demand an economy where everyone gets a fair return, not one where a tiny minority rigs the system in their favor.*

## CHALLENGE 2

# People Sometimes Deny That Racial and Gender Disparities Exist in Manufacturing or Think of Them as Natural.

When people think about who works in manufacturing, they often rely on deeply ingrained assumptions about gender, class, and race. Manufacturing is widely understood as “men’s work,” especially suited to working-class men. The lack of women in management positions is sometimes explained with the idea that men and women are just naturally better at different types of work.

People also often misunderstand the nature of structural racial inequities in manufacturing. Workers of color are more likely to have lower-paying, “floor-level” jobs, but people don’t usually attribute this to the system being unfair. Often they assume that people get the jobs they deserve, based on their work ethic. Sometimes people (primarily white people) assume that anti-racist policies have gone too far and created reverse racism, such that people of color have an advantage. At the same time, people of color sometimes push back against the idea of structural racism fully determining outcomes in manufacturing, preferring to stress the role of personal agency.

These mindsets create major challenges for communicators. Occupational segregation—the over- or underrepresentation of certain groups in certain jobs—is one of the clearest signals that the economy, and manufacturing within it, is structured by power. But without the right framing, simply naming disparities is unhelpful. This can easily reinforce the thinking that differences are natural and inevitable or a result of individual competence. And it can sometimes lead to a reactionary reverse-racism backlash.

## **Recommendation: Explain the Historical Roots of Occupational Segregation and Lead These Explanations with the Value of *Fairness*.**

Appeal to the value of *Fairness* by talking about how everyone should have opportunities for good jobs, with the support they need, whatever their starting place in life. We use this value to make the case that the distribution of jobs in our society should be fair, which then allows us to explain the current unfair situation in manufacturing.

Explanation is vital when talking about occupational segregation. We should avoid simply stating facts like “Black men are overrepresented on the factory floor,” as people can understand these in counterproductive ways. Instead, we need to explain *why* occupational segregation exists in manufacturing, tracing it to historical and ongoing societal biases and policy failures. We do this by emphasizing that these patterns are not accidental or natural but produced and reinforced over time through laws and policies—including poor enforcement of labor protections.

Be bold in talking about this as an ongoing structural problem that we have failed to address over time. But make sure to follow the problem with appropriate solutions. Show how manufacturing workers can come together to demand better laws and policies.

## Why It Works

*Fairness* is a value that helps people care about the problem of occupational segregation. It works because it easily orients people to collectivist and structural thinking, focusing people on the distribution of opportunities and outcomes for different groups of people in society.<sup>3</sup>

We must pair *Fairness* with an explanation of the structural causes of inequities in manufacturing. If we don't explain causes, there is a risk that people fill in the gaps with racist or sexist stereotypes—like the idea that Black communities have fewer opportunities because they don't value hard work,<sup>4</sup> or that women lack the natural “brute strength” or technical skill needed to do these jobs.

When we explain historical causes, emphasizing our ongoing societal failure, we can instead increase understanding that structural racism and sexism shapes manufacturing work. By explaining occupational segregation in terms of policy failures, the frame improves systems-level thinking about how the economy and workplaces are designed. The through line throughout history shows how the racist and sexist practices of the past still have an impact today. This helps to steer people away from understanding the pattern as being accidental or natural. When the problem is framed as a systemic one, rooted in historical laws and policies, the solutions of better laws and policies now make sense.

Explaining occupational segregation as an ongoing societal failure, rooted in history, is more persuasive than emphasizing the progress we've made over time. Frames that acknowledge progress, then pivot to the problems we still face, are weaker overall. Talk of progress can reinforce the idea that discrimination is being resolved on its own, reducing urgency for collective or policy-based solutions.

## How to Use It in Manufacturing Communications

- **Don't just provide facts about disparities—always offer an explanation of them.**
  - Facts don't speak for themselves. Instead, people understand facts in terms of their default assumptions.
  - Never state patterns of race or gender representation without describing how laws, policies, and enforcement shaped them.
- **Explain the problem historically and connect it to the present without leaning on ideas of “progress.”**
  - Avoid language that suggests the system is steadily fixing itself. Instead, talk about the ways today's disparities can be traced back to historical policy decisions.
- **Talk about fairness as meeting needs.**
  - Fairness framing needs to emphasize everyone getting the support they need.
  - Essentially, define the value of *Fairness* as equity, but stick with the word “fairness” to avoid confusion or backlash.
- **Emphasize policy in the explanations.**
  - Make clear that past exclusions still shape today's manufacturing workforce through stereotypes, weak protections, and low enforcement.

