

Dignity and bargaining power: Insights from struggles in strawberries

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Abstract

While solidarity is widely understood as key to worker capacity to improve terms and conditions of employment, the creation of solidarity has received less attention. This article advances the theory that dignity is the creative process, based on a psycho-social understanding of dignity not as an outcome but an interpersonal exchange. Mutual recognition of each other's capacities to participate in social rules creates solidarity, thereby catalysing collective action and making workplace improvements more likely. The argument is developed through comparison of three cases of worker struggles in the strawberry sector that produced varied outcomes, from steady improvements through union collective bargaining to persistence of poverty wages and gender-based violence. The proposed model of dignity-based worker power suggests both functional and psychological effects of democratic practice within worker organizations, coalitions and workplaces.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Solidarity matters. It is the difference between shared exploitation and collective action to improve terms and conditions of employment, between a 'class in itself' and a 'class for itself', in Karl Marx's (1847) classic observation. Where competitiveness reproduces and enhances an employer's position in society, solidarity makes social uplift possible for workers. In other

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words, workers' bargaining power depends on solidarity. The importance of solidarity in employment relations has long been recognized. Considering its source, emergent solidarity, bonds that bloom like so many lilies struck by morning sun, is perhaps the most agreed upon understanding. In the intensity of collective action, solidarity arises from each worker's humanity, bonding coworkers in common struggle. Yet clearly solidarity is not automatic. If it were, far more collective action and negotiations over employment would be expected than the levels observed in much of the contemporary world. What then occurs between working people that creates solidarity is the question considered in this article.

Human dignity, I argue, creates solidarity. By human dignity, I do not mean an outcome but a process. Adapting the psycho-social definition of Axel Honneth (1995), here dignity refers to the mutual recognition of each other's capacities to participate in the rules to which each is subjected. Between mother and child, this process is the fundamental development of the child's own humanity and of bonds of trust between the two. It is the exchange that provides both the self-confidence to act interdependently, in interaction with each other and other people. Between coworkers, the process is creative destruction, breaking down social constructs of division and bonding the humans as participants in the construction of more desirable social relations of work. The more the process of dignity continues among coworkers and with others, the more likely and potent is their collective action. Instead of considering dignity as an outcome, possibly granted from employers or a state, understanding it as workers' process of creating solidarity helps to understand variation in actual class struggle.

Worker collective actions in the strawberry sector exhibit the operation of dignity in shifting bargaining power and improving working conditions. Over the last 30 years, corporations, led by retailers and marketers, and national states co-developed the international production and distribution of strawberries that today makes the seasonal, perishable fruit always available. International trade increased from zero in 1988 to 2 billion pounds of strawberries annually in 2020. Riding the wave, lead marketer Driscoll's grew from a sub-national distributor to a multi-national valued at \$3 billion. The largest seller, Walmart, set the terms of trade. Meanwhile, most workers harvesting strawberries have faced wages suppressed below local living costs, no job security and endemic labour law violations—all sustained by surplus labour markets, selective law enforcement and racial and patriarchal hierarchies (Fischer-Daly, 2022). Workers resisted, demanding higher pay, legal compliance, decent treatment and collective bargaining.

Institutions and mass collective action do not explain different trajectories of workers in the sector. The workers who achieved more improvements to working conditions are considered 'illegal' by the national state and excluded from national labour law protecting freedom of association and collective bargaining rights.¹ Workers used strikes, boycotts and lawsuits, formed the union *Familias Unidas por la Justicia* and negotiated collective contracts with the berry production company Sakuma Brothers in the US State of Washington. Further suggesting the limits of an institutional explanation, in other cases, clear laws on labour rights and mass collective action did not lead to good working conditions. The largest strike in agribusiness in Mexico shut down strawberry production and transport from the export hub San Quintín in Baja California, yet workers' demands for freedom of association, collective bargaining, living wages and payment of legal benefits remain unfulfilled 5 years later. In Europe's primary

¹The U.S. National Labor Relations Act protects private-sector workers' collective bargaining rights and excludes agricultural workers, domestic workers, incarcerated workers, independent contractors and supervisors (29 U.S.C. §§ 151–169).

strawberry source, Spain's Huelva province, sectoral bargaining covers the sector, yet payrates below national minimum wage rates and sexual assaults and harassment persist.

Dignity made the difference. Where workers dismantled the divisions set between them and engaged each other as coworkers capable of setting the terms for their own interactions, they developed the power to act as a collective, Rhomberg and Lopez's (2021) apt definition of associational power. When allies recognized workers as equal partners in struggle for improving society, workers' internal capacity expanded to a coalition of social actors engaged in collective action. The exercise of associational and coalitional power, in the forms of strikes, boycotts and lawsuits, altered the balance of bargaining power, adjusting corporate interests. Compelled to acknowledge workers' collective capacity to participate in setting and implementing work rules, a marketing company encouraged, and an employer developed a problem-solving relationship with a union, expressed in successive collective bargaining agreements and daily co-decision-making.

This article unpacks the role of dignity in bargaining power in six sections. First, extant considerations of the concept of solidarity and its role in bargaining power are discussed. This discussion is followed by a presentation of the dignity-based model of building bargaining advanced in this article. The next section summarizes the investigatory methodology. Then the cases of worker collective action in the strawberry sector are presented. In the discussion of the research findings, a dignity-based model is used to compare and contrast the cases. Finally, implications for employment relations practice and research are considered.

