

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

Organizing the Gateway City

Faith-Labor-Community Organizing in St.
Louis, Missouri

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I. Introduction

This paper is concerned with issues of inequality, work and organizing for political and economic justice in the contemporary American metropolitan area. The city has returned as the focus of critical social science in the last 20 years, “the clashing point” for a turbulent era (Amin & Graham 1997, 413). Indeed, as the leading edge of contemporary social problems, the city occupies the attention of both the scholar and progressive reformer.

The essay begins with a review of research scholarship that has repositioned the city as the key site of struggles for economic and social justice, placing the experience of workers and community-based coalitions at the forefront. I then turn my attention to a revelatory case study, St. Louis, MO, that illustrates the dynamics of local responses in an era of globalized economic flows and heightened inequality. Through an in-depth analysis of social, political and institutional forces, I show the potential for community organizing that confronts issues of economic and social inequality. In positing a ‘St. Louis’ model, I reveal a rich picture of organizing that builds power through networks of faith, labor and community-based groups across fractured metropolitan space. This essay contributes a unique case study model, asserting the importance of local social and institutional analysis to describe progressive organizing for economic justice in ‘non-global’ metropolitan areas.

The city as a stage

In a context of “global economic, technological and cultural shifts” (Amin & Graham 1997, 411) the city emerges as the stage on which a complicated “drama” (Landry 2008) of political struggle unfolds. Early globalization theorists, including Sorkin (1992), Virilio (1987) and Pascal (1987) (cited in Amin & Graham 1997) posited the end of the city as the key economic, cultural and political site. A flattening of scale by communications and transportation innovations seemed to anticipate the realization of a decentralized global geography. However, contemporary scholars (Sassen 1994, 1995; Castells 1989; and Friedman 1995) countered these claims by “reassessing the importance of large metropolises as key command and control centers within interlocking globalizing dynamics” (Amin & Graham 1997, 413).

Neoliberal urban change

Attempting to explain the vast changes afoot in the physical form of cities and social dislocations these changes entailed, scholars described the *neoliberal* ‘urban restructuring’ of cities (Brenner & Theodore 2002; Logan & Swanstrom, Eds. 1990; Fainstein 1990). Urban governing coalitions, exploiting new administrative mechanisms and shedding remnants of the welfare state (Kearns & Paddison 2000), arrange space for capital concentration and the settlement of an increasingly mobile ‘creative’ population. Vying for centrality amidst capital flight and economic polarization at the global scale,

cities authored policies of gentrification and tax abatement to attract firms and retain 'desired' populations of entrepreneurs (Wilson 2004a). As scholars became more confident in the *systematic* nature of the changes that they documented across capitalist societies in the last three decades of the twentieth century – “deregulation of state control over major industries, assaults on organized labor, the reduction of corporate taxes, the shrinking/or privatization of public services, the dismantling of welfare programs, the enhancement of international capital mobility, the intensification of interlocality competition, and the criminalization of the urban poor” (Brenner & Theodore 2002, 350) - it became equally clear that the scale of *neoliberalism* was the city. Indeed, cities are “at the forefront of neoliberalization” (Peck & Tickell 2000, cited in Leitner et al. 2007, 2).

Political struggle & scale

The renewed attention to the scale of the urban or the “revival of the local” (Wilson 2004a) combined with a vigorous focus on issues of social inequality (Doussard 2014a) to produce a wealth of new research. In “hollowing out” the nation-state and making “cities increasingly responsible for realizing international competitiveness” (Leitner et al. 2007, 2) a range of challenges confront the reformer and progressive activist. Not the least of these is conceptual; while bringing the focus to the local clarifies the scale required for effective intervention, it also privileges a certain type of discourse that

naturalizes a “global trope” (Wilson 2007) of inter-urban competitiveness and ‘creative’ places. Expounded in a bevy of policy primers, reports and journal articles is the imperative that every city discover its “niche” (Schlichtman 2009), or “centrality” (Landry 2008) to avoid decay. Amidst these normalized discourses of heightened competitiveness, justifications for redistributive and progressive policies fall prey to “a range of policies intended to extend market discipline, competition, and commodification throughout all sectors of society” (Brenner & Theodore 2002, 350).

Conceptual problems of globalization

As scholarly and activist attention turned to the damaging outcomes of neoliberal urban restructuring, capital mobility and urban governance that privileged so-called ‘creatives’ to the poor and disadvantaged – who Robert Fishman called the “perpetual urban underclass” (2000) - the normalized discourses, what had become internalized assumptions, of urban studies, geography and planning revealed their limitations. As Amin & Graham (1997, 416) wrote, theories of “urban centrality... almost always” drew from what was thought to be true of “the global cities of New York, London and Tokyo” whose financial sectors made them sites of global significance. The work of scholars like Saskia Sassen, Manuel Castells and John Friedman continued to advance certain core assumptions about global cities that reduced the political opportunities for workers and reformers caught in a spiraling downward cycle of falling wages and eroding working

conditions (Bernhardt et al 2009). This paper, following Amin & Graham (1997) and Jennifer Robinson (2013) argues for a model of 'ordinary cities', specifically to reveal how local actors work for economic and social justice in non-global metropolitan areas.

Although the work of Preteceille (1990) presciently showed that one of the "political paradoxes of urban restructuring" was a "localization of politics" amidst the "globalization of the economy", accounts of political struggle continued to focus disproportionately on New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. As long as our assumptions about cities and globalization carried the weight of dominant narratives that privileged the political economy of global cities and Fordist economic targets (large firms and city governments), the horizon for activists was likewise limited to an outmoded model (Doussard 2014a). Recasting cities in terms of the material experience of residents gives researchers and activists a clearer lens for interpreting seismic changes in the global flow of information, people and goods. In this light, Marc Doussard's (2013) *Degraded Work* is pivotal in turning the attention to workers and workplaces as the sites of resistance and reform. This essay builds on the call for attention to the local and for analysis of social and economic inequality by documenting contemporary organizing in St. Louis, MO.

Inequality, work and the contemporary American city

American cities have been subject to unforgiving forces for the last 30 years. Amidst turbulent economic conditions, working people are confronted with stagnant wages and eroding workplace conditions (Bernhardt et al. 2009). Technological innovation has displaced low-skill jobs, lowering transportation costs have moved production offshore all while an “ineffectual and disengaged state” (Fine 2011, 45) has failed to protect the poor and unemployed, shifting the fiscal and social service burden to local governments and nonprofits (Hackworth 2007; Eisinger 1998; Keyes et al. 1996). Economic growth in the last three decades has been characterized by heightening polarization of income and wealth (Mishel et al. 2012). The substitution of manufacturing, which dropped from 21.6 percent of all workers in 1979 to less than 9 percent in 2011, for health care and educational services has been unkind to the average American as wages have fallen and health and safety violations have risen (ibid, 327). From 1979 to 2007, the share of “good jobs”¹ dropped 2.4 percent (ibid, 333) as many jobs created since the profit-crisis of the mid-1970s (Harrison & Bluestone 1990) have been part-time, contingent and low-wage (Doussard 2013). Indeed, the Economic Policy Institute, in their *State of Working America* report for 2012 describe the last 10 years as a “lost decade” in terms of median wages

¹ John Schmitt and Janelle Jones (2012) of the Center for Economic and Policy Research have defined a “good” job modestly as a job that meets three criteria – it must pay at least \$18.50 per hour (the median male hourly wage in 1979 adjusted to 2010 dollars), offer health insurance, and offer a retirement plan of some kind. (Mishel et al. 2012, 333).

and incomes for the “typical” American (Mishel et al. 2012, 6). Jobs created in construction, retail and food services exist beyond the pale of federal labor market intervention which was crafted to regulate the large industrial manufacturing plants of a mostly bygone era, shifting the burden for reform to localities and community-based organizations.

Additionally, an unreformed immigration system - combined with the de-skilling and de-regulation of many so-called *service jobs* over business cycles in the 1990s and 2000s - further erodes job quality. Immigrants, particularly Mexican and Central American, arrived in large number as a result of push factors from their places of origin and rising pull factors with American employers (Chavez 1998; Gonzales 2011). Many found work in the booming residential construction industry, cleaning and landscaping, retail and food service. While U.S. citizens seeking employment outside of the managerial realm have faced eroding opportunities and deteriorating job quality over the last 30 years, immigrants have borne the brunt of an economic system that drives inequality. The federal regulatory system turns a total blind eye to workers *sin papeles* leaving them to toil unsafely for unguaranteed wages.