### What this looks like:

*Fairness means good work is available to everyone with the support people need to succeed—whatever their background, race, or gender. But manufacturing has long been shaped by laws, policies, and practices that channel people into different roles. Black workers were deliberately steered into the most dangerous, lowest-paid jobs on the floor. Women were pushed out of the sector entirely because they were seen as unsuitable or unskilled. Weak enforcement of labor laws has allowed these patterns to persist to this day. But the imbalances in manufacturing rooted in the past can be solved today. When manufacturing workers come together to demand higher wages, better benefits, and stronger labor protections, everyone can have what they need to thrive. Together, we can build a manufacturing sector that lives up to the promise of fairness for all.*

### CHALLENGE 3

## People See That the Profit Motive Drives Bad Working Conditions in Manufacturing but Don't See Exploitation as Central to Our Economic System.

People often think of manufacturing as a dirty, dangerous job done by people who don't have many other options. There is broad recognition that the jobs can be physically demanding, unsafe, and poorly compensated. This creates some openness to the idea that outcomes and conditions in manufacturing are shaped by forces beyond individual control.

However, this understanding remains partial and underdeveloped. While people may recognize that conditions are unfair, they do not consistently understand exploitation in manufacturing as a structural feature of an economic system driven by profit and enabled by a weakened regulatory system. Instead, exploitation is often understood in unhelpful ways. For instance, it's often seen as an inevitable, natural feature of the economy. Or it is attributed to particular, isolated bad people and bad companies. Or it's seen as an obstacle that people can avoid or overcome through hard work.

This creates a critical communication challenge. Without a clear explanation of the ways our economy is designed to drive exploitation—by keeping wages low, weakening protections, and extracting value from labor—conditions in manufacturing can appear natural, fixed, or unchangeable.

The task for communicators is to help people see exploitation in manufacturing not as an unfortunate natural side effect of economic activity but as a deliberate outcome of how the economy is designed—and therefore something that can be redesigned and improved through collective action.

Next, we recommend two distinct frames that address this challenge. Each serves a unique function and accomplishes related but separate shifts in public thinking. These frames work well together and can also be used separately.

## **Recommendation: Use the Metaphor of the Economy as a Pyramid to Show How Exploitation Is Structural and Changeable.**

Communicators should talk about how the economy is being built like a pyramid by corporations to exploit workers in manufacturing and across the economy. Talk about how a few at the top benefit by standing on the backs of the workers at the bottom. Use the pointed shape of a pyramid to talk about the concentration of wealth upward in the hands of a few, and use the weight-bearing structure of a pyramid to talk about the burden on workers.

To emphasize that this is changeable, use the present-continuous tense (“is being built”) instead of the present simple tense (“is built”). Talk about how political action and policies can rebuild an economy that supports everyone, not just the wealthy few. For example, talk about manufacturing workers coming together in unions and creating more worker-owned businesses. Call people to action by saying that working people can topple the pyramid, then rebuild the economy. Describe how all working people—across race and background—are the real foundation of power.

### **Why It Works**

The pyramid metaphor helps build understanding that profit motive drives exploitation, and it builds support for labor unions. It works because it uses an intuitive image of a physical structure to clearly explain key economic processes. This is a shape that makes constructed hierarchy visible. It reinforces the idea that the economy is built, not natural. Finally, the pyramid metaphor also helps bridge from problem to solution—it suggests the possibility of rebuilding or restructuring. If the economy has been built in a way that concentrates wealth at the top, it can be rebuilt differently—by strengthening worker power and changing the rules that govern work. Because manufacturing is already understood as providing the material foundation of the economy, this metaphor is especially powerful in the context of manufacturing.

### **How to Use It in Manufacturing Communications**

- **Emphasize that the economy is being built.**
  - Make it clear that this is happening now through ongoing policy choices (use present-continuous language).
- **Talk about workers as the large base, kept down while supporting the pyramid.**
  - Make clear that corporations rely on workers, including manufacturing workers, by talking about how corporations stand on workers’ backs and how workers bear the weight without sharing in the profit.
  - Be sure to include other types of workers alongside manufacturing workers. If the “base” of the economy is *only* manufacturing workers, there is a risk that this devalues other sectors (like care work), as if they are not economically important.

