



Reframing Work, Rebalancing Power

Three Framing Strategies That Connect
Jobs with Economic Justice

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Introduction

In the United States today, a period of rapid technological, economic, and political change is having a huge impact on how we work. Now, more than ever, we need a fundamental shift in power toward working people rather than corporations and the wealthy. With framing strategies that connect jobs to economic justice, we can build support for that shift.

We need to tell a new story about work—one that addresses the long-standing structural issues we have in our economy and meets this particular political moment.

New policies on labor, trade, and immigration are affecting workers across industries. Executive orders that weaken diversity, equity, and inclusion programs are removing important labor protections against unfair treatment.¹ Tariff policies that were introduced with promises about reigniting American manufacturing have instead been accompanied by a steady decline in manufacturing jobs.² Deportation drives are causing widespread fear and threatening industries that depend on immigrant workers, such as child care.³ At the same time, the rapid growth of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in the workplace is causing many workers to worry about their futures.⁴

Some recent laws *were* meant to protect workers and create good jobs, including the Inflation Reduction Act, the CHIPS and Science Act, and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. But many of these efforts are now being weakened or reversed. Meanwhile, long-standing problems remain. Many workers face job insecurity, stagnant wages, income inequality, and “occupational segregation,” which pushes women, people of color, and immigrants into lower-paid jobs.

To fix these problems, we need major changes to our economy. We need to end exploitative practices, make it easier for workers to join unions, support alternatives to corporate ownership, break up monopolies, and use the tax system to better share wealth.

However, the possibility of change is undermined by Americans’ deep assumptions about work. The mindsets we hold shape our visions for change and how motivated we are to come together and fight for that change. At the moment, the idea of *Self-Makingness*—that it is up to individuals to work hard and make their own success in life—dominates how Americans think about work. People also often naturalize work, assuming that men and women are biologically suited to different types of jobs. Existing ways of thinking about racism and sexism focus on personal attitudes, making it hard to see how racism and sexism work through our systems and laws. These ways of thinking make it harder to see the need for large policy changes and a shift in power.

At the same time, many Americans think about the *economy* in more structural ways. They increasingly see the economy as a system designed by people and often rigged to benefit those at the top.

With the right framing strategies, we can pull this structural thinking about the economy into people's thinking about work. By connecting jobs to the wider economic system, we can build support for the big, collective solutions we need.

This brief lays out framing strategies—developed through three years of research in collaboration with field and movement leaders—that bridge the gap between jobs and the economy. They offer a new way to talk about work: Not as individual success and failure stories, but as part of a system shaped by power. By moving away from the myth of self-made success and toward a focus on how the system works, we can help people understand the real causes of workers' struggles and inspire collective action. This is how we begin to rebalance power in our economy.

This report is organized into three sections:

- 1. Target Ideas.** We begin with a description of the ideas about work that the new framing strategy is designed to communicate.
- 2. Key Mindsets to Consider.** This section outlines some of the key cultural mindsets—the implicit assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of thinking—that people use to think about work in the United States.
- 3. The New Framing Approach: From individuals striving in jobs to economic systems shaped by power.** In this section, we outline the new approach and describe three specific strategies for executing this approach: Highlight how our systems channel people into different sectors, name and explain exploitative forces, and call for collective worker action as a response to a rigged system. Each of these strategies comes with several framing recommendations that can be used on their own but that work best in concert with one another.

About This Project

[WorkShift](#) is a multiyear project designed to build public support for the restructuring of our labor systems, which is needed to counter exploitation and create a just and sustainable society—with a particular focus on care work and manufacturing. WorkShift is guided by an advisory board of advocates, scholars, organizers, and other stakeholders: Ben Freeman, Stephen Herzenberg, Livia Lam, Chirag Mehta, Ruth Milkman, Vicki Shabo, Jason Tomlinson, Jaimie Worker, and Chris Zepada-Millan. [Read more about our advisory board here.](#) We thank the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the Square One Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, and the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation for their generous support.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The framing strategies are based on three years of research involving mixed methods and deep collaboration with our advisory board and other stakeholders:

- **To understand how the field is thinking and talking about work**
 - **Stakeholder interviews.** We conducted 24 one-on-one interviews with a range of stakeholders in the field, including academics, policy experts, and worker advocates. Each interview was 60–90 minutes and conducted on Zoom.
 - **Literature review.** We reviewed academic and gray literature to support our understanding of current problems and policy solutions.
 - **Field frame analysis.** We analyzed communication materials from 37 organizations focused on work and labor issues, including unions; workforce development organizations; and a range of think tanks, community organizers, and industry groups.
 - **Media content scan.** We analyzed news sources to assess media framing in particular areas, such as unions, strikes, and the “great resignation” (the trend in which employees resigned from their jobs en masse during the COVID-19 pandemic).
- **To understand cultural mindsets about work**
 - **In-depth interviews.** We conducted 50 one-on-one, two-hour-long, in-depth, semistructured interviews with members of the US public from May 1 to July 5, 2023. These explored how people thought about issues relating to work, including care work and manufacturing.
 - **Cultural mindset surveys.** After analyzing the interviews, we designed and fielded three descriptive surveys in November 2023, with 3,741 participants, that examined cultural mindsets on work in general, care work, and manufacturing.
- **To develop frames**
 - **Communication tasks.** From our understanding of public thinking and the field’s analysis, we identified tasks that frames needed to accomplish. These tasks are an expression of what we wanted new frames to be able to shift in public thinking (for instance, “to build public understanding of how political decisions structure employment, shape working conditions, and weaken worker power”).
 - **Frame development.** We developed candidate frames—including values, explanations, explanatory metaphors, and issue frames—to address these tasks.
 - **Creative sessions.** We held several workshops and sessions to generate and critique ideas with members of our advisory board and creative professionals, including scriptwriters, filmmakers, comedians, and cultural strategists.
- **To test frames**
 - **Focus groups.** We ran nine focus groups in October 2024—three focused on care work, three on manufacturing, and three on work in general. These focus groups were designed to explore thinking about work in a social setting and also to test candidate frames.
 - **Survey experiments.** We fielded and analyzed four nationally representative survey experiments between March and October 2025, testing 53 frames with 15,185 members of the American public. The sample recruited for the experiments reflects key demographic characteristics of the American public, with quotas set for age, gender, race/ethnicity, household income, education level, and political party affiliation.