The concurrent growth of unregulated workers and workplaces demands a response that the federal government has been unwilling to mount. At the national scale only a narrow set of options are available to improve working standards, workers can unionize workplaces and collectively bargain with employers, file health and safety

suits with OSHA or the legislative option allows for Congress to impose a higher minimum wage on all employers. Activists and reformers may also pursue statutory options at the state level. However, the economic picture of growing inequality for more than 30 years (Autor et al. 2008) shows that the old forms of labor market mediation are falling short.

The first step is interrogating our notion of regulation in an economy that looks very different than the “Fordist” (Amin 2008) “economic settlement of the postwar years” (Doussard 2013, x). When manufacturing plants occupied entire city blocks, a centralized regulatory system predominated as a sensible and effective strategy. The economy of flexible manufacturing and local-serving industries tends to be much more diffuse and decentralized (ibid). Rather than keep pace with a more robust and flexible fleet of federal and state regulators, we have tended toward the opposite, de-funding state departments of labor and leaving the federal office incapable of such a task. Faced with eroding workplace standards, increasing income polarization and deepening poverty, city governments and community-based organizations (CBOs) remained as a last bulwark against deepening inequality and exploitation. Despite the gravity of the task at hand, in many cases, activists at the local level are “driving without a map” (Doussard 2013, 14). They face a range of competing priorities that vie for their limited resources. With their backs against the wall, they perform research, build coalitions and hold public officials and employers accountable.

A St. Louis Model

As a way of clarifying the ways in which local actors navigate specific barriers and opportunities, I home in on the case of St. Louis, a mid-size Midwestern metropolitan area that doesn't fit the 'global city' category. Unlike New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, St. Louis lacks both global finance and the attendant real estate pressures. Additionally, St. Louis has one of the smallest immigrant populations of any mid-size American city (Strauss et al. 2013). As a result, the opportunities to organize from entrenched ethnic neighborhoods *a la* Los Angeles or Chicago do not apply. Nonetheless, large campaigns are being undertaken by coalitions that span a fragmented metropolitan region, leading to new organizations, coalitions and social movements that have defined and elevated working class issues.

As I show, narrow conditions of possibility to organize for social change in St. Louis are imposed by three key factors: spatial and political fragmentation; ongoing racial division; and a state legislature intent on securing the political gains of legislation that antagonizes immigrants and the poor. Navigating this particularly hostile territory, organizers interviewed for this project show the potential for improving the lives of workers and residents across the city. I conducted 25 interviews over six months in the St. Louis metro area to isolate the barriers that activists, organizers and institutional actors overcome to advance economic and social justice. Particularly important are the collaborative relationships between labor (including the SEIU and the Central Labor

Council), community (including Jobs with Justice, Missouri Immigrant & Refugee Advocates [MIRA]) and faith-based organizations (including Metropolitan Congregations United [MCU], the Catholic Archdiocese). From those interviews I show the way in which activists from a variety of backgrounds organize the gateway city. Across a metropolitan area seared by a host of historically entrenched political, economic and social challenges organizers have found the potential for faith and labor cohesion through “congregation-based community organizing” (Jacobsen 2001, 23) that takes advantage of St. Louis’s rich network of faith-based institutions.

II. The labor movement's new context

The first task in gaining insight into contemporary economic justice organizing is to turn our attention from the national to the local scale as the terrain of activists, reformers and coalitions working to improve conditions for workers. Locally, activists work in partnerships, coalitions and alliances to demand concrete changes from employers or lawmakers that improve the lives of workers and the poor. Although researchers have shifted toward the city in the last 30 years a clearer focus on 'ordinary cities', places with political economies that are not affected by large financial sectors and the politics of pressurized real estate development (Doussard 2014a), will deepen our understanding of the new local terrain of organizing.

Confronting a changing economy: Contentious politics, social movements & scale

At the heart of this research is a concern with how workers and the poor make demands in a context of unresponsive state institutions and emboldened, mobile employers, two forces that upset the conventional view of community organizing. An increasingly globalized economy renders *contentious politics*, or struggles between people “over which political program will prevail” (Tilly & Tarrow 2006; 2), to the uncertainties of a fragmented system of authority. Particularly damaging to the labor movement has been its failure to revitalize amidst postwar moments of social movement. As Turner and Hurd (2001, 5) write, “from the point of view of today’s union activists, the transition

from the social movement unionism of the 1930s to the business unionism [and its insistence on Fordist compromise] of the 1950s to 1980s left American unions demobilized and to a large extent defenseless in the face of growing employer opposition from the 1970s on." Failing to renew itself through political and social organizing, the labor movement contracted during a long, uneasy "truce" with capital after the 1930s (Bronfenbrenner 1998, 37) that set the framework of a Fordist (Amin 2008) economic settlement (Doussard 2013) that characterized postwar labor market mediation.

Contributing to the demise of this settlement was an intentional "production of scale" (Herod 1991, 84) by business and government elites that fragmented labor and empowered capital. The mobility of capital in the face of geographically bounded communities is not just the result of technological innovation. As Mark Pendras (2010) writes, capital mobility is the intentional result of a legal framework created by public policy decisions. The national bargaining arrangements of the postwar era created a fragmented landscape and weakening position of labor relative to capital, resulting in a continuously "shrinking perimeter of unionism" (Davis 1986 cited in Herod 1991, 87). Designed to diminish solidarity and decentralize wage settlements and negotiations further from the federal government, the 'Taft-Hartley Act' of 1947 further "fragmented any emergent tendencies toward collective action" (Herod 1991, 85). Business had privileged a new scale, the state, as the location where open shop legislation could be

passed. This has left workers more vulnerable to the effects of globalized economic development and increasing capital mobility. As Herod concludes (86), “the failure of the labor movement to overcome the decentralized nature of labor relations has been one of the most significant impediments to working people’s abilities to counter the economic predations of capital restructuring.”

Shifting the focus from state to local

No longer able to rely on ‘business unionism’ as a way of resolving the decentralization of labor relations, and facing eroding wages (Autor et al. 2001) and declining social mobility, unionists and community-based activists alike have struggled to find space for legislative and workplace reform. Electoral politics are increasingly the purview of the wealthy as campaign finance controls were diminished by legislative or judicial action, overwhelming a key safeguard of democratic control (Gilens & Page 2014). It is in this context that we see the primacy of the local for those working on behalf of the disadvantaged. This essay focuses in particular on those struggles that advance the economic interests of the poor and working class, including immigrants whose position in the labor market is precarious at best.

In turn, scholars have had to shift their analytic frame from the state to the local. In order to escape the “territorial trap” (Brenner 1999; 40) of state-centric analyzes, scholars interested in oppositional politics are extending their understanding of space to bring closer attention to the multiple scales actors advancing economic and social justice

can affect. The problem of the “territorial trap” is not alleviated by simply bringing the focus down to the local level. As the literature review highlights, scholarship tends to privilege the local where exemplary cases of ethnic neighborhoods “claiming space” command bargaining power with elected officials and major employers as well as where successful campaigns offer enticing case study fodder.

Local actors lay claim to their more immediate context in order to be in a position to affect the state or national scales when the opportunities arise and conditions demand it. Helga Leitner et al. (2008), following Brenner (1999 & 2000) describes the tendency of movements to work on different scales and interact with space variously. Doussard (2014b) adds to this discussion by describing the opportunities for “equity planning outside city hall.” When it fits the priorities of a campaign, a neighborhood, community or city scale may be jumped, leaping to the state, national or global. Strategies that continuously engage multiple scales may do so because of compromise or innovation. Generally, they respond to conditions of possibility shaped by local challenges and institutional strengths and weaknesses.

III. Organizing the ordinary city

Three bodies of recent scholarship are of interest to this study: rethinking scale in terms of organizing and contentious politics; community-labor coalitions and interactions with faith-based institutions; and immigrant civil society and organizing. Two trends in the research – the insistence on global city case studies and exemplary campaigns from smaller places – create a conceptual gap in our understanding of organizing in mid-size cities. To the extent that smaller cities are the subject of case study work, the research describes a particular campaign, implicitly asking the reader to do the work of translation into one’s own context. A review of some of this research is the jumping off point for my presentation of St. Louis’s particular political economy for organizing. Lacking many of the traits that scholars tend to foreground in discussions about organizing and scale-jumping in Chicago or Los Angeles, St. Louis needs to be understood through a nuanced perspective of its specific local conditions, patterned by fragmentation, racial division and an antagonistic state legislature.

Toward social movement unionism

Scholars have recognized a range of community-labor coalitions over the last 30 years that have responded to the “new labor relations environment since 1980” (Johnston 1994; preface), encouraging the labor movement to broaden its effectiveness through direct engagement with community, neighborhood and issue-oriented groups (Johnston

1994; Turner et al. Eds. 2001; Nissen 2004). Unions and community groups alike have recognized the advantages of building more collaborative strategies on behalf of workers. Moving beyond historical practices that privileged parochial union interests and narrow neighborhood or issue-based politics, we can see successful efforts like the SEIU's Justice for Janitors campaign in Miami (Lerner & Adler 2008) and Chicago Teachers Union 2012 strike (Uetricth, 2013) as evident of the virtues of labor going "into the community".