- **Explicitly name collective solutions.**
  - Talk about unions and worker-owned enterprises to show how workers can reshape the structure.
- **Stress that the pyramid is not inevitable.**
  - Emphasize that the pyramid is a designed structure, which means it can be undone and rebuilt.
  - Be clear about solutions like unions and cooperatives.
- **Emphasize unity rather than competition among workers.**
  - To avoid cuing ideas of reverse racism, explicitly note that workers across race are the foundation of the economy and share common interests.

### **What this looks like:**

*Our economy is being built like a pyramid. Corporations and the wealthy few sit at the top. Meanwhile, those of us who form the foundation—manufacturing workers, care workers, service workers, people of every race and background—bear all the weight while the profits flow upward. But a pyramid is a built structure, and what is built can be rebuilt. When manufacturing workers come together in unions and push for businesses owned by workers, not corporations, we can topple the pyramid.*

## **Recommendation: Explain How Corporations Exploit Workers—Don’t Just Focus on the Harms Workers Face.**

Communicators should foreground who is doing the exploiting and how exploitation is motivated by profit. This means clearly describing *how* corporations and the wealthy few profit from workers by keeping wages low to increase profit margins, weakening labor protections and safety standards, and using ownership and control over resources to dictate conditions. Talk about a group, class, or set of people who are benefiting from exploitation and explain how systems are designed to allow for this exploitation.

### **Why It Works**

Frames that foreground the profit motive and ownership increase understanding that exploitation is systemic, and they also boost support for unions. This approach helps people see exploitation in manufacturing not as accidental or inevitable, but as the predictable result of an economy designed to prioritize profit over people.

This strategy works better than starting explanations with who is being exploited. This may be because starting at the level of who is exploited can undermine agency, making people feel less powerful. People may also reject a frame that starts by presenting them as a victim. When exploitation is framed first and foremost in terms of worker hardship, it risks reinforcing fatalism or individualism rather than building support for collective solutions like unions, stronger labor laws, or alternative ownership models.

The effective approach leads with who is profiting from exploitation. This is likely to be especially effective in manufacturing because people already associate the sector with difficult and dangerous work. That recognition creates an opening to explain how a few benefit from the labor of many and how this extractive process is built into our current system.

### How to Use It in Manufacturing Communications

- **Start by explaining who is profiting from exploitation;** how profit results from exploitation—the extraction of value from labor—through low wages, overwork, and bad working conditions; and how accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few reinforces this cycle.
- **Avoid simply naming bad conditions or starting with who is exploited.**
  - Connect bad conditions to the wider pattern of a wealthy class profiteering from workers.
  - Galvanize people into action by starting with the exploitative pattern, *then* talking about the impacts on workers.
- **Keep the focus on extracting profit and accumulating power.**
  - Avoid framing exploitation as simply the result of individual bad bosses. Instead, keep systems in view by connecting the exploiters to profit motive and systemic mechanisms like control of resources and influence over policy.
- **Pair explanations with solutions that make change feel possible.**
  - Solutions can include collective bargaining, stronger labor laws, and alternative cooperative ownership models.

### What this looks like:

*Many large manufacturing corporations keep wages low to protect their profits. They weaken safety standards to cut costs. They oppose unions to stay in control. This is how wealth is taken away from manufacturing workers and directed upward—because the economy is designed to put profits before people. Manufacturing workers build this country, but a wealthy few take most of the wealth they create. When we organize, demand stronger labor laws, and build worker-owned businesses, we can reshape the system so everyone benefits, not just the wealthy few.*

## CHALLENGE 4

# People Sometimes Understand That Manufacturing Pollutes Locally but Don't See the Scale of the Problem Facing Workers and the Planet.

People often recognize that manufacturing can have harmful environmental impacts. In interviews and focus groups, our participants pointed to pollution, toxic waste, damage to surrounding ecosystems, and sometimes the health effects on local communities. At the same time, people sometimes recognize that manufacturing workers are exposed to toxic chemicals and face negative health effects from their working conditions. More generally, people can see that manufacturing workers often face dangerous working conditions and low pay. However, members of the public often talk about these harms in passive terms, as something that just happens to people and the surrounding environment. They don't tend to locate a shared, systemic cause to these problems.