For more detail on the methods we used to understand field framing and public thinking, refer to the [Methods Supplement](#) that accompanied the publication of our first phase of research, [Self-Made Individuals and Just Labor Systems](#). For more detail on the frames we developed and tested, refer to this [supplement](#).

What Are We Trying to Communicate?

Five Target Ideas

Five “target ideas” emerged from our interviews with stakeholders in the field and our literature review. These are ideas that the field wants to communicate to members of the public.

For more detail, [read them in full here](#).

- 1. Political decisions have weakened worker power and privileged large corporate actors.** Public policies and government decisions structure our economy, regulate industry, and shape jobs. These policies have created an economy in which many workers face stagnant wages, precarious employment, and poor working conditions—while corporate profits soar. The imbalance of power between workers and corporate employers is a result of deliberate decisions made by powerful actors in government and business.
- 2. Structural oppression shapes how society values different industries and who does which jobs.** Women, people of color, migrants, and youth are overrepresented in “lower-status” jobs, such as child care, factory floor jobs, and meat packing. Racism and sexism are prevalent in the workforce, and the system is rigged against workers when it comes to workplace discrimination. These structural patterns are built into our economy’s historical design—shaped by slavery, colonialism, and patriarchy—and they continue to be maintained by powerful political and economic elites.
- 3. We need to shift power in favor of workers rather than corporations and the wealthy.** Without a shift in power, we will change little by creating “more good jobs” or helping particular groups of people become more “economically mobile.” All workers need more choice and autonomy over how they spend time, what work they do, and how they care for their families and communities. We can shift the balance of power by changing labor laws and regulations, creating alternative ownership structures, overhauling the job training system, reforming the tax system, and enforcing antitrust laws.
- 4. Stronger unions are a key way to build worker power and improve working conditions.** Collective bargaining can help both union members and nonmembers, leading to binding changes in a firm, affecting a whole sector, and influencing politics. Union-coordinated apprenticeships and accreditations lead to higher racial and gender diversity in jobs, and union partnerships with employers can help skilled workers find dignified work. We need to make it easier for workers to form and join unions.

5. Changes to how we work must be situated within a broader vision of economic justice.

In a just economy, we should be able to do the following:

- a.** Meet people's needs, whatever their work status, through measures that make life more secure for all Americans, such as universal child care and affordable housing.
- b.** Provide a job guarantee for those who want to work.
- c.** Decide what labor is socially valuable, increasing pay and support for valuable labor like care work.
- d.** Implement just transition policies that are good for workers and the environment, including massive investment in green, sustainable industries; pathways for workers to train in those industries; and federal investment to support workers and communities affected by the transition.

How Are Members of the American Public Thinking about Work and Labor? Key Mindsets to Consider

Through in-depth interviews with a cross-section of the American public, we identified numerous key mindsets people draw on when thinking about work.

WHAT ARE CULTURAL MINDSETS?

Cultural mindsets (or mindsets, for short) are deep, assumed patterns of thinking that shape how we understand the world and how we make decisions. In shaping how we think, mindsets give rise to our beliefs, attitudes, and opinions, and they inform our decisions and behaviors. In contrast to public opinion research, which tells us *what* people think about specific issues or policies, cultural mindset research tells us *how* people think about an issue: the ways our tacit assumptions about the world shape how we make sense of issues, how we draw (or don't draw) connections between issues, and how we reason about needed solutions.

Two Clusters of Mindsets about Work

Cultural mindsets about work tend to fall into two groupings, or clusters. The more dominant cluster is unproductive, characterized by ***Individualistic, Naturalistic, and Reactionary*** thinking—such as the mindsets that individuals are responsible for their own success, that men and women are biologically suited for different jobs, and that the economy is a natural force best left to its own devices. When thinking with these mindsets, people want to uphold the status quo and tend to defend existing, unequal power structures.

The other cluster is productive, characterized by ***Collective, Structural, and Designed*** thinking—such as the mindsets that workers are stronger together, that structural racism shapes work, and that the economy is a designed system governed by laws and policies. When thinking with these mindsets, people are much more receptive to the need for structural change.

It is important to stress that both mindset clusters are available to everyone and that people move back and forth between them, seeing things sometimes from one perspective, sometimes from the other. **These clusters describe ways of thinking, not sets of people.** For advocates, organizers, and researchers trying to build more just labor systems, the strategic importance of the clusters is clear: Through our framing strategies, we want to avoid reinforcing *Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary* thinking and instead build and extend people's *Collective, Structural, and Designed* understandings of work.

Key Trends in How People Think about Work

While the clusters give us an overview of public thinking about work, there are particular mindsets within the clusters that present important challenges and opportunities for communicators:

- **Individualism is the biggest challenge.** The concept of *Self-Makingness* is foundational to how people make sense of work. The key assumption of this mindset is that individuals are responsible for making their own success through hard work, grit, and determination. People can also embrace *Opportunity Structures* thinking—the idea that opportunities are shaped and constrained by factors outside an individual's control. But people often point to individuals as being responsible for “rising above” such constraints. Individualistic thinking is a challenge because it stands in the way of embracing collective action and policy change.
- **The economy is often thought of as a designed system.** While people think about work individualistically, people also strongly endorse the *Economy as Designed* mindset, seeing the economy as a human-made system, shaped by laws and policies. This is a helpful way of thinking, as it comes with the assumption that we have agency in how the system is designed and are therefore able (at least in theory) to redesign it for the better. People can also draw on a *Market Naturalism* mindset, where economic forces are understood as natural and outside of human control, but naturalistic thinking is weaker when people think about the economy than when they think about work.
While people think about the economy in helpful, structural ways, they don't tend to automatically extend this thinking to jobs. With the framing strategies we share here, we can help people see that the same forces shaping our economy also shape our jobs.
- **Several mindsets deny or diminish structural racism.** The role of structural racism in shaping work is not well understood, particularly by white Americans. People often draw on the *Discrimination as Interpersonal* mindset, assuming that workplace discrimination is just a matter of how people talk and behave toward one another—rather than being baked into institutions, policies, and laws.