At its most progressive, this work is described as "social movement unionism", or labor asserting itself in more broadly political terms (Marvin 2013; Leitner et al. 2008; Barreto et al. 2006; Milkman 2006). In the case of Indianapolis's recent Justice for Janitors campaign, the SEIU aligned itself with community-based organizations in hopes of connecting "workers and their unions with broader coalitions for economic and social justice" (Marvin 2013, 6). Rather than present their demands in narrow contractual terms, the coalition positioned the effort to organize janitors as a "battle as a fight for the future of the city" (ibid, 7). These accounts of wins and losses (Johnston 1994) offer compelling stories and describe, narratively, the way particular efforts come together. The tendency of this campaign-centric literature, and its main shortcoming, is to start with a success and reverse engineer to the point of when a union and a community coalition initiated. To the extent that case study literature digs deeply into a local context, it is most commonly in the context of large financial centers, e.g., Los

Angeles (Barreto et al. 2006; Milkman 2006; Milkman & Navarro, eds. 2010) that tell us a lot about places that share very little with the rest of American cities. Although the study of particular campaigns is useful for presenting scholars and activists with a menu of tactical options, it falls short of providing an analytic framework for understanding why organizing happens the way it does in particular, 'ordinary' locations. It is the aim of this paper to ground contemporary economic and political organizing efforts within a deeper study of local institutions, historical social context and political conditions.

Immigrant organizing

One of the most central features of the “new labor relations environment since 1980” (Johnston 1994; preface) that coincided with financialization, globalization and the deregulation of the economy (Campbell & Pederson 2001) has been the influx of unskilled immigrant workers from south of the U.S.- Mexico border (Ness 2010). Into the de-regulating labor market they were thrust, taking jobs in the booming residential construction industry of the 1990s and 2000s as well as the growing service economy, including food service, cleaning and landscaping (Doussard 2013). In many cases, unions struggled to view immigrants, particularly the undocumented, as anything more than threats to their control of workplace standards (Clawson & Clawson 1999) and failed to develop new organizing tactics. The reality of deteriorating conditions at the bottom of the labor market for all workers demands that the labor movement renew

itself or further fade into oblivion. Organizing immigrants is particularly important, because as Janice Fine (2007, abstract) notes, “many low-wage immigrant workers in the United States today function within industries in which there have been few or no unions through which they can speak and act to effect improvements”.

Efforts to organize these workers have been the attention of much recent scholarship (Martin 2011; Theodore & Martin 2007), whose work describes ongoing efforts in Chicago’s ethnic neighborhoods. Doussard (2013) and Fine (2007) are among the scholars exploring the organizing opportunities for immigrant and other low-wage workers employed in non-mobile industries, including retail, construction and landscaping. Across cities that Fine studied, worker centers, community-based immigrant-serving organizations and unions have targeted “non-footloose” (Fine 2007, abstract) industries with varying levels of success. Some of the conditions of a city like Chicago allow for strategies that may not be available in a city with a more dispersed immigrant population. Chicago’s long-standing immigrant communities rooted in dense neighborhoods help foster “place-based collective identities” (Theodore & Martin 2007, 279), or *territories* from which CBOs advance workplace and legislative reforms. Density creates a level of political identity that builds power to make demands on employers or elected officials. Organizing immigrant workers in St. Louis, with a more recently arrived and dispersed population inevitably looks different. We need research that accounts for how this happens, which means shifting our perspective to include the

various networks of congregations and civil society groups in which immigrants participate even when those don't reach the denser numbers they do in larger cities.

Faith, labor & community coalitions

The success of workplace and economic justice campaigns often rely on more than simply navigating the sometimes competing priorities of labor and community-based actors. When organizers seek to broaden their message, overcome spatial, ethnic and racial fragmentation and talk about economic justice in a conservative environment, faith-based institutions may act as crucial collaborators as recent scholarship shows (Christens et al. 2008; Jones 2006; Marvin 2013; Staral 2004; Sziarto 2008).

Churches do a number of services that is important to community organizing, or the “process of garnering power and taking collective action... by groups with little individual economic or social power” (Christens et al. 2008, abstract). They are the first point of contact for the immigrant population that may be very difficult to access through more formal channels. For many recent arrivals, particularly Catholic Latino/a Mexican and Central Americans, churches are an initial point of contact and introduction into civil society (Hondagneu-Soletu 2006). Secondly, churches are sites of pre-organized people ready to be mobilized into a neighborhood, community, city or higher-level campaign. Thirdly, although churches span arch-conservative and radically progressive theological interpretations, a general sense of social responsibility permeates most assemblies (ibid). Successful organizers are able to link ongoing

political and economic campaigns to the missions of individual congregations. In so doing, they often rely on sympathetic faith leaders, be they Christian, Jewish, Muslim or from a non-Abrahamic tradition. Barreto et al. (2006) discovered that when organizers were looking for potential allies who may not be hit directly by immigration reform but “might be sympathetic to the issue for other reasons” they went to “through congregations... to hit on the moral issues.” This relied on “congregations where a priest or someone would actually talk about how [immigration reform] is a moral issue” (744).

As I will show in St. Louis, organizers think along the same lines, constantly scanning for common ground with potentially sympathetic congregations. In doing so, they rely on relationships with priests, pastors, rabbis and imams that they can go to and rest assured that they will receive a fast and positive response. Through associations of different networks - secular and religious, progressive and evangelical, labor and community, as well as national and local - organizers build power across the local landscape to influence higher levels of policymaking.

Organizing through and across networks

Recent scholarship, including Marvin (2013) and Sziarto (2008) deepens the discussion of faith-labor-community alliances, revealing the opportunities to organizers who link networks of organizations in places with more fragmented populations and

conservative political environments. Beyond what individual congregations provide, networks, including interfaith associations, are allowing struggles for economic and social justice to build power across space. This, in turn, creates conditions of possibility for campaigns to gather requisite momentum to jump scale and affect policymaking at the local, regional and state levels. Kristin Sziarto (2008) describes the religious-labor alliance that proved integral to an SEIU organizing effort for hospital workers in Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN. By allying with a network of congregations (TC-WIN) that were active on issues of social and economic justice, the campaign was able to capture “moral authority” built on “interfaith” cooperation (407), placing its ‘legitimacy’ in a broader frame of justice for residents and workers. The challenge, she showed, was for unions to demonstrate that their workplace campaign was not simply out for its own gain and she found that the integration of charismatic priests and congregations offered an “antidote” (420) that the SEIU needed. The risk for unions when working with congregants and faith leaders is to appear to mercenarily “rent-a-collar”, which reinforces the instrumental nature of the relationship. Success is more likely where labor organizers can “produce legitimacy” (Sziarto 2008) and engage a broader coalition of interests. Where common ground can be found between existing networks labor organizers and faith-leaders and laity organized around social and economic justice opportunities to make demands on behalf of the working-class can be permeated with the language of spiritual and moral justice (Marvin 2013).

Race & organizing

Engaging a place like St. Louis brings to the fore the ongoing, thick problems of race in structuring the way labor organizing efforts and campaigns for economic justice take shape. For Ruth Milkman (2006), the decisive question was that of the undocumented worker, she described the various and successful efforts in that direction that ignited Los Angeles in the 1990s and 2000s. Out of such a rich, vibrant and broad migrant civil society developed a new political force, undocumented immigrants and activists working on their behalf. This has proven to be a movement capable of shifting the national discussion on immigration reform by jumping scale (Barreto et al. 2006) to the level of federal policy. Missed by the broad and influential discussion on immigration rights organizing has been the ongoing racial element of economic inequality that sears urban areas across the United States. The black-white and black-brown divides retain power that even robust labor-community coalitions struggle to overcome. Deepening the racial fissures in many locations is the spatial and political fragmentation set in motion by decades of racialized residential policy. Out of these historical processes we can see why a place like St. Louis continues to be defined by the past, foreclosing contemporary opportunities to find common ground and fight for economic justice.

I now turn the attention of this essay to St. Louis to dig into how its context has conditioned the way in which organizing happens, overcoming barriers of fragmentation, racial division and an antagonistic state legislature. What opportunities

are available to organizers when CBO coverage is thin, no dominant foundation bankrolls community or neighborhood-based efforts, access to a sympathetic state legislature is not available and immigrants remain fragmented and dispersed? In essence, how do activists for economic and social justice overcome barriers to organize the gateway city?