Another related challenge is that people tend to think of the solutions to poor working conditions and pollution in narrow, disconnected ways. Environmental impacts are often understood as localized problems or one-off events. This takes people to solutions like cleaning up a river or punishing a particular company for dumping toxic waste. On the other hand, unhealthy working conditions are often understood as the backdrop against which individuals should work hard to earn themselves a better, safer job. In neither case are people thinking about a large-scale industrial policy agenda that would improve outcomes for people and the environment.

This fragmented understanding creates a major barrier to building support for a just transition. Without a shared explanation that links environmental degradation and worker exploitation to the same underlying forces, people lack a vision of how manufacturing could be reorganized to serve both the planet and working people. Climate solutions can appear to threaten jobs, while labor protections can seem unrelated to environmental repair. When the shared system-level causes remain invisible, the idea of a just transition can feel abstract, unrealistic, or zero-sum.

## **Recommendation: Use the Metaphor of Rebalancing to Make the Case for a Just Transition.**

Start by asking people to imagine a future where society is rebalanced, stabilizing ecosystems and lifting working people up with good jobs while bringing down corporate profits. Make it clear that this future is one where the decisions we make as a society prioritize the balance of the natural world and the economy. Describe the concrete material outcomes of these decisions like clean air, improved water quality, and regenerated soil. Talk about how, in this future, renewable energy industries and green technology will thrive, providing the needed energy and resources without tipping the scales against workers or the environment. We can describe this vision without using terms like “just transition” or “climate justice.”

However, offering a vision alone is not enough. We must provide a critique of how things are now, talking about how the practices of large corporations harm workers and pollute our communities. Meet this critique with an urgent call to collective action, using the rebalancing metaphor. We can rebalance society away from corporate profit, toward people and the environment. This means making big investment in green industries and pathways to train in the good jobs these industries rely on.

### **Why It Works**

The rebalancing metaphor helps people understand that today's problems are not isolated failures but the result of a system that has tipped too far in one direction. By naming imbalances in wealth and power, communicators can appeal to the intuitive solution of stabilizing the system. Balance is widely understood as responsible, sustainable, and desirable. This strategy works to build support for just transition policy because it offers a common, large-scale, systemic explanation for harms that people already recognize but see as separate. Our research shows that while people do not automatically connect profiteering with environmental degradation, they sometimes see the connection between profiteering and bad working conditions in manufacturing. The rebalancing metaphor builds directly on this understanding. By explaining and emphasizing the imbalances of wealth and power, as well as connecting pollution and worker exploitation to the same root cause, this strategy helps people see environmental harm and labor injustice as intertwined. This helps build support for win-win solutions, rather than reinforcing zero-sum thinking about climate and jobs.

### **How to Use It in Manufacturing Communications**

- **Use the rebalancing metaphor throughout messages.**
  - The metaphor helps connect the domains of environment and jobs, which otherwise seem separate or even in conflict to people, especially in manufacturing.
  - Integrate the metaphor throughout each step of the framed message—from the initial vision of a rebalanced future to the critique of the skewed status quo, ending with the call to action to tip the scales in the favor of workers and our planet.
- **Lead with a call to imagine a better future, one where society is rebalanced.**
  - Describe a future where clean industries thrive, workers have good jobs, and natural systems are stabilized.
- **Locate imbalance in systems driven by profit.**
  - Make clear that systems are currently “skewed” toward short-term corporate profit, leading to worker exploitation and environmental destruction.
  - Name fossil fuel extraction and short-term profit as destabilizing forces.
- **End with a call to action.**
  - Emphasize that rebalancing requires taking action now—regulating corporations, investing in green industries, and creating clear training pathways for workers.

### What this looks like:

*Imagine a future where manufacturing works for people and the planet. Clean energy industries thrive. Manufacturing workers have good jobs with fair wages and safe conditions. Our air and water are clean, and our communities are healthy. That future is within reach, but getting there means confronting what is holding us back. Right now, the scales are tipped. Corporations chase short-term profit by keeping wages low, cutting safety standards, and burning fossil fuels that pollute the communities where manufacturing workers live. Worker wellbeing and environmental health are being sacrificed for the same reason and by the same forces. But we can rebalance this. By investing in green manufacturing, creating real pathways for workers to train in clean energy jobs, and holding corporations accountable for pollution and exploitation, we can tip the scales back toward working people and the natural world.*

## CHALLENGE 5

# Unions Are Supported in Principle but Seen as Outdated or Ineffective in Manufacturing Today.

People generally express support for unions. However, people don't tend to understand how unions work, how they built the strength of manufacturing in the past, or why manufacturing unions are necessary today.