In addition, several mindsets serve to diminish or deny the existence of racism:

- *Reverse Racism at Work*—the mindset that society has overcorrected on race, such that white people now face disadvantage at work.
- *Racial Progress*—the mindset that racism is no longer a problem because we have already made enough progress.
- *Class Not Race*—the mindset that disadvantage at work is more connected to class than it is to race.
- *Gender Not Race*—the mindset that disadvantage at work is more connected to gender than it is to race.
- **Gendered thinking about work is deep and pervasive.** The naturalistic *Gender Essentialism* mindset—the idea that men and women are biologically different and suited to different types of work—justifies gender inequities. For instance, people use this mindset to explain why there are more women in care work (because “women are naturally more caring”) and why there are more men in construction (because “men are naturally stronger”).
- **People across the political spectrum agree that workers are stronger together.** When thinking with the *Stronger Together* mindset, people assume workers have more strength collectively than they do on their own. Specifically, people assume workers are stronger through unions. In our survey, we found that this mindset was endorsed, on average, by both Republicans and Democrats—a finding echoed by recent polling that shows continued bipartisan support for unions.⁵ The *Stronger Together* mindset is productive but also vague, in that people often don’t have a sense of *how* workers are stronger through unions.

The New Framing Approach: From Individuals Striving in Jobs to Economic Systems Shaped by Power

When we talk about jobs, we should also talk about the larger economic system that shapes them. Otherwise, we can easily activate dominant and unhelpful ways of thinking—such as the ideas that individuals make their own success through grit and determination or that men and women are naturally, biologically suited to different types of work. These ways of thinking can hide the real forces that shape people's opportunities.

Many factors that affect work are systemic. These include companies putting profit ahead of workers and the racism and sexism that are built into our laws and policies. Focusing only on individuals' experiences and available opportunities also hides the power of workers acting *together* to demand change.

The big framing move we need to make is to connect jobs with our economy. We need to show that the same forces shaping our economy are also shaping who works in which jobs and how workers are treated. When we do this, we help people think at the level of *systems, not individuals*. We can expose the power dynamics of those systems and show how they can be redesigned with working people at the center. This counteracts people's tendency to assume it's up to individuals to improve their lot, or to understand the current situation as being “natural” and unchangeable.

Three Strategies to Reframe Work

We can execute this framing move with three distinct framing strategies. First, we can explain how our systems channel people into particular jobs, shining a light on structural racism and sexism in the economy. Second, we can show how power and wealth are concentrated in ways that exploit workers. Third, we can call for a fairer balance of power through large-scale collective action.

These strategies lead people to understand the structural forces that shape work, and they orient people toward the possibility of solutions through collective worker power. In each, there are several tools and tips that can help us with that framing strategy.

The different strategies will be appropriate for different contexts and communicators. They cover distinct issue areas: occupational segregation, exploitation, and collective worker power. Each strategy can be taken as an open toolbox, with any single framing recommendation within the strategy having its own merit. However, for maximum impact, we encourage using the *whole* strategy for talking about the issue at hand, and, when possible, using *all three* of these strategies across the breadth of communications.

The examples given below are not meant to be prescriptive—use the frames in ways that fit into your communications, are suitable for your audiences, and fit your authentic voice.

STRATEGY 1

Highlight how our systems channel people into different sectors.

When we *explain* why certain groups of people work certain jobs, we reveal a problematic design feature of our economy. This helps people think at the level of sectors and systems rather than individual workers. It also builds understanding of how structural racism and sexism shape the jobs we do and how desirable those jobs are. The most effective way to talk about this is to appeal to the value of *Fairness* and then explain how our system pushes people into different jobs.

Recommendation: Lead explanations with the value of *Fairness*.

What to do:

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. By talking about fairness like this, it's possible to unpack the concept of equity without using the word “equity.”⁶

It is vital to pair this value with an explanation. With the value, we make the case that the distribution of jobs in our society should be fair and equitable, but this alone is not enough. We must follow this with an explanation of how policy decisions and system design shape opportunities.

Why it works:

Across issues, we have found that the value of *Fairness* is helpful for building support for different and more inclusive systems.⁷ This is because *Fairness* is easily associated with collectivist and structural mindsets, focusing people on the distribution of opportunities and outcomes for different groups of people in society.

When we explain occupational segregation with the value of *Fairness*, we can leverage this helpful structural, collectivist thinking. Leading with fairness helps us boost the understanding that the economy is a designed system and that structural racism shapes work. It also helps us build support for collective action through labor unions.

The value of *fairness* also works because it is motivating; people want a fairer system. But we must pair this with an explanation of the structural causes of inequities. If we appeal to fairness without explaining the causes of inequities, there is a risk that people fill in the gaps with their own explanations, such as the racist stereotype that Black communities have fewer opportunities because they don't value hard work.⁸

What it looks like:

Fairness means everyone has access to good jobs with good pay, regardless of their background.

That means ensuring opportunities that acknowledge the real differences in where people start out—differences shaped by gender, race, or zip code.

Recommendation: *Explain, don't just state, the facts.*

What to do:

Don't just state the patterns of occupational segregation—for instance, that “women of color and immigrants are overrepresented in care work” or that “Black workers are less likely to be in management.” Instead, explain how these patterns have come about through policy decisions, historical forces, and system design. Whenever possible, give examples of the types of policies and practices that sustain these patterns.

These explanations are most effective when they come with a corresponding solution. Show how we can address occupational segregation with changes to policies and practices.

Communicators can decide whether it's appropriate to use the term “occupational segregation,” based on their goals and audiences. If used, the term should always be accompanied by a careful articulation of what it means.

