

# WorkShift Short Guide: Three Strategies for Reframing Work

WorkShift Toolkit

---

## Introduction

Achieving long-term social change means making a big framing shift in how we talk about work. This means shifting the narrative away from individuals striving in jobs toward how power shapes economic systems—and how we can redesign those systems.

People can already think about the economy in structural ways, such as recognizing it is rigged by the wealthy and powerful. But they don't automatically connect this structural thinking to jobs. The following three framing strategies bridge this gap, helping people see that the same forces shaping our economy also shape who works which jobs, how workers are treated, and what solutions are possible.

These framing strategies work best when used across your communications, either individually or in combination. Use them flexibly and match them to your own communications style. And always make sure to include solutions that match your mission.

## STRATEGY 1

# Highlight how our systems channel people into different sectors.

Explain who does which jobs and why—and why that's unfair.

When we explain why certain groups of people work certain types of jobs, we bring the system into view. Starting with the value of *Fairness* opens the door to more productive conversations about how the current system is designed and why we need to redesign

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

Start with *Fair Opportunities and Resources* to make it clear why this is an issue we should all care about. Explain that *Fairness* means all workers should have access to good jobs and good pay, regardless of where they are starting from. Then explain why these opportunities and resources are unfairly distributed right now.

Example:

*Fairness means everyone has access to good jobs with good pay, regardless of their background. That means ensuring opportunities that acknowledge people start from different circumstances—differences shaped by gender, race, or zip code.*

**Tip:** Don't start your communications with "It's not fair." Instead, tell your audience what fairness is or should look like, and explain how we get there.

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

When talking about who holds which jobs, don't just state facts. Saying things like "Women of color do most of the care work" or "Black workers rarely make it into management" describes what's happening, but not *why* it's happening. Instead, explain how policy decisions, historical forces, and system design—not individual choices or natural differences—create these patterns. Give concrete examples of policies and practices that funnel certain people into certain jobs.

Example:

*Fairness means everyone has access to good jobs with good pay, regardless of their circumstances or backgrounds. But women and people of color are concentrated in low-wage care work because of racist and sexist policies that continue to put limits on their opportunities and devalue care work. We can create a fairer system by... [fill in with the solutions you are advocating for].*

**Tip:** Always link explanations to the clear, concrete policies, practices, and solutions you want to promote to avoid reinforcing fatalistic thinking.

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

Connect the dots between patterns in who does which jobs today and racist and discriminatory decisions in the past. Always point to collective solutions that show people can act together to redesign these systems today.

Putting it all together with a historical example:

*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 not by accident, but as a 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 restrict opportunities. These structural barriers continue today and concentrate groups of workers in low-wage occupations with few worker protections.*

*But workers can and have pushed back against those barriers. To build a better system, all workers need to have a real choice in the work they do, regardless of race, gender, or background. This means... [fill in with the policies or solutions you are advocating for].*

**Tip:** When talking about historical processes, make it clear that despite ongoing barriers, history does not dictate the future, and workers have the agency to make change.

## **RECOMMENDATION: TALK ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE'S STEEPER PATHWAYS TO WORK**

When talking about young people entering the workforce—especially those who face discrimination based on race, class, gender, or immigration status—talk about their path as a journey through steep terrain. This metaphor helps people understand that some young workers face much higher barriers than others and builds the case for solutions such as apprenticeships, hiring incentives, and policies that support younger workers. Make it clear that when we invest in young people today, everyone benefits, now and in the future.

### **Example:**

*All young people need strong supports along the path into work, but some face a much steeper climb than others. Young people of color, immigrant youth, and those from low-income families often lack professional networks, face discrimination in hiring, and land in jobs that don't pay enough to live on while they gain experience. When we expand apprenticeships, raise wages, and offer flexible schedules and mental health support, all young people can get the start they deserve—and everyone benefits.*

**Tip:** Always talk about the supports, resources, and relationships young people facing a difficult path need so audiences know they shouldn't have to make this journey alone.

## 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 build a better understanding of the economy and raise support for collective action to unrig the system.

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

Talk about the economy as a pyramid with corporations and the wealthy at the top and workers as the foundation. Be clear about how the distribution of wealth and resources actively designs and maintains the economy in this shape. Talk about how it can be rebuilt differently when working people unite across racial and other differences to topple the pyramid and rebuild the economy.

Example:

*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.*

**Tip:** Consider incorporating words and phrases related to the *Pyramid* metaphor throughout your communications, such as “propped up,” “built on workers’ backs,” “dismantle,” or “pull down.”