Instead, unions are often thought of as an opportunity for workers to have a voice or come together, without a clear sense of how they shift power or produce change. In some cases, unions are understood primarily as a thing of the past, relevant in an earlier era of manufacturing but unnecessary today. People are also sometimes skeptical about their impact and relevance or suspect that they exist simply to collect dues without supporting workers.

While the general support for unions is an opportunity for communicators, this lack of understanding about how they work and how they leverage power creates a barrier. Even when people recognize that the system is rigged against workers, they struggle to imagine feasible solutions that match the scale of the problem. This can leave unions sounding either too small to matter or too vague to inspire action.

Next, we offer two related but unique recommendations to address this challenge by building support for labor unions and creating a sense that collective change is possible. These frames work well together and do helpful work on their own.

## **Recommendation: Talk about How Workers Should Get a *Fair Return* in the Economy.**

Communicators should appeal to *Fairness* as reciprocity—the idea that people contribute to the economy, and the economy should work for them in return. The idea of a *Fair Return* is not just about money or tax contribution but about support, resources, and care more generally. Talk about the valuable contributions we all make—through taking care of people, doing our jobs,

or helping out in the community—and the social policies that we deserve. In contrast, talk about how the wealthy and powerful few are receiving far more than they put in.

This value of a *Fair Return* should be applied at the level of the economy, not just individual workplaces. Instead of focusing narrowly on the return from employers to workers, the frame should emphasize the ethical imperative that the economic system as a whole delivers a *Fair Return* for the value we all create.

### Why It Works

The value of a *Fair Return* resonates strongly in manufacturing, where people already recognize that the work is difficult and dangerous, and the workers are often underpaid. Many people also see manufacturing as a symbol of the whole economy. Because of that, it is easy to move the conversation from problems in one manufacturing workplace to problems in the entire economy. When we do this, we help people see the structural problems that affect all of us and the need for widespread collective action to meet this.

By emphasizing the gap between what manufacturing workers contribute and what they receive, the frame makes inequality feel unjust rather than inevitable. It galvanizes support for unions as a collective tool for correcting this unfairness in manufacturing and beyond.

### How to Use It in Manufacturing Communications

- **Emphasize that *Fairness* is a shared social value.**
  - Talk about a *Fair Return*—meaning if we contribute to society, we should be able to live well.
  - Emphasize all the different ways that people make contributions, including outside formal employment like family care work. This sets up a broad and inclusive notion of economic contribution.
- **Talk about how this value is currently not upheld.**
  - Make it clear that manufacturing workers help make the economy run but are not getting a *Fair Return*.
- **Point to unions as way to increase fairness.**
  - Talk about how unions work, through contracts and strikes, to make sure workers get the fairness they deserve in the form of higher wages, expanded benefits, and safer working conditions.
- **Highlight that union gains often extend beyond union members.**
  - Talk about the way unions improve fairness for workers across entire industries.

### What this looks like:

*Manufacturing workers help keep our economy running, and the economy should work for them in return. But too many manufacturing workers are paid low wages, work in unsafe conditions, and have no benefits to fall back on. That's not a fair return. Unions are one of the best tools we have to create a fairer system by winning better pay, safer workplaces, and stronger benefits for workers both in the union and across the whole industry.*

## **Recommendation: Be Specific about How Manufacturing Unions Build and Leverage Power in a Rigged System.**

Communicators should explain specific mechanisms through which manufacturing unions build and use power—especially securing contracts and going on strike—rather than relying on general language about worker power or voice. Because many people believe a powerful few are rigging the system for their own benefit but struggle to see how things can change, it's important to briefly explain how corporations rig the system. Then we can explain the mechanisms by which unions can help unrig the system. Frame unions as a direct and proportionate response to concentrated corporate power.

### **Why It Works**

While people sense that unions can do something, they often cannot articulate what that is. Frames that explain concrete mechanisms—such as how contracts legally bind employers or how strikes disrupt production and create leverage—powerfully build support for unions and increase the belief that change is possible. This is because people can see how they themselves might be able to effect change through unions. It is also because these mechanisms offer a solution that seems both feasible and ambitious enough to address the problem of a rigged system.