IV. Historical context to the challenges of organizing in St. Louis

Three broad issues rooted in the historical context of St. Louis, entrench the status quo and limit opportunities to organize for social change. Examining these problems means taking into account the intransigence of certain social and political problems set into motion more than a century ago in many cases. The challenges are: (1) spatial & political fragmentation; (2) ongoing racial divisions; and an (3) antagonistic state legislature. Each of these challenges and the sub-challenges associated with them offers insight into the shape progressive organizing takes across the metro area. Although activists work in a variety of settings and with varying demographics, the efforts that have been most successful at jumping to the metropolitan scale or to the state level have confronted these challenges strategically and exploiting opportunities for organizing in the local context.

Spatial & political fragmentation

Reformists and activists working in St. Louis confront a landscape characterized by urban sprawl, political factionalism and uneven service delivery. The contemporary population inherits the accumulated legacy of one crucial folly: city-county separation - that set the subsequent path in motion. The Great Divorce of 1876, as it is known to historians, established St. Louis as the first municipal home-rule charter (Stein 2002).

City leaders were concerned that overweening 'out-state' interests, particularly rural voters exerting influence on taxation issues (Primm 1998, 297) would subject the increasingly important shipping site to unwanted interference. As a result, they demarcated the city by its 1876 borders, abrogating any future annexation and preserving self-determination in municipal governance. The legacy of this decision and the full weight of its implications cannot be overstated. Cordoning off the city at such a stage of relative infancy has spawned huge challenges for generating adequate revenue to fund service delivery to this day. It has also meant that the urban area constitutes a hyper-fragmented polity. Today, the metro area is the second-most fragmented MSA in the country (Miller & Lee 2011), with hundreds of municipalities forming in not only suburban settings but also the inner-ring belt that would have been annexed in comparable urban areas throughout the early to mid-20th century.

Within the city, another slate of challenges diminished the opportunities for progressive reform throughout the 20th century. As Stein (2002) writes in her history of the city, *The Triumph of Tradition*, "by the end of the 20th century, St. Louis remained virtually alone in perpetuating a fragmented ward system." Even within the municipal boundaries, a ward-based political arrangement has persisted, entrenching a system of patronage and factional interests. St. Louis's "unreformed" city politics resisted progressive-era reforms of the first three decades of the 20th century, institutionalizing only weak civil service requirements and maintaining a weak mayoral role through the

1914 & 1941 municipal charters (Stein 2002, xvii). The patronage system was institutionalized throughout the late 19th and first half of the 20th century by a series of city bosses, most notoriously Colonel Edward Butler (Zink 1930). A factional ward-based system and weak mayor constitute and mutually reinforce one another, resisting efforts by a long line of leaders to cut through the fragmented political environment. The Great Divorce helped to lay the path that defined the 20th century of St. Louis politics, entrenching a set of provincial interests and conditioning the urban area as one that would be very difficult to politically organize, despite the interests of a heartened charismatic leader. Not until the 1950s and the infusion of federal urban renewal monies and consolidating banking influence over issues of local urban development would a coalition emerge that could cut through the morass and stagnation of city politics.

The importance of the city-county split emerges decisively amidst the great suburbanization of the United States beginning in the first decades of the 20th century. This frantic settlement of outlying areas in exclusively residential areas hit St. Louis with intensity after the Second World War. Colin Gordon's *Mapping Decline* (2008) addresses the consequences of unrelenting sprawl amidst social and political fragmentation. The key consequence of a pattern of suburbanization and rigid municipal boundaries entailed a shrinking city population, wreaking further havoc on municipal tax receipts and in turn, service capacity. As the federal government reduced

its investment into cities after the 1960s, St. Louis's problems worsened. The combination of subsidized urban sprawl, racialized disinvestment and real estate steering has led to massive white flight [and later black flight], reducing the city's population from a peak of over 850,000 in 1950 to under 320,000 in 2010. Race, undoubtedly, has played a central role in this process and the city's history.

Table I: Population & Race, St. Louis City & County
ACS, 2008-2012 estimates

	St. Louis City		St. Louis County	
Total population	318,527		999,147	
White	134,581	42.3%	688,471	68.9%
Black or African American	155,495	48.8%	230,273	23%
Hispanic or Latino	11,005	3.5%	25,016	2.5%
Asian	8,461	2.7%	34,125	3.4%
Other	8,985	2.7%	21,262	2.2%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, DPO5: *Demographic & Housing Estimates*, 2008-2012

Ongoing racial division

Much like the Great Divorce of 1876, the long-term effect of an institutionalized policy of segregation casts an immense shadow on St. Louis to this day. Missouri was admitted as a slave state in the 1840s as a result of the Missouri Compromise. Helping to inflame the antagonism that led to the Civil War was the 1857 Dred Scott decision that played out in St. Louis's Old Courthouse in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled slaves could not be counted as citizens (Primm 1998, 228). As German and Irish immigration increased, nativism rose alongside it, leading to conflagrations of violence

and unrest. The dimensions of this violence etched a landscape of separation, division and hostility as the immigrant, increasingly Catholic city faced alienation from the mostly Protestant and rural state (Stein 2002). Perhaps it is not surprising that city voters in 1876 would support the [ultimately fateful] decision to adopt independent status as a way of avoiding rural and conservative interference. Race, much more than religion, however, carried the greatest momentum into the 20th century as a source of ongoing spatial and political separation.

The character of suburbanization in St. Louis was heavily influenced by racialized housing policy adopted by local leaders in the early 20th century. The 1916 segregation ordinance (Stein 2002; Gordon 2008) led to a legacy of restrictive covenants that patterned residential settlement across the metro area. Gordon (2008) describes the importance of racialized local policy decisions that spatially entrenched racism across St.

Louis:

The intent and effect of local public policy, in St. Louis and its suburbs, were to tilt the playing field dramatically in favor of those who were already winning. The economic and locational disadvantages suffered by African Americans lengthened (in time and space) the dismal reach of Jim Crow. They undermined the legal victories of the civil rights movement, as the right to employment or education meant little in settings where the jobs had fled and the schools were crumbling. And they eroded the legitimacy of even modest efforts at redistribution or redress, as inner-city poverty was willfully misdiagnosed as a sort of community pathology, as something African Americans had done to themselves (13).

The realities of ward-based factionalism and residential segregation contribute to the social and political fragmentation of the metro area. Only exceptional circumstances,

including the election of Freeman Bosley who rode a wave of African-American discontent with public housing and inner city hospital closure (Stein 2002), have popular coalitions overcome the gridlock to win at the ballot box. The prevailing political economy of racial segregation in housing markets (Denton & Massey 1993, 76; Gordon 2008) and longstanding political division diminishes the opportunities for broad community organizing. After surveying the landscape, it should not be surprising how fleeting has been the success of political or social movements. An additional factor makes organizing for social change difficult in the contemporary context: an antagonistic state legislature, riding a wave of anti-immigrant sentiment to power in the last decade.

Antagonistic state legislature

Regarded as a national bellwether state for its history (Missouri aligned with every presidential victory, excepting 1956 & 2008), a decisively conservative turn was undertaken more recently, animated by anti-immigration sentiments from conservative, rural politicians outside of the state's urban centers. These elected officials in Missouri form part of a national wave of nativism in the last 10 years that has contributed to oppositional statewide organizing efforts. Both the antagonistic legislation and the oppositional organizing mirror trends across the country.

At the national level, the 2006 Sensenbrenner bill (HR 4437) in U.S. Congress set off a wave of “extensive mobilization efforts in Latino” communities that responded to what protesters decried as “threats [in the bill]... that would have increased penalties on undocumented immigrants as well as those who employ and assist them” (Barreto et al. 2006, 736-7). Responses on the ground to the national legislation and similar state-wide efforts described the large urban areas of Chicago (Cordero-Guzman et al. 2008), New York (ibid) and Los Angeles (Barreto et al. 2006, 746) and the extensive civil society, and migrant civil society networks from which they drew. In those places, “political threat” was transformed into “political opportunity” by dense networks of immigrant institutions (ibid, 746). As the reality of social and political fragmentation would suggest, St. Louis should be an inhospitable place for such activism. However, a menu of legislation that would criminalize undocumented status by lawmakers in Jefferson City, beginning in fall 2006 with the convening of a House Special Committee on Immigration provided the impetus for a large scale defensive effort (MIRA’s website, 2009).