2 | SOLIDARITY AND BARGAINING POWER

In considering the capacities that employers and workers bring to bear on their relationship, the power resources approach elevates associational power. In order to consider workers as a cohesive group despite actual intra-class diversity, associational power is the first order resource. Associational power refers to the ability of individuals to act as a collective (Rhomberg & Lopez, 2021). Its strength is indicated by the ability of the collective 'to sanction defectors from cooperation both among their own members and among capitalists' (Wright, 2000, p. 962). While the scope of associational power typically refers to workers at a particular employer or industry, it might be expanded by incorporating allies into the struggle, or creating coalitional power, 'involving other, non-labor actors willing and able to influence an employer's behavior' (Brookes, 2013, p. 2019). Nevertheless, without associational power, strikes and other disruptions of the process of capital accumulation are not feasible.

How is associational power created, then, is central to understanding bargaining power. In the direction of understanding the interactions between individual workers that results in associational power, Erik Olin Wright (2000, p. 985) observed that two components are necessary, organization and solidarity. Much of labour studies has focused on the organizational component, creating the institutions such as unions, political parties, laws and enforcement apparatuses. While essential, they are half of the wheel of associational power, unable to roll without solidarity. Marx (1847) noted that employers' act of hiring workers and setting their wages physically unites the employees and presents them with a common interest around which they might bond. Antonio Gramsci (1996) observed that unity among workers is contingent on how they address their historically constructed conditions. Such conditions include reified social constructs mobilized to divide workers, such as nationality, race and gender. Towards a collective consciousness, then, workers might progress through stages, first recognizing

common interests with coworkers, then perceiving management as an adversary, considering labour-management struggle as fundamental to society and envisioning alternative social organizations of production and distribution (Mann, 1973). Participation in high-stakes activities, particularly strikes, can accelerate the development of such consciousness (Blackburn, 1967; Fantasia, 1988; Lefebvre, 1970).

While highlighting the transformational character of collective action, understanding solidarity as emergent neglects workers' agency, leaving undertheorized what workers do to create class-based bonds. Towards clarity on solidarity, Adam Reich and Peter Bearman (2018, p. 268) described solidarity as 'relations in which we engage to achieve an external ... goal' and found that when workers experience such relations, their patterns of neural activity change, signalling thoughts of trust more than casual friendliness. What individual workers are doing to enter into solidaristic relationships is fundamental to understanding the creation of associational power, thus compelling further inquiry.

3 | MODELLING THE ROLE OF DIGNITY IN CREATING SOLIDARITY AND ASSOCIATIONAL POWER

Dignity is necessary to create solidarity, associational power, and thus workers' bargaining power, is the argument advanced herein. While widely used to describe an outcome of social relations, the meaning of dignity is typically assumed. Since the 19th Century, the general conception of dignity is a status belonging to all humans, the basis for human rights (Debes, 2017). When workers strive to gain respect for rights, clearly, they do not already enjoy this aspirational-oriented notion of dignity. In employment relations, dignity is considered less universal, an outcome of certain changes. Thus, scholars identify workers' desires to bring dignity into their employment relationships (Reich & Bearman, 2018). Towards defining dignity, Michèle Lamont (2000) characterizes employment with dignity as where workers are 'expressing their own identity and competence'. Understanding dignity as an action partly explains why workers improve terms and conditions of employment more in certain cases than in others.

Dignity, it is argued here, is best understood as a process in which people recognize each other's capacity to participate in the rules to which they are subjected. Honneth (1995) developed this definition of dignity by observing parental relationships. As a mother permits her child autonomy, the two negotiate rules of their interactions, and both gain confidence in their individual identity, relationship and capacity to assert claims, or they deny to each other such capacity and endure conflict rooted in self-doubt. Throughout their lives, humans continue to form identity intersubjectively, through dignified relationships that reinforce one's participatory capacity and undignified relations that destroy trust in oneself by denying participation in rules governing relations with other people.

Thus, dignity may be best understood and here is referring to the inter-personal act of creating solidarity by recognizing each other's capacity to participate in the rules to which each is subjected. These rules include those governing the relationship between two workers, members of a collective of workers and those governing relationships with potential allies, employers and state actors. By embracing each other's participation in creating, implementing and adapting the rules of their own collective, workers build individual and collective confidence and capacity to assert claims.

As a process through which solidarity is created, dignity is essential to building associational power. The capacity to act as a collective is necessary for workers to strike, workers' primary tactic for influencing employment relations given their control over labour power. Furthermore, the strike presents workers a moment of high-stakes decisions and thus an opportunity to recognize or deny each other's capacity to participate in the collective action and related decisions. Workers may embrace each other's participation or deny certain coworkers capacity to participate, contributing or detracting from their solidarity. The extent to which workers engage in the process of dignity with each other determines the strength of their solidarity, thus their associational power. When workers deny each other's dignity, such denial weakens associational power by reducing or even eliminating its solidarity component. In such a context, the risk emerges that some workers will engage in organizational fetishism, believing that power lies in the existence of their collective organization rather than solidarity between its members. The risk rises when leaders distance themselves from rank-and-file members and come to believe that the organization's power is self-generating (Bourdieu, 