Why this works:

Neither the term nor the facts convey *why* occupational segregation happens. If we state patterns of who is working which jobs, *without explaining why*, then people can dismiss the concept completely or make sense of these facts in problematic ways.

For instance, people draw on the *Self-Makingness* mindset, reasoning that such patterns must be the result of individual choice and effort. In connection with gender, people sometimes reach for the *Gender Essentialism* mindset, which leads them to see occupational disparities as the result of natural differences between men and women. All of these mindsets mask the role of structural racism and sexism in shaping what jobs are considered desirable and, therefore, who does them.

Explaining *how* these patterns come about prevents people from making sense of the facts through these unproductive mindsets.

Offering solutions to the problem is important because it helps deepen people's understanding of the cause-and-effect relationship. It can also give people hope about the possibility of change, rather than making the problem seem too deep and structural to surmount.

What it looks like:

In a fair economy, all workers have access to good jobs with good pay and strong protections. But right now, some groups of workers, such as Black women and immigrant women, are concentrated in low-wage jobs with poor working conditions. This is the result of discriminatory policies and practices that steer certain workers into lower-paid work, block access to better opportunities, and systematically undervalue the jobs that women of color are most likely to hold. We can create a fairer system by ... [fill in with the solutions you are advocating for].

Recommendation: Use *historical explanations* to emphasize how structural racism and sexism shape jobs and what still needs to change.

What to do:

Show the throughlines from the past to the present by linking today's occupational segregation to historical causes. Talk about how the patterns of who works which jobs are the legacy of practices that steered people into certain jobs and kept them out of others. For instance, we can talk about segregation laws, sexist and racist hiring standards, and educational barriers. Show how inequity is further reinforced through low pay and poor working conditions.

Be bold in talking about this as an ongoing problem that we have failed to address over time. But make sure to follow the problem with solutions. Show that people can come together today to change the system by demanding better laws and policies.

Why it works:

By clearly illustrating the connection between the past and present, we can push back against the thinking that racism and sexism are artifacts of the past. Instead, we can increase understanding of the ongoing and structural nature of these patterns.

Historical explanations of occupational segregation strengthen the mindset that structural racism shapes work. This is particularly effective when we emphasize how this is an *ongoing problem* we have faced in the past and still face today. When we talk about our continued failure to address occupational segregation over time, we make it crystal clear that it is still a significant and pressing problem. This is important because it prevents people from dismissing the issue on the grounds that racism and sexism have largely been addressed.

We also tried a strategy of appealing to the idea that we have made some progress, then stressing that we still have a long way to go, but it was far less effective. When our frames acknowledge the progress we have already made, there's a risk of downplaying the seriousness of the issue and the need for collective action to address it.

What to watch out for:

Talking about the ongoing problems of structural racism and sexism in our society can lead to fatalism about the possibility of change. It can make people feel that the weight of history is too heavy to surmount. In our focus groups, participants of color sometimes reacted against the implication that opportunities are *determined* by racism, because they felt this undermined free will and agency.

We can address this by checking that our frames aren't suggesting that people's lives are wholly determined by systems. For instance, we should avoid making generalizations that sound like they apply to *all* women or *all* people of color. Instead, we can talk about "trends" and "patterns" and why some people might be "more likely" to work in certain types of jobs. We can also talk clearly about the solutions we need and how people can play a role in bringing about those solutions.

For instance, we can talk about people coming together to demand better laws, policies, and workplace practices. This is important because it shows how people have agency to change the system rather than being determined by it. By offering examples, we can avert fatalism and motivate people to push for change.

What it looks like:

Example 1:

Fairness means all workers get the opportunities and support, whatever their background or starting place. But some workers are less likely to have those opportunities. For instance, women are more likely to be concentrated in low-wage jobs because of sexist hiring standards and policies that historically steered women away from other fields—patterns that persist today through low pay and poor working conditions. We can create a fairer system by ... [fill in with the solutions you are advocating for].

Example 2:

Fairness means everyone has access to good jobs with good pay, regardless of where they start in life. But some workers are less likely to have access to those opportunities. For instance, people of color are more likely to find themselves in the lowest-paid, most dangerous jobs—and this is not by accident. Racist and discriminatory policies and practices have long shaped who gets which opportunities. These patterns continue to be reinforced through low pay and poor protections today. We can create a fairer system by ... [fill in with the solutions you are advocating for].

Example 3:

Fairness means all workers get the opportunities and support they need, whatever their race, gender, or country of origin. But immigrants are more likely to end up in the most exploitative jobs because policies and legal structures have long restricted their rights at work, leaving them vulnerable to employers who profit from keeping wages low. We can create a fairer system by ... [fill in with the solutions you are advocating for].

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: A WINNING FRAME ON OCCUPATIONAL SEGREGATION

Fairness means all workers should have access to good jobs and a living wage—regardless of their race, gender, or starting place. But today, women of color and immigrants are overrepresented in low-paid care work, and this isn't accidental. This is the legacy of a long history of racism and sexism. Historically, people of color, women, and immigrants have been channeled into lower-paying, lower-status jobs through discriminatory laws and practices that restricted opportunities. These structural barriers continue today and concentrate groups of workers in low-wage occupations with few worker protections.

To create a fair system, we need policies that give all workers real choice in the work they do and strong protections on the job—regardless of race, gender, or background. These policies include ... [fill in with the solutions you are advocating for].

SPOTLIGHT ON YOUTH: TALK ABOUT HOW SOME YOUNG PEOPLE FACE A PARTICULARLY STEEP CLIMB INTO WORK.

Patterns of occupational segregation begin in youth. Young people who already face barriers because of their race, class, or gender are more likely to be channeled into low-wage jobs with fewer protections. For instance, young women without college degrees are more likely to be in jobs like customer service and retail, while young men are more likely to end up in jobs like trucking or construction.⁹

Again, we can bring equity into the conversation without using the term “equity.” We can talk about how some groups of young people face a particularly *Steep Climb* into work and therefore need tailored support. In previous work, we found the *Steep Climb* metaphor effective for talking about how some young people experience a steeper path to adulthood because they don’t have the same connections and support that other young people have. Here, we tested the metaphor in the context of young people navigating their way into the world of work. We used it to talk about the need for equitable solutions to support all young people—like expanding apprenticeships; using tax credits to encourage employers to hire and train young workers; and instituting better work policies like flexible hours, mental health support, and mentorship.