To deepen our understanding of organizing the ordinary city, I propose St. Louis as a case study, with attention to three ongoing efforts to expand economic and political justice. The campaigns I presently describe in more detail: fast food worker organizing; immigration reform; and ballot initiatives to raise the minimum wage and regulate payday lending all rely on four key aspects. In order to advance their goals, organizers

must work across an urban landscape fragmented politically, socially and spatially. The most successful efforts build associations between different types of networks, including community, labor and faith-based. Using a model of congregation-based community organizing, even secular and progressive campaigns for economic and political justice draw from existing networks of churches to build power. As they work through networks, strengthening ties as they attempt to cross the urban and suburban spheres, campaigns gain enough momentum to jump scale and influence public policy at the metro and state levels.

V. Campaign Case Studies

Amidst this adverse landscape, an array of effective organizers overcomes fragmentation to unite different types of networks and institutions. In order to explore the specific and concrete ways activists navigate the terrain in St. Louis and identify opportunities, I conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with organizers and institutional actors. Initially, I appraised the internet and secondary sources to identify prominent organizations that were actively networking and moving their agenda forward. I was able to somewhat serendipitously attend the St. Louis Labor Conference in October 2013, which led to a series of less formal conversations and more ideas for central actors in the labor and economic justice realms. My second trip focused on the question of immigration as a potent lens into on-the-ground organizing for economic fairness. Ultimately I narrowed the focus of my third trip to more explicitly focus on faith-based institutions after their centrality as sites of organizing became clear.

I focused on groups with a shared agenda of economic and social justice. In fact, what was readily apparent was the dearth of these organizations compared to Chicago, where my lead faculty advisor drew many of his models. St. Louis offered nothing in the way of worker centers, and its quantity of immigrant-serving organizations is no more than a handful, whereas across Chicago there are dozens. Certainly some of this is merely a matter of empirics - we can expect a metro area the size of Chicago (nearly 10 million compared to the St. Louis CSA of less than 3 million) to have a significantly

higher number of specialized civil society organizations, but something else was at play. St. Louis, we learned, also has one of the smallest immigrant populations of any large MSA, a common statistic was that St. Louis, just within the 20 largest MSAs, had only the 37th biggest immigrant population share (Strauss report). Absolutely - and proportionally - there are fewer immigrants in St. Louis. So how do we understand a St. Louis model of organizing that draws its strength from different types of groups, forming networks that allow access to low-wage workers and residents? This compelled us to shift the way we were approaching the city and to interpret the ways in which immigrants occupied a different place in St. Louis's political economy. Clearly, organizers who were able to build networks across the metro area had a different kind of approach.

What we encountered, and what the two dozen interviews confirmed, was the primacy of faith-based institutions as providing the only glue to bond an otherwise completely fragmented metropolitan area. In terms of a progressive organizing force, even the ostensibly secular Jobs with Justice or MIRA depended on organizing a base of churches or utilizing MCU's pre-established network of congregations. The interviews shaped our conclusions about the organizing challenges laid out in the previous section: political & social fragmentation; ongoing racial division; and an antagonistic state legislature. Although pernicious and potentially overwhelming, activists continuously

spoke of the myriad opportunities they discovered to advance an agenda of economic and social justice for immigrants and low-wage workers.

Interviewees included two workers, eleven faith activists, seven institutional leaders and four professional organizers. They told a consistent story of how they do their work. To overcome barriers to organizing of political, spatial and social dimensions, organizers must work through networks of existing organizations. Whereas workers - whose struggles are at the center of economic and political justice struggles - are covered by networks of CBOs, worker centers and immigrant-serving organizations in cities including Chicago, New York and Los Angeles the landscape is different in St. Louis. Organizers rely on building power through networks of congregations where they find pre-organized groups of citizens and recent immigrants. As they carve out a shared agenda of economic justice, including campaigns to raise wages for the lowest paid, improve workplaces and protect and expand unionization, they must build associations between local networks in order to jump scale and influence higher level public policy. Only after they have linked progressive, secular, religious and union-based organizations across the urban and suburban landscape can they generate capacity to make demands at the state level or on an industry as large as fast food eateries.

To illustrate the ascendant potential of congregation-based community organizing as a strategy for labor, faith and community based networks, I will examine three campaign case studies:

1. Fast food organizing: “We Can’t Survive on \$7.35!”, an effort coordinated at the national level through the SEIU to organize fast food workplaces for higher wages and unionized representation. St. Louis, according to one interviewee, has 36,000 fast food workers.
2. Immigration reform: Immigrants sit at the intersection of low-wage work and an unresponsive political system. Organizing efforts in St. Louis seek to boost immigrant participation in the political realm and create a more just and humane immigration system.
3. Minimum wage & payday lending ballot initiatives: “Cap the Rate! & Raise the Wage!” were the two campaigns in 2012 that sought to raise the minimum wage statewide and limit the rate payday lenders could charge.

Campaign Case Study #1: Fast Food Organizing: “We Can’t Survive on \$7.35!”

Fast food worker organizing brought the issues of higher wages and unionization for employees in the sector to the level of national dialogue 2013, culminating with work actions in hundreds of U.S. cities. Coordinated by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) on-the-ground organizing depended on the recruitment of actual workers and managers from stores like McDonalds and Jimmy Johns. In many cases, the success of actions relied not only on the SEIU’s organizing capacity or the charisma of particular employees, but also the collaboration of external community members. The shape that such organizing took in St. Louis reflects its distinctive identity as a faith-networked metropolitan area. Religious leaders, performing acts of solidarity and support, took the campaign to lift wages and allow fast food workplace unionizing to another level. In this section I show how the campaign took form with a central role for well-networked religious leaders who added legitimacy as well as particular tactical advantages to striking workers.

Overview: fast food workplaces & organizing

Fast food workers face poverty wages (Allegretto et al. 2014) and unsafe workplaces. The average workers makes less than \$9/hr (ibid), regardless of experience. In many chains, including Jimmy Johns, workers cannot count on completing a full shift without an interrupted “break” because of an exploitative practice of sending workers home

during a lull in the late afternoon (personal interview). Fast food, if it ever was, is no longer the domain of teenagers making a few extra bucks on the side in high school. Workers in the industry are getting older, particularly after the economic recession of 2007-2009. As a result of depressed wages, de-regulated workplaces and an older, more experienced employee base, fast food worker organizing is also increasing (NY Times November 28, 2013 "Life on \$7.25 an hour").

In St. Louis, according to an organizer working on the local campaign, there are over 36,000 fast food workers, for whom the average wage is \$8/hr. (personal interview 10/13/13). The low wages, combined with the lack of union coverage leads to a precarious employment situation in which grinding poverty is often the result. Workers, even part-time, are often unable to secure a second income to supplement their meager wages because of inconsistent week-to-week scheduling. As a result, with the support of the national SEIU and statewide JWJ organizing in St. Louis took considerable steps forward in 2013, peaking in a series of city-wide strikes as part of the broader Fast Food Forward national effort.

Campaign strategy

Fast food organizing faces long-shot odds, for in many respects, the industry itself is set-up to resist unionization efforts to demand profit-sharing and dignified treatment

for workers. As Josh Eidelson, a labor journalist who covered the actions in St. Louis writes, their tactics reveal the opportunities and limitations for organizers:

Some of the features these recent strikes share in common can best be understood as strategies for dodging those obstacles [unsupportive federal apparatus and fragmentation of fast food workers through franchising]: striking for just one day in order to draw more workers, and more attention, at less risk; citing labor law violations as a cause for the strikes in order to bolster workers' legal protection; staging actions with a minority of the workforce in hopes that it will inspire more of their co-workers to get involved. ([Salon.com May 8, 2013](#))

A St. Louis-based worker and organizer, who I will refer to as John, described the course of events that led to him taking a leadership role in the organizing effort. One day last year he was accused of making multiple “mistakes” on orders, and as a result was forced along with another supposedly mistake-prone co-worker to pose with signs that described their errors as the manager snapped a photo with his camera phone. Aggrieved by the action, John and his co-worker felt the impetus to take action. Importantly in the case of John, the groundwork for his militancy was laid by a personal relationship with Jobs with Justice [JWJ], the “biggest tent” of labor-community-labor activism in St. Louis. Already in touch with a JWJ organizer, he was further mentored into next steps by an SEIU organizer appointed to St. Louis. John explains what happened next:

First they [JWJ & SEIU] showed us a video of workers striking in New York, then a bunch of us maybe 20 or 30 went to Chicago for a strike in April. We came back from that really motivated. We thought ‘why not us?’ After the incident [in which John and his co-worker were humiliated by the store manager] four of us were really agitated. This led to the small strike on May 8th. Community members supported us

by delivering a letter to managers saying “These workers are going on strike on this date and we expect no retaliation.” That day was small but the next day was much bigger with 50 workers taking part, we marched up and down the loop. We used that story about the manager and the photos he took as we talked to the press those days.