### **Recommendation: Explain how wealth enables exploitation.**

Start by talking about wealthy people and corporations—what they do and how they profit. Explain how the rich and powerful actively hoard wealth and squeeze money out of workers through a system designed to benefit them and then describe the harms to workers. Make it clear that our economic system was set up this way on purpose and workers can demand change through collective action.

Example:

*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, fight unions that give workers bargaining power, and lobby for tax breaks to hoard even more wealth—all while pocketing the profits from our work. This is how they've deliberately designed the system to benefit themselves. We need to come together to put people first, not profit.*

#### **Putting it all together:**

*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 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 knock down this unfair pyramid. We can rebuild an economy that spreads power and wealth fairly—an economy that actually works for all of us.*

### **RECOMMENDATION: TALK ABOUT THE NEED FOR A FAIR DISTRIBUTION OF POWER WHEN TALKING ABOUT ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND WORK.**

When talking about the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in our economy and the workplace, make it clear that power needs to be shared fairly. Emphasize that decisions about AI are being made by the powerful, for the powerful, at workers' expense.

*A fair economy means workers have a voice in decisions that affect their jobs and livelihoods. But right now, a wealthy few are making decisions about how AI is developed and used in the workplace without input from the workers whose jobs are on the line. That's not an accident; it's the result of a system designed to prioritize corporate profits over people. We need a fair system that gives workers the power to negotiate when and how AI is used.*

**Tip:** Avoid framing workers as passive victims—instead, present them as agents who can come together to demand a fairer system.

### **STRATEGY 3**

## **Call for collective worker action as a response to a rigged economy.**

When we talk about collective action, we build a sense of solidarity, agency, and the potential for change.

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

Talk about the shared interests of the 99% —across race, gender, and background—and how those interests are undermined by the ultra-wealthy who shape the rules in their favor. Emphasize our shared interests: We all want to live well and be treated fairly. Name these tactics for what they are—strategies to divide people and weaken collective power. Call for working together to change a system that, right now, works for very few of us.

Example:

*No matter what work we do or what our background is, the vast majority of us want to live well and do right by one another. 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 minority rigs the economy in their favor.*

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

Talk about how we *all* contribute to the economy and the economy should work for us. Include both paid and unpaid work as part of the economy. Explain how we can unrig the system and make the economy work for all of us through collective action in the workplace and beyond.

Example:

*We all play a part in our economy—through our jobs, caring for family, and helping our communities. A fair economy should work for all of us in return, not just reward a wealthy few. Right now, corporate profits are soaring while the rest of us struggle with rising costs. When we come together through unions, worker organizations, and collective action, we can build an economy that works for all of us.*

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

Explain how unions give workers the power to bargain collectively instead of individually, giving workers far more leverage against large corporations. Point to unions as one of the most effective tools workers have to rebalance power in a system where corporations have enormous resources to influence policy and keep wages low.

Describe strikes as a powerful tool to make the wealthy listen by bringing industries to a standstill, and emphasize that a union contract locks in those wins and protects workers from having their rights rolled back. Use concrete examples (for example, autoworkers, UPS drivers, or Hollywood actors and writers).

Example:

*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 (UAW) 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% wage increase over the contract period, cost-of-living adjustments, and better benefits. The contract protects those rights and raises 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 with a union example:**

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

When calling for a sustainable future that is good for both workers and the environment, talk about the need to *Rebalance* wealth and power. Provide an aspirational vision of what a *Just Transition* future looks like that includes a critique of how things are now. Emphasize how our economic systems are currently skewed toward the wealthy and powerful and make the case that rebalancing that system through collective action improves outcomes for working people and the natural world.

**Example:**

*Imagine a country with clean waterways, healthy air, and good-paying jobs building solar panels and wind turbines in thriving communities. We can build that future—but only if we rebalance who holds the power. Right now, billionaire investors make the decisions, designing our economy at the expense of workers and the environment. A Just Transition means rebalancing that power. It means workers and communities having a voice in how we move to clean, renewable energy. It means good union jobs building solar panels and wind turbines. It means investing in communities hit hardest by pollution. When we rebalance power through collective action, we can build an economy that works for people and the planet—not just the wealthy few.*

**Tip:** Be creative and use variations of the Rebalancing metaphor, such as “tipped against,” “thumb on the scale,” “tilted toward the powerful,” or “leveling.”

# WorkShift Short Guide:

THREE STRATEGIES FOR REFRAMING WORK



All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the FrameWorks Institute.

FrameWorks Institute. (2026). *WorkShift Short Guide: Three Strategies for Reframing Work*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

Designed by Constructive · © FrameWorks Institute 2026