For some audiences, the *Steep Climb* metaphor weakens the idea that men and women are naturally suited to different jobs. It also increases support for youth-focused policies like offering mental health benefits. We found it was effective across different age groups and worked particularly well for Republican-leaning participants.

The *Steep Climb* metaphor works well because it shows that the difficulty is in the terrain—not the person climbing it. This makes it easier to talk about structural barriers rather than individual failures. It can be applied to different groups of young people who face a harder path into work.

What it looks like:

All young people need opportunities and strong supports on the journey into work, but some face a much steeper climb than others. Young people of color, immigrant youth, and those from low-income families may lack professional networks and face discrimination in hiring. The jobs they get don’t always pay enough to support them while they gain experience. We can make changes that help all young people have the support they need when they start working and as they learn and grow. We can expand apprenticeship programs, offer living wages, introduce work policies like flexible schedules, and offer mental health support. When all young people have these kinds of supports, everyone benefits now and in the future.

STRATEGY 2

Name and explain exploitative forces.

When we explain how systems are designed to help the wealthy and powerful profit from the exploitation of working people, we can galvanize collective action.

Recommendation: Use the *pyramid* metaphor to show that exploitation is a structural—and changeable—feature of the economy.

What to do:

Talk about how large corporations are building an economy shaped like a pyramid, where wealth is concentrated at the top and the wealthy get there by climbing on the backs of working people. Be clear that the economy is actively designed and maintained in this shape so the wealthy and powerful can profit off the labor of working people. To emphasize the active nature of this, we can use the present continuous tense (“is being built”) rather than the simple present tense (“is built”).

Be clear that this pyramid economy is not inevitable and that the economy can be rebuilt differently. Offer details on what solutions are needed. For instance, talk about how workers can come together in unions and create more worker-owned businesses. Be clear that this can happen when working people *unite across race*. For instance, describe how all working people—whether Black, white, or brown—are the real foundation of power. It is this foundation of power that can topple the pyramid and rebuild the economy.

Why it works:

This metaphor is a helpful way to talk about exploitation in our economy because it conveys that the system is designed and built. The shape of a pyramid is a clear visual illustration of the main dynamic of the system, and it helps increase understanding of exploitation. The idea that this is *constructed* maps easily to solutions that involve rebuilding the system in ways that redistribute power and wealth toward workers. An emphasis on system design and solutions helps show the agency people have to change the system.

When we explicitly talk about how workers across race are the foundation of the economy, we can avoid triggering zero-sum thinking about race. The *Reverse Racism* mindset can be cued by frames about exploitation and hardship—because of the idea that people must compete with one another when resources are scarce. We can avoid this by talking about the need for cooperation and collaboration to rebuild the system.

What it looks like:

Right now, our economy is shaped like a pyramid, with wealthy CEOs and corporations at the top, profiting off working people's labor, which is the real foundation of our economy. When workers unite in unions and fight for worker-owned businesses, we can knock down this pyramid and build a fair economy that works for everyone, not just the wealthy.

Recommendation: Explain how wealth enables exploitation.

What to do:

Explain how the rich and powerful often hoard wealth and profit from the work of others. Make it clear that this happens because of how our economic system is set up. Our laws and policies are designed to help large corporations and wealthy people get richer at the expense of workers.

To help people understand why the system needs to change, focus on groups in society rather than individuals. Talk about “the wealthy and powerful few” or “large corporations” that shape the system to benefit themselves. Show how these powerful groups influence laws and policies to protect their profits. For instance, talk about how they push for lower wages and weaker worker protections. Avoid blaming individual bosses or CEOs.

Follow this critique of wealth and power with a call for working people to come together and demand change.

This strategy for explaining exploitation is an alternative to the familiar strategy of talking about harmful effects on people. We should lead with a critique of *villains-in-systems* rather than leading with *workers-as-victims* of exploitation.

Why it works:

We need to show how our *systems* enable exploitation, instead of locating this problem in individuals. This builds understanding that the problem is structural and opens the door for solutions that redistribute power. Leading our explanations with *villains-in-systems* works because it is motivating; people recognize this pattern of exploitation and want to resist it. The frame aligns with the dominant mindset that the system is rigged for the few against the many.

If we blame individual bosses and leaders, then the obvious solution is simply to replace them with better people. This is unhelpful because it doesn’t change anything structurally.¹⁰

Similarly, if we lead explanations of exploitation by talking about *workers-as-victims*—stressing how underpaid and overworked workers are—this is less galvanizing than explanations of *villains-in-systems*. People don’t necessarily want to identify as passive victims, as that doesn’t inspire hope. It also carries the risk of naturalizing the problem, as if there will always be the “haves” and the “have-nots” and there’s nothing we can do about it. If we want to avoid this trap and motivate collective action, it’s better to frame working people as agents standing up to exploitative forces rather than as victims of them.

What it looks like:

Large corporations and wealthy CEOs have rigged our economy to funnel money straight to the top. They keep wages low while their own pay skyrockets, they fight unions that would give workers bargaining power, and they lobby for tax breaks that let them hoard even more wealth—all while pocketing the profits from our labor. This is how they’ve deliberately designed the system to benefit themselves. But we can change our laws and policies to put people first rather than profit. When workers come together to demand change, we can secure better wages and protections.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER: A WINNING FRAME ON EXPLOITATION

A fair economy would distribute power and wealth in ways that benefit everyone, not concentrate it at the top. Instead, large corporations are building our economy like a pyramid—CEOs and wealthy shareholders sit at the top, getting richer by climbing on the backs of working people at the bottom. The powerful few have designed the system this way on purpose so they can keep making money off the work we do. This isn't fair, and it doesn't have to be this way. All working people, regardless of race, gender, or immigrant status, are the foundation of this economy. When we join together in unions, start worker-owned businesses, and get corporations out of our elections, we can topple this unfair pyramid. We can rebuild an economy that spreads power and wealth fairly—an economy that actually works for all of us.

SPOTLIGHT ON AI: TALK ABOUT THE NEED FOR A *FAIR DISTRIBUTION OF POWER*, SO THAT WORKERS HAVE MORE SAY OVER HOW AI IS USED.

AI tools are rapidly changing the way people work. AI has been heralded as a technology that will bring widespread prosperity while freeing people up for more leisure time. It is also talked about as a job killer, making people redundant across a wide range of industries. The long-term trajectory is unknown, but one thing is clear: Working people themselves don't have much of a say in how it is being used. This ties in with the theme of *power* that threads through the framing strategies we share in this report. Our economy and the way we work is designed by the powerful, for the powerful, and AI is being developed along the same principle.

While AI wasn't a central focus of the WorkShift project, we have elsewhere explored how to talk about the social implications of AI and how to use [values to talk about transformative change](#) in technology and other issues. Here, we synthesize what we found on WorkShift with some of our recommendations from these other projects:

- **Talk about human involvement at every stage of AI.** We should take care to distinguish AI from human intelligence. One way to do this is to define it as a computer processing technology that identifies patterns in massive amounts of data. Another way to do this is to emphasize how people are involved in every step of AI's design, operation, and application. When we talk about human involvement, we can help people see the ongoing influence we have over AI technology rather than suggesting that we are simply at its mercy. Talking about human involvement also helps open the door for talking about how power and bias shape AI systems.
- **Use the *Amplify* metaphor to show how AI can increase harm to already marginalized communities.** When talking about the social impacts of AI, use real-life examples of how AI is being used for harm. Talk about how the high-speed processing capabilities of the technology can quickly reinforce—*Amplify*—the systemic biases in the data it uses. This helps people see AI as a social justice issue that must be addressed through greater regulation and other policy changes.
- **Call for a *Fair Distribution of Power*, such that workers have more influence over how AI is used.** Values can help us communicate the impact of AI on working people and the need for workers to have more power over how AI is used. Talking about a *Fair Distribution of Power* can help make the argument that a wealthy few currently unfairly control the development and use of AI—and that this should change. With this value, we can emphasize how the system is currently designed to privilege the already privileged, at the expense of workers. Distributing power more fairly would mean giving workers more power. That means workers having more power to keep tech corporations in check—for instance, by negotiating contracts that specify if and how AI is used in the workplace. The *Fair Distribution of Power* frame is particularly good at boosting structural mindsets about the economy, such as the idea that an economy is a designed system and that workers are exploited by corporate profit-seeking. This value frame helps connect AI to the wider dynamics of power in society and the solutions we need.

What it looks like:

A fair economy means workers have a voice in decisions that affect their jobs and lives. But right now, a small group of wealthy people are deciding how AI is built and used at work, without input from workers who could lose their jobs because of it. This is the result of a system built to put corporate profits ahead of people.

When profit comes first, workers get hurt. For example, a qualified job applicant might get passed over because their resume is missing certain keywords. Two people doing the same job might get paid differently because of a biased algorithm. If no one steps in, AI systems can make existing inequalities worse because they learn from data that already reflects unfair patterns in our society.

We need a fairer system, one that gives workers real power over when and how AI is used on the job and makes sure everyone benefits from its use, not just corporations. When workers come together, they can hold large tech companies accountable. We can negotiate contracts with our employers that set clear rules about how AI is used in our workplaces. By standing together—across different races, backgrounds, and communities—we can make sure that decisions about AI are made by us and for us, not just the wealthy few.

STRATEGY 3

Call for collective worker action as a response to a rigged system.

The idea that the economic system is rigged by the few against the many is already shared by Americans across demographic groups.¹¹ While this mindset can be hijacked by anti-immigrant and racist narratives, it opens space for thinking about systems and power. If we draw on it in the right ways, we can use it to build demand for the changes needed to counter corporate exploitation. Elsewhere, we offer detailed guidance about [how to talk about rigged systems](#). One key finding from this research is that we always need to *explain* how the system is rigged rather than simply *stating* it is. Otherwise, people can understand this in unhelpful ways—for instance, that liberal elites are rigging the system to benefit immigrants at the expense of middle-class white people.

Here, we show how to integrate talk of rigged systems into framing strategies about work. We do this by appealing to the concept of solidarity among the 99% and the value of a *Fair Return*, and by explaining how workers can change the balance of power by organizing.

Recommendation: Talk about how the 99% can respond to a system rigged by the 1%.

What to do:

Talk about the common cause we have as the 99%, across differences of race and background, against the ultra-rich (1%), who rig the system against us. What we have in common is that we all want to live well and be treated well, and we can unite to demand that for each other. Explain how the 1% rig the system and actively weaken that solidarity through the divide-and-rule tactic. For instance, they keep wages low and make people compete for jobs.

Talking about the 99% conveys solidarity without needing to use the word “solidarity.” This broad frame—inspired by the Occupy movement¹²—is also more effective at shifting thinking than narrowing the sphere of solidarity to workers, against bosses.

Why it works:

Solidarity is a galvanizing solution to the divide-and-rule problem. Talking about the “99% and 1%” in the economy is particularly effective for two reasons. First, by zooming out to the economy, we can cue the structural mindsets that people associate with the economy, such as the ideas that the system is designed through laws and policies and that corporate profit-making exploits workers. Second, we offer a villain (“the wealthy, powerful few”) that is easy for people across identities and demographics to rally against. When we explain how this group rigs the system against the 99%, through the divide-and-rule tactic, we activate the powerful mindset that the *System Is Rigged*. Then, by emphasizing our vast strength in numbers to stand up to this, we build the belief that change is possible. The numbers—99% vs. 1%—help quickly convey how this power dynamic can be flipped.

By contrast, focusing more narrowly on solidarity among workers, against bosses, is less effective. This may be because the “villain” (described as our bosses” and “big business owners”) is someone whom people are more likely to identify with or feel sympathetic toward. It might also be because it makes it easier to locate the problem in particular individuals rather than in systems. In other words, if we talk about “our bosses,” we think of particular people and how they might be replaced by better bosses. But if we talk about “the wealthy and powerful few,” then we signal how the problem lies in a class or segment of society.

What it looks like:

Whatever work we do, and whatever our race, gender, or country of origin, the vast majority of us want to live well and do right by one another. But the wealthiest 1% don't want us to recognize what we have in common. They keep wages low so we compete against each other for jobs, fund politicians who pit us against each other by race, and use fear about immigration to divide us. But when the 99% of us come together, we have the power to change the system. We can demand an economy where everyone who contributes gets a fair return—not one where a tiny minority rigs the economy in their favor.

Recommendation: Talk about how workers should get a *Fair Return* in the economy.

What to do:

Emphasize the reciprocal relationship between people and society using the value of a *Fair Return*. Talk about how all of us make valuable contributions to our communities and society in different ways—through taking care of people, doing our jobs, or helping out in the community. In return, we should be treated fairly by society. We need social policies that look out for us in the way we look out for one another. The idea of a *Fair Return* is not just about money but about support, resources, and care more generally.

Talk about a *Fair Return* between people and the economic system rather than between workers and employers. The economy should work for us, as we work for it—instead of being rigged to reward a wealthy few. This reflects existing field usages of fairness to call for economic justice, such as talking about how the wealthy should pay their “fair share,” and putting forward a vision of “an economy that works for everyone.” We can connect this value of a *Fair Return* to the workplace by talking about the need for unions and other forms of collective worker action. By coming together, working people can demand a *Fair Return* in the economy.

Why it works:

A *Fair Return* frame helps convey the value *all* working people bring to society and the raw deal we are currently getting in return. The frame includes people doing unpaid or informal forms of labor, like family care work. It helps us communicate that we all deserve better in this system and should collectively demand better—for instance, by coming together through labor unions. Going up a level from jobs to the economy is more effective at shifting thinking. This is likely because it keeps the idea of reciprocation more structural and collective, opening the door for bigger policy changes

that benefit everyone. It helps us call for working people to get a fairer deal more broadly, and not just in specific workplace pay disputes.

The success of this frame echoes what we have found elsewhere, as described in the Culture Change Project report [Claiming Contested Values](#), where talking about *Fairness* in terms of reciprocity worked well across issues.¹³

The *Fair Return* value also does better than another value currently used by the field: *Justice*. The value of *Justice* can shift thinking in helpful directions, but it is not as powerful as *Fairness*. This is likely because the notion of reciprocity is closely tied with thinking about work and can be scaled from a narrow reading (e.g., “fair pay for a fair day’s work”) to a broader reading (“fair treatment for our valuable contributions to society”). While both *Justice* and *Fairness* can convey the idea that working people deserve better, a *Fair Return* sets up a motivating argument about the contributions we make rather than leading with how things are unfair or unjust.

What it looks like:

We believe in fairness. We all play our part in society in different ways, and in return we should all be able to live well. But too often, the rewards flow to a wealthy few while everyone else is left struggling. We deserve an economy that works for us, like we work for it—where the system gives back in the form of decent wages, strong public services, and real security for working people. By joining together in unions—across our races, backgrounds, and zip codes—we can fight for a fair return.

Recommendation: Be specific about *how* workers can change the balance of power in a rigged system through unions.

What to do:

Talk about contracts or strikes as ways workers can leverage power through their unions, rather than simply noting that workers are stronger when they come together. Pair these mechanisms with a brief explanation of how the system is currently rigged to benefit corporations at the expense of workers. For instance, talk about how large corporations buy influence over elected officials, fight to weaken labor unions, and allow employers to avoid paying decent benefits.

Make it clear that strikes and contracts offer a way for working people to change the balance of power through unions:

- **Strikes.** Talk about strikes as a powerful tool to make the wealthy and powerful listen by bringing our country’s industries to a standstill. This can be illustrated through examples of recent successful strike actions, from UPS drivers to writers in Hollywood.
- **Securing Contracts.** Talk about contracts as legally binding documents that can help raise standards across industries by pressuring other employers to match them and keep up. Emphasize the benefits beyond the immediate workplace.

Why it works:

People have a sense that unions can do something in response to corporate rigging, but they are not sure what. Offering a specific mechanism is helpful because many people have a low understanding of how unions work and how they can be involved in them, even if they are receptive to the general idea that we are stronger when we come together.

Talking about strikes and contracts is also helpful because it offers tangible solutions to a problem that can otherwise feel intractable—a rigged system. These solutions are both big and feasible enough to encourage people to believe change is possible.

It's important to explain what we mean by a rigged system before we offer these solutions, because people can interpret “rigged system” in very different ways. On the Culture Change Project, we have explored how to most productively use the [System Is Rigged](#) frame—and the power of explanation is clear. We must fill in the blanks for *how* the system is rigged, by *whom*, and against *whom*. If we don't fill in those blanks, people can read this in ways that scapegoat marginalized groups and reinforce racist, authoritarian narratives. We avoid that by offering an alternative explanation that focuses on what large corporations are doing to rig the system against working people.

If we speak in vague terms about workers having power and voice through unions, this is much less effective than naming mechanisms like strikes and contracts. With the general idea that workers are stronger together, we can build support for unions, but we don't motivate the belief that systems change is possible. In other words, people need to have some understanding of how unions leverage power to believe that this can actually happen.

What it looks like:

Right now, the system is rigged to benefit corporations. CEOs and executives make decisions about our wages, benefits, and working conditions without real input from workers. But when workers join together in a union, they negotiate as one. For instance, in 2023, when the United Auto Workers organized against giant corporations like GM and Ford, 150,000 workers stood together. And when the corporations refused to meet their demands for better pay and job security, the workers went on strike—bringing production to a standstill.

That's the power of a strike. The wealthy have to listen when workers stop an entire industry. GM was losing an estimated \$400 million per week. Suddenly, the workers had leverage they'd never have as individuals.

And when the UAW won their new contract, those gains were secured in writing for years, including a 25 percent wage increase over the contract period, cost-of-living adjustments, and better benefits. The contract protects those rights and raised working standards across the industry. When workers organize and use tools like strikes and contracts, they can actually shift who has power in the workplace—from corporations back to the people doing the work."

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: A WINNING FRAME ON COLLECTIVE WORKER ACTION.

All of us contribute to this economy—through our jobs, our caregiving, and our communities. But right now, the system isn't giving most of us a fair return. Instead, it's designed to send wealth and power to the top 1%, while the rest of us—the 99%—are left to compete for what's left over. Corporations and the ultra-wealthy use their power to rig the system and pit workers against each other—including by race, gender, or immigration status. As long as we're divided, they stay in control. But when we recognize what we have in common, we become a powerful force for change.

Unions are how we unite and shift the balance of power. When workers go on strike—like UPS drivers and Hollywood writers and actors have done in recent years—they bring industries to a standstill and force the powerful to listen. When workers negotiate contracts, they win legally binding protections that raise standards not just in one workplace, but across entire industries. These aren't small steps; they're how working people fight back against a rigged system and demand a fair return for everything we put in.

The economy should work for us, the same way we work for it. When we stand together—across our differences—we can make that happen.

SPOTLIGHT ON JUST TRANSITION: USE THE METAPHOR OF *REBALANCING* THE SYSTEM, ALONGSIDE A CRITIQUE OF THE STATUS QUO.

When calling for a future that is good for both workers and the environment, we need to lead with a vision of what that looks like. This is a climate justice vision. It requires a major shift in our economy—away from extractive practices that damage and pollute, toward sustainable practices that care for people and the planet. We can paint a picture of this vision without using terms like “just transition” or “climate justice.” For instance, we can talk about the need for clean waterways, better air quality, regenerated soil, and good jobs in thriving industries, like renewable energy and green tech. We can explain how we get there through investment in the green industries and offering workers training pathways.

However, offering a vision alone is not enough. We must provide a critique of how things are now and call for a redistribution of wealth and power. The metaphor of balance is helpful because we can use it to emphasize how our systems are skewed toward the wealthy and powerful and make the case for a rebalancing that improves outcomes for working people and the natural world.

Communicating about a just transition can be challenging because climate change isn't at the front of people's minds when they are thinking about work. That's the case even if people care about climate change. People aren't making connections between climate change and local environmental impacts (for instance, pollution from factories and data centers). People also tend not to have a clear understanding of how jobs and climate change intersect or a vision of what it would look like to move toward an economy that is better for both the environment and workers.¹⁴ In our frames, we need to help people make these kinds of connections.

While more research is needed to support a full framing strategy on the just transition—including testing on the term itself—we can help people connect visions of the future with a critique of the present. Without a grounding in what's wrong now, the changes can seem disconnected and far away. We have also found that visions of the future, without a road map from the present, can cue fatalism (the belief that change isn't possible) or deferment of responsibility to future generations (the belief that this is a future problem to solve rather than a problem that needs action now).

When we use the *Rebalancing* metaphor to carry a critique of how things are now and the need for change,

we can build support for better labor policies. This metaphor does much better than the metaphors of *Repairing* or *Rebuilding* the system and is particularly effective with Republican-leaning audiences.

Rebalancing works because the concept of bringing things into balance is compelling. It seems like the obvious, intuitive, stabilizing, responsible thing to do. Balancing and leveling metaphors are already in use in the field for talking about how the economy is out of balance, and they extend easily to ecological systems, which the just transition encompasses.

By contrast, the concept of *Rebuilding* may be less well suited to talking about ecological systems, as it cues the built, rather than the natural, environment. The idea of *Repairing*, which we talked about in terms of healing, can cue thinking about health and the ability of bodies to repair themselves naturally. This is less easily connected to a critique of how the system is designed to distribute power and wealth. When we talk about the imbalance of wealth and power, we provide a common explanation for the climate crisis and the issues facing workers.

What it looks like:

Imagine a country with clean waterways, healthy air, and good-paying jobs building solar panels and wind turbines in thriving communities. That future is within reach, but only if we rebalance an economic system that is badly out of balance right now.

Today, our economy is tilted toward corporations that profit from pollution and extraction. The wealth flows up, while the damage flows down—into our lungs, our soil, and our water. And as our climate is pushed further out of balance, the consequences are felt hardest by working people and the communities that can least afford it. Workers and the natural world are both paying the price.

Rebalancing means lifting up people and planet. It means investing in clean energy and green industries and creating clear training pathways so workers can move into good jobs in those fields. It means holding corporations accountable for the damage they've caused instead of letting it pile up in our communities.

When working people come together, we can demand the rebalancing that our economy—and our planet—so badly needs.

Conclusion

Many workers in the United States are underpaid, overworked, and disengaged. Patterns of exploitation and opportunity stem from how our system is designed. In an economy designed by the powerful, for the powerful, working people get a raw deal.

Yet, when people think about “jobs,” they often fall back on unproductive ways of thinking, putting the onus entirely on individuals to apply themselves, work hard, and achieve their own success. This obscures understanding of the structural problems in our economy and the power of working people to come together to make change.

We must pivot away from the narrow story of individuals striving in their jobs, toward a bigger story of an economic system shaped by power. We do this by talking about key issues—occupational segregation, exploitation of workers, and labor unions—in a way that connects our *jobs* to our *economy*. We need to expose patterns of injustice and forces of exploitation in the system, and we need to call for collective action. This counters unhelpful individualistic, naturalistic thinking and brings systemic thinking to the foreground.

This report and the accompanying toolkit offer three strategies for executing this approach:

- Highlight how our systems channel people into different sectors.
- Name and explain exploitative forces.
- Call for collective action as a response to a rigged system.

With these new strategies in hand, communicators can build understanding of the structural problems working people face and galvanize collective action for a better system.

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Reframing Work, Rebalancing Power

Three Framing Strategies That
Connect Jobs with Economic Justice

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