As John’s narrative shows, these strikes are often very small, involving just a few workers from one or two stores at first. In St. Louis, the actions grew in size and visibility over the summer, culminating with much larger actions in July and August, involving hundreds of workers from across the city. He also reveals an important tactical question that confronts the SEIU and the organizers working locally - how to motivate workers to take the risk, especially when very few others might take part? A faith-based organizer offers one answer in the form of a tactic employed in St. Louis to discourage retaliatory firings for striking workers:

We have 350 clergy who are part of JWJ. If a worker is released after participating in a work action, we will send out a call. Faith leaders in that neighborhood will then show up at the workplace. Probably three will go and speak with the manager to ask that the worker be reinstated. If the manager says no, we’ll unleash what is called “Fast Food Fridays”. Those clergy will then fill up the counter and start placing a bunch of complicated orders. But they’ll move very slowly and pay with pennies. It works because it slows down the whole operation in their busiest rush. Fast food franchises depend on a one or two hour rush at lunchtime. If you mess that up you screw up the entire business model. So managers usually respond after one of those actions. But they can’t call the police because what we’re doing is entirely legal.

Missouri Jobs with Justice deployed the network of clergy to respond in particular circumstances of retaliation also encourages broader community participation through the “Be There” pledge which encourages all members to take part in five

demonstrations or public actions throughout the year. This helps to ensure broad coverage across the metro area for a wave of actions that grew throughout the summer. As the “St. Louis Can’t Survive on \$7.35!” campaign reveals, an industry that perhaps more than any reflects the decentralized, de-regulated and de-stabilizing trajectory of the growing service economy in the last 30 years must be tackled with a strategy of appropriately innovative and flexible tactics. The fast food organizing effort shows that the SEIU’s national priorities in St. Louis manifested as a local-run campaign. Specifically, networked clergy provided the best opportunity to respond positively and adequately to a fragmented organizing landscape.

Campaign Case Study #2: Statewide ballot initiatives: “Raise the Wage! Cap the Rate!”

Organizing for progressive change in Missouri means generally accepting that your cause will have few allies at the highest levels. Historically a swing state, Missouri has moved decisively into the red column over the last decade, culminating with the resounding electoral victory of Republican nominee Mitt Romney in 2012. Attendant with the consolidation of Missouri into the GOP column this last decade was the electoral sweeps of conservatives “out-state” leading to a solid majority in both houses. For progressive activists, the political landscape at Jefferson City tends to lead more toward defensive organizing across the state, particularly in the urban areas of Kansas City and St. Louis where the preponderance of voters are more progressive. Although conservatives have swept recent elections for state legislature, Missouri’s referenda and ballot initiative laws allow for binding citizen initiated reform through a rigorous signature collection process. A broad coalition put this approach to the test in 2012, following on the footsteps of a successful initiative to raise the minimum wage by ballot referendum in 2006.

Overview: statewide minimum wage and payday lending context

In early 2012, two statewide ballot initiatives linked their efforts, arguing for a higher minimum wage along with cap on the rates allowable for payday lenders. Having been

successful in 2006, a coalition led by Jobs with Justice believed they had the organizing capacity to generate adequate signatures to make the November ballot. The initiatives hit a crucial snag when the Secretary of State rejected their signatures based on a technicality, dealing the campaigns a fatal blow.

Campaign strategy

The coalition involved a range of organizations that provides insight into the opportunities for statewide organizing, particularly under the direction of the Missouri Organizing Collaborative which includes Jobs with Justice, a People Improving Communities through Organizing [PICO] affiliate in Kansas City, Metropolitan Congregations United [MCU], ProVote and the SEIU. A senior faith advocate I spoke with described how congregations formed part of a broader network of economic and faith-based activists. His comments show the unique position MCU occupies as a force that can bridge gaps across the politically, socially and spatially fragmented landscape that dampens the power of urban activists and voters. By working at the scale of statewide organizing and tapping into a network of national faith-based institutions, he helps build the political power of St. Louis-based activists:

We have two primary networks of relationships. One is statewide, this is the Missouri Organizing Collaborative. This includes community-, faith- and labor-based organizations. For example we worked with the NAACP on the minority hiring provisions of the CBA we struck with MSD. This statewide coalition was tested on payday lending campaign. [Tells story of getting screwed on signatures].

So you might have expected that to really depress people, which it did, but we came back stronger and are going to push ahead with it again.

The other network is the faith-based national organizations: Gamaleil and PICO. A couple of years ago the faith and Organizing Collaborative came together for lobbying. It was almost like a marriage. Again, the payday lending campaign tested and really fused it.

The campaign was able to generate hundreds of thousands of signature because highlighted issues that were salient to urban and suburban residents. Urban voters tended to rally on the minimum wage, though many were concerned about payday lending as well. Jobs with Justice was able to rally its members across the city and county on a higher minimum wage as they recruited volunteers to go outstate. For faith-based organizers working in both inner-city and suburban contexts, pairing the payday lending reform was a tactical strength. A suburban parishioner engaged with MCU explains why:

On payday loans we saw an issue that got people at St. Ferdinand excited. It's tough to get them active on anything outside of their own church. We're just trying to get them to look past their own doorstep. I think it was because people were using these payday loans and being affected by them that was really important. People in our parish are using them, sometimes they're unemployed but it's not just something that affects minorities. Take my son-in-law for instance. So we did prayers outside of payday offices... One thing I remember was a parishioner here counted the number of offices he saw in Florissant. It was just during his daily commute, he saw 23 of them. So I think the visibility was really key.

In a fragmented environment where many of the most palpable dimensions of economic and racial inequality are deliberately outside of the suburbanite's gaze, finding an issue with high visibility was crucial to energizing her fellow congregants.

The failure to anticipate and respond to the technical challenge raised by the Secretary of State was fatal for the 2012 election cycle and means much of the work will have to be duplicated the next time around. As the senior faith organizer said, perhaps understating the force of the setback, the coalition was “tested”. The success of organizers to collect close to 200,000 signatures illustrates the potential for activating Missourians in a broad campaign. In doing this work, the coalition of organizations, both faith-based and progressive and secular, worked through congregations that reached thousands of residents in suburban and rural contexts where social justice involvement is framed very differently from diverse, urban settings. In the future, organizers are likely to turn once more to ballot initiative to overcome an intransigent state legislature, in doing so they will rely on networks of faith-labor-community organizations, crafting messages that span social and economic fissures across the state.

Campaign Case Study #3: Immigration Reform

Overview: opposition to state legislative action

Activism to increase rights and legal coverage for immigrants has steadily mounted for more than 10 years, reaching an initial peak in response to a House Bill: HR 4437 in 2006 that proposed major steps toward harsher criminalization of undocumented status. The public demonstrations of 2006 drew on an existing network that was built in the summer of 2003 from the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride - a national effort aimed at emulating the Freedom Rides of the civil rights era to foster a more cohesive immigrant rights movement (Leitner et al. 2008; Barreto et al. 2006). In St. Louis, organizing around immigration reform began when Jobs with Justice coordinated the task force that greeted freedom riders when they passed through the Gateway City. The Immigrant Rights Action Task Force (IRATF) of JJJ brought together more than 5,000 people by the time protest waves spread in 2006 responding to the Sensenbrenner House bill (MIRA's website, 2009).

Campaign strategy: organizing through congregations to build statewide coalition

As the Missouri House Special Committee on Immigration began to hold hearings across the state in the fall of 2006, concerns about legislation that would criminalize non-citizen status loomed large. The IRATF moved expanded its activities to meet the challenge, leading to the formation of Missouri Immigrant and Refugee Advocates

Coalition (MIRA) in November of 2006. I interviewed an immigrant rights organizer who works within the city, in the county and “out-state.” She confirmed that the dispersed immigrant population, fragmented across the metropolitan area and in only small communities ‘out-state’ lacked a political territory from which to build a power base. She pointed to challenges that indicate the obstacles to organizing across fragmented space:

“I’ve seen a willingness to collaborate. I think a lot of it is that there aren’t the established, institutional organizations. People aren’t particularly turf-y... There’s generally a willingness to collaborate when it makes sense to do so. One thing that is challenging – and I don’t know if St. Louis is unique in this at all – is getting different immigrant groups to identify common cause with each other and then be willing to move together. That’s just hard... One thing we’ve seen in North County is that African Americans, Africans, Muslims (who may or may not be immigrants) and Latinos are all experiencing discrimination at the hands of the same actors. But nobody’s talking to each other and nobody identifies. That’s been a challenge.”