Being specific about the mechanisms of unions is much more effective than simply noting that workers have power in numbers. Talking about worker power or worker voice can increase support for unions, but it doesn't otherwise move thinking or galvanize people. That's because people already believe that we are stronger together—they just aren't sure how.

Importantly, these frames need to be paired with an explanation of corporate system-rigging. Only when people understand both the problem (rigged systems) and the mechanism (what unions actually do) do unions become a plausible tool for change.

### **How to Use It in Manufacturing Communications**

- **Use *System Is Rigged* framing.**
  - Explain how corporations rig the system and how unions can unrig it.
  - Present unions as a key solution to corporate power consolidation.
- **Talk about how unions benefit workers beyond a single workplace.**
  - Talk about how union contracts raise wages and standards across the manufacturing sector by pressuring other employers to match them.
- **Get specific about how unions work.**
  - Explain how strikes halt production and force powerful actors to respond to demands.
  - Describe how workers can negotiate for better contracts through their unions.

- **Use manufacturing-relevant examples of strikes.**
  - Include examples of successful strikes to show that unions have already shaped the sector's working conditions and to demonstrate labor power.
- **When talking about historical strikes, explicitly connect past successes to present conditions.**
  - This can prevent the tendency for people to think unions are outdated.

**What this looks like:**

*Corporations rig the system by keeping manufacturing wages low and weakening labor laws to protect their profits. Without something pushing back, that doesn't change. Manufacturing unions are that pushback. When workers go on strike, they halt production and force corporations to negotiate. When they win contracts, employers are legally required to honor better wages and safer conditions. This lifts standards across the whole industry—not just for union members—because other employers are pressured to match these gains. This is how manufacturing workers unrig a system that was designed against them: By organizing the collective power to make real demands and win.*

# Conclusion

Manufacturing represents many of the core failures of our current economic system. Workers are segregated into unequal roles along lines of race and gender, exposed to dangerous and degrading conditions, and denied a fair share of the value they create. At the same time, manufacturing is a major source of environmental harm. The sector pollutes air and water, degrades ecosystems, and puts both workers and surrounding communities at risk.

Yet public understanding of these problems remains fragmented. Individualistic thinking about self-made success obscures the role of policy and power in shaping work. The mindset that the economy is a natural force makes segregation, exploitation, and pollution seem inevitable. And reactionary narratives pit workers against one another, making it harder to work together to change the systems that exploit them. When these patterns go unchallenged, it becomes difficult to imagine a manufacturing future that is safer, fairer, and more sustainable.

This brief shows that these public understandings are not written in stone. By applying evidence-based framing strategies, communicators can help people see manufacturing as part of a deliberately designed system—one that can be redesigned. When we employ these strategies, we can build a powerful public mandate for change by focusing on the following approaches:

- Appealing to solidarity among the 99% shifts attention from individual grit to collective power.
- Explaining occupational segregation through historical failure and calling for fairness as equity helps us talk about systemic problems in manufacturing that require systemic solutions.
- Explaining exploitation through the pyramid metaphor and foregrounding the profit motive makes concrete how wealth is extracted upward and how workers, as the foundation of our current economy, are downtrodden but should be empowered.
- Using the metaphor of rebalancing connects worker wellbeing and environmental sustainability, showing that both have been undermined by the same concentration of wealth and power, which leads to support for a just transition.
- Being specific about how unions work to unrig the system through contracts and strikes resolves skepticism by making worker power concrete and credible.

Taken together, these strategies point toward a different future for manufacturing. In that future, workers are no longer segregated, put at risk, or exploited—they share fairly in the value they create. Manufacturing no longer destabilizes communities and ecosystems but operates within balanced systems that sustain both people and the planet. Power is no longer concentrated in the hands of a wealthy few but redistributed through strong unions, democratic input, worker ownership, and policies that prioritize human and ecological wellbeing over short-term profit. Manufacturing, long treated as symbolic of the economy as it is, can instead become a powerful example of what the economy could be: One where workers thrive, communities are healthy, and the systems we rely on are designed to work for us all.

# Endnotes

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Cohen, E., Sanderson, B., Volmert, A., Insouvanh, K., John, J. E. FrameWorks Institute. (2026). *Producing Power: Applying Framing Recommendations about Work to the Manufacturing Sector*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

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