The inability to “identify common cause” came up repeatedly in my interviews with activists from faith, labor and community backgrounds. Particularly deep is the perceived fissure between immigrants, especially brown-skinned, and African-Americans. This limits different marginalized groups - facing discrimination and institutional oppression from the same sources - to coordinate a strategy based on solidarity. Racial profiling in the county, particularly St. Ann and Overland is felt by black and brown-skinned people, however, it was clear from her comments, as well as those of another immigrant rights organizer that an effective oppositional strategy struggles to take off because of ongoing racial divisions.

Immigrant rights organizing has taken a different shape in the last several years, with immigrant capacity for leadership increasing. An organizer working with congregations on immigration reform reiterated this shift during our interview, homing in on the emergent *Latinos en Axion*:

This action on the 4th [of November 2013] was primarily organized by *Latinos en Axion*, and the advocacy groups that normally do a lot of this immigration work were assisting and not taking the lead... In 2006 in St. Louis there was a huge march – I think several thousand people - and it was a shock to St. Louisians: 'who are these people and where are they coming from?' It was really exciting for immigrants here. But then there was a period without a lot of activity. But just recently it's been ramping up. Big rallies and marches. I think the immigrant community enjoys occupying really public space in that way. That's what I've heard from *Latinos en Axion*...

Latinos en Axion grew out of grassroots relationships in pockets of St. Louis's fragmented immigrant population. Its story reveals the dominant feature of organizing in St. Louis - to build a political force capable of advancing a political project, organizers meet people where they are in places of worship. A Latina community leader confirmed that their model based on the congregation-based community organizing. The story she shared was a common one for faith-based activists (Christens et al. 2008; Staral 2004) that draw from Saul Alinsky's model for the Industrial Areas Foundation of the 1960s-70s. 'One-on-ones' or intensive listening sessions with parishioners and neighbors allow organizers to identify interests and build personal relationships. As priorities and relationships are developed, organizers move to agitate and encourage people to take action up to and including civil disobedience (Jacobsen 2001). Based on several years of

conversations with fellow immigrants, many of whom have faced exploitation through wage theft, undignified work and isolation from their families in Latin America, the organizer motivates them to action. November 4th, 2013 was a big moment for Latinos en Axion, they put several of their members onto the frontline of a civil disobedience demonstration in front of the federal courthouse in St. Louis.

The rally targeted public officials, in particular U.S. Congresswoman Ann Wagner who has remained unwilling to support comprehensive immigration reform (CIR). With a large CIR bill making it out of the Senate in 2013, attention turned to the federal scale as the best chance for a pathway to citizenship and more visas. Rep. Wagner looms as a potentially sway-able Republican in the House, the outstanding voting block needed with both the Senate and Pres. Obama in favor of a legislative path. Despite the huge obstacles in Washington DC, the prospects for anything progressive out of Jefferson City seem even more remote, the organizer expressed disappointedly “we [Latinos and Latinas] have no allies in state government.”

To get to the point of staging a demonstration with hundreds at the courthouse, as well as being able to bring a sizeable contingent to Washington DC in October for an action directed at Congress, she worked primarily with three active churches in St. Louis. One is Santa Cecilia in the city’s southside, which, as a staff member confirmed in our interview, offers the largest spanish mass in the metro area. The church in this case does the initial work of bringing people together around a shared conviction in

Catholicism - providing a referential frame that fosters a sense of community. People build familiarity with one another and generally view the church as a place of comfort and support. The staff member helps connect parishioners with jobs, services and resources as part of her role. Immigrants come to Santa Cecilia in search of the connections that will allow them to function economically and flourish socially. Organizers across St. Louis are aware of the principal role churches play in doing the work of bringing people together. In terms of organizing for immigration reform, churches are particularly central, as St. Louis lacks strong ethnic neighborhoods that could generate the scale necessary for community-based organizations. For the organizers I interviewed this means their work primarily happens in concert with priests and pastors, accessing congregations to build power.

Opposing Right to Work & new formal alliances

The ongoing opposition to open-shop legislation² reveals both historical continuity as well as the new reality in which labor solidarity takes shape. Today, the AFL-CIO of Missouri mobilizes a campaign against the threat of RTW, working with the networks of JWJ, allowing them to more broadly reach a range of non-unionized workers and

² Right-to-Work laws passed at the state level allow new employees, covered in bargaining units, to opt out of union dues, severely weakening the ability of those unions in some cases from organizing workplaces (Ellwood & Fine, 1987).

sympathizers outside of the formal labor movement. No longer able to rely on the strength of simply organized workplaces and local Central Labor Councils (CLCs), the AFL-CIO has adapted its strategy to the emerging conditions. My interview with a faith leader on the anti-RTW campaign, illustrates one feature of their strategy. Hired specifically to venture “out-state” into more hostile and conservative territory where union coverage is thinnest, the former reverend is trying to change opinions on unions. The CLC determined that faith leaders, well versed through a lifetime of conversations with people of conservative social leanings, would have the credibility and perceived neutrality to engage out-state faith leaders on their terms. In his case, he’s “paid to educate pastors on Right to Work.” He is essentially “starting a conversation” through individual conversations in territory that has been intimidating to union organizing.

A new network: Faith & labor alliance

Faith leaders like the one I interviewed, find the roots of their work in the Interfaith Partnership of St. Louis, formed in 1978 to oppose RTW. The partnership appears to have been *ad hoc* to his chagrin, disintegrating shortly thereafter. A new attempt to institutionalize the connection between faith and labor is taking place with older and newly arrived faith leaders at the forefront. The monthly gatherings, facilitated by faith and labor co-chairs, works on consolidating the power of the respective broad and often segmented groups to advance particular public policy goals. Sitting over pancakes

every third Wednesday, they hash out a local and statewide political agenda, sensitive to their respective priorities. Tom sees the meetings as a place to “bring in the average pastor” and start the conversation on practicing faith through activism on economic justice. For Mike, as assistant priest at Christ Church Cathedral in the city, the meeting is a chance to more prominently link evangelical Christian language with fights for economic and social justice. The labor leaders see the alliance as a key opportunity to tap into a well-networked group of leaders who already possess the moral and ethical high ground. As labor has lost its ideological power over the last 30 years, labor organizers are becoming more keenly aware of the necessity to work alongside faith. In St. Louis, where faith permeates the landscape of civil society, the imperative is even more obvious, failing to engage pastors, priests and their congregations means the battle against a well-resourced assault at the state level before the battle has begun. A labor organizer described what this entails:

“We rely on Catholics for their networks and their power to influence public policy [through the Public Policy Committee of the Archdiocese]. So we are willing to engage them on their terms. They have certain priorities - for example on abortion and gay marriage that a lot of our members or allies may not. But we know how important the Catholics are [as individual congregations and as an institution] so we take those issues off the table.”

In St. Louis, this is how things get done. In order to build a network capable of building a metropolitan base of power that can successfully go “out-state” and influence policymaking at Jefferson City, progressive and secular activists work through

congregations, sometimes putting their social values aside to identify common cause and advance issues of economic and social justice. If Missourians are able to confront the challenge of Right to Work legislation in the coming years, it will likely happen in part due to the hard work of labor and faith leaders to organize in concert with one another.

VI. Discussion & Conclusion

Organizers working for economic and social justice across the St. Louis metropolitan area navigate an unforgiving landscape of political, social and spatial fragmentation. St. Louis is one of the most politically fragmented MSAs in the country, consisting of hundreds of municipalities in part because of the Great Divorce of 1876 that fixed the city's boundaries and prevented it from annexing the sprawling growth that was to come. Many of the municipalities that formed the great sprawl of the 20th century established exclusive residential communities (Gordon 2008), essentially erecting a wall to racial and socioeconomic integration. As a result, the urban area is one of the most racially segregated in the country, a pattern that to a large extent defines the class-based separation as well. Activists and reformists are unable to initiate progressive change at the state level, to the contrary, the conservative turn of the last decade makes Jefferson City a particularly foreboding environment for activists. Nonetheless, and despite these great obstacles, organizers from a wide range of backgrounds, working for justice in a variety of realms, are able to come together and push forward an agenda of legislative and political reform. The extensive case study research I conducted over 9 months reveals the importance of congregation-based community organizing as a strategy for linking pre-organized clusters across the city and county. Within these networks a common agenda of economic and social justice is hatched out, with progressive and

secular activists often negotiating with and deferring sometimes to Catholic parishioners in order to access their vast infrastructural resources.

Three groups of organizers were particularly important to telling the story of ongoing economic and social justice work in St. Louis: SEIU, JWJ and MCU. Where the three have been able to come together has led to the biggest and most successful campaigns. In the case of fast food workers' "Fight for 15 & A Union", the SEIU's national resources have initiated much of the impetus for work that JWJ has facilitated, using their relationships and broad network of volunteers. However, as they have found, in order to reach a broader audience and encourage sympathy from those who may be apathetic, JWJ has worked with MCU's network of congregations across the city and county. As a result of this strategy, the campaign reached a fevered pitch with three strikes and a variety of actions to restore workers after retaliatory firings. The moral legitimacy and charismatic public profile that religious leaders cultivate appears crucial to the success of demonstrations, rallies and 'walk-backs.'

A similar approach is being used by activists working for immigrant rights. At the center of this campaign, Missouri Immigrant & Refugee Advocates Coalition (MIRA) builds a network of volunteers and organizers across the city and county, working closely with JWJ, MCU & SEIU. In one small move towards overcoming fragmentation, all four groups rent office space in the same building on Clifton Ave. Building from a base of congregations, the only reliable places where people are pre-organized, they put

pressure on elected officials and rally for expanded rights. Much of what they are forced to respond to, including legislative actions from the antagonistic state legislature, colors their day-to-day. The hostile state legislature proved to be a major feature of the work activists and reformists do, limiting and shaping both strategy and tactics.

One approach that avoids Jefferson City, tested by a broad coalition of interfaith activists alongside JWJ and their allies was to take advantage of Missouri's citizen referendum process, thus bypassing the state legislature completely. The campaign, dubbed "Cap the Rate & Raise the Wage!", linked an effort to raise the state's minimum wage and cap the rate of payday lending on a referendum for statewide approval. Although the Secretary of State turned the effort back on technicalities in 2012, the ability of organizers to gather more than 200,000 signatures shows the imminent potential of this strategy going forward.

Lessons: A St. Louis model

Activists from faith, labor and community-based organizations are working through networks of congregations to organize across the fractured St. Louis metropolitan area. In doing so, they reveal a particular, locally-grounded response to issues of economic, political and social inequality in a contemporary American urban area. Using the best tactical options available, including "pre-organized" assemblies of residents in congregations; statewide ballot initiatives; and well-networked religious leaders, organizers develop campaigns for economic and social justice that reveal the potential

of locally-grounded and informed strategy. Notwithstanding the great barriers to legislative and community-based intervention, these local actors shows the importance of crafting strategies that work *through* rather than *against* local social and institutional realities. Needing the capacity and resources of the Catholic church, progressive campaigns will craft their reform agendas accordingly, so as not to alienate potential allies. Similarly, faith-based activists, aware of the power in a broad labor-faith alliance, align their language with the economic justice priorities of secular allies. Together they are carving space to make the political system more responsive at the state and local levels. They work across a landscape splintered by racial and socioeconomic barriers, highlighting the intense challenges and opportunities of working for justice in the contemporary American metropolis.

Appendix

Tables II & III: St. Louis City & County Population & Income, 1970-2012
Income in constant 2013 dollars, BLS calculator

Table II: St. Louis City

	1970	1980	1990	2000	2012
Population	619,269	451,112	395,857	347,144	318,172
Per capita personal income	\$23,019	\$27,250	\$31,364	\$34,241	\$38,451

Table III: St. Louis County

	1970	1980	1990	2000	2012
Population	952,050	975,668	995,198	1,016,178	1,000,438
Per capita personal income	\$31,047	\$38,814	\$46,057	\$55,101	\$55,323

Source: REIS, Population & Income, CA1-3, 1969-2011

Tables IV & V: St. Louis City & County Major Employment Sectors
County Business Patterns, 2011

Table IV: St. Louis City

Sector	2001	2011	Ten year change in employees
Health care and social assistance	36,099	35,390	-709
Educational services	19,141	28,611	9,470
Accommodation & food services	19,336	21,578	2,242
Admin, support, waste mgt, remediation services	25,086	20,442	-4,644
Manufacturing	27,957	17,982	-9,975
Professional, scientific & technical services	17,537	16,767	-770
Finance & insurance	20,694	11,597	-9,097
Retail trade	17,269	10,855	-6,414
Wholesale trade	15,138	10,842	-4,296
Management of companies & enterprises	15,860	10,817	-5,043
Transportation & warehousing	9,110	8,754	-356
Construction	9,965	7,456	-2,509
Information	10,991	6,610	-4,381
Arts, entertainment & recreation	4,868	6,407	1,539
Real estate & rental & leasing	3,388	2,322	-1,066

Table V: St. Louis County

Sector	2001	2011	Ten year change in employees
Health care and social assistance	71,186	82,924	11,738
Retail trade	74,170	67,397	-6,773
Professional, scientific & technical services	39,169	49,901	10,732
Accommodation & food services	47,831	48,826	995
Admin, support, waste mgt, remediation services	47,704	41,428	-6,276
Management of companies & enterprises	30,918	38,925	8,007
Manufacturing	59,048	34,813	-24,235
Wholesale trade	36,756	30,971	-5,785
Finance & insurance	37,391	30,958	-6,433
Construction	39,876	25,491	-14,385
Educational services	14,144	15,613	1,469
Information	17,611	15,567	-2,044
Transportation & warehousing	24,190	14,383	-9,807
Real estate & rental & leasing	12,478	10,859	-1,619
Arts, entertainment & recreation	7,373	9,459	2,086

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, County Business Patterns (NAICS), 2011

Table VI: Poverty by Means of Transportation to Work
ACS, 2008-2012 estimates

St. Louis City		St. Louis County	
Mode of transportation	Share below 150 percent of federal poverty line	Mode of transportation	Share below 150 percent of federal poverty line
Drove alone	16%	Drove alone	8%
Carpooled	24%	Carpooled	13%
Public transportation	39%	Public transportation	32%
Walked	36%	Walked	28%
Taxicab, motorcycle, bicycle or other	29%	Taxicab, motorcycle, bicycle or other	19%
Worked at home	16%	Worked at home	8%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, *B08122: Means Of Transportation To Work By Poverty Status In The Past 12 Months*, 2008-2012

Table VII: Educational Attainment by Sex
ACS, 2012 estimates

	St. Louis City			St. Louis County		
	Male	Female		Male	Female	
Population 25 years and over	214,083	101,697	112,386	684,868	313,674	371,194
Less than 9th grade	5.6%	5.9%	5.4%	2.6%	2.2%	3.0%
9th to 12th grade, no diploma	12.4%	12.9%	11.9%	5.2%	5.1%	5.2%
High school graduate	22.7%	22.9%	22.5%	22.3%	21.5%	23.0%
Some college, no degree	22.1%	22.1%	22.1%	22.2%	21.9%	22.4%
Associate's degree	6.7%	6.2%	7.2%	7.0%	6.8%	7.3%
Bachelor's degree	18.1%	17.9%	18.2%	24.0%	24.5%	23.6%
Graduate or professional degree	12.4%	11.9%	12.8%	16.7%	18.0%	15.5%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, *S1501: Educational Attainment*, 2012

Table VIII: Educational Attainment & Poverty
ACS, 2012 estimates

Share in Poverty	St. Louis City			St. Louis County		
	Male	Female		Male	Female	
Less than high school graduate	41.5%	41.0%	42.0%	23.5%	16.1%	29.0%
High school graduate	25.2%	25.1%	25.3%	12.8%	12.1%	13.3%
Some college or associate's degree	24.0%	19.3%	28.1%	9.1%	6.3%	11.4%
Bachelor's degree or higher	9.3%	7.2%	11.1%	3.9%	3.4%	4.4%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, *S1501: Educational Attainment*, 2012

Tables IX & X: Earnings by Sector & Sex
ACS, 2012 estimates (SIC)

Table IX: St. Louis City

Occupations	Total	Male	Female	Median earnings	Median earnings
				(dollars) male	(dollars) female
Civilian employed population 16 years and over	141,006	49.2%	50.8%	32,041	26,898
Management, business, science, and arts	52,845	44.9%	55.1%	54,787	40,990
Sales and office	32,823	39.2%	60.8%	29,870	26,199
Service	33,337	45.0%	55.0%	20,677	15,618
Production, transportation, and material moving	14,670	74.3%	25.7%	24,961	21,438
Natural resources, construction, and maintenance	7,331	94.4%	5.6%	31,504	25,369

Table X: St. Louis County

Occupations	Total	Male	Female	Median earnings (dollars) male	Median earnings (dollars) female
Civilian employed population 16 years and over	486,928	49.7%	50.3%	47,061	30,434
Management, business, science, and arts	205,168	48.2%	51.8%	76,530	43,655
Sales and office	128,519	38.8%	61.2%	40,104	26,618
Service	81,065	41.0%	59.0%	20,978	16,191
Production, transportation, and material moving	44,565	74.9%	25.1%	30,869	20,061
Natural resources, construction, and maintenance	27,611	96.5%	3.5%	41,511	35,743

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, *S2401: Occupation by Sex and Median Income (SIC)*, 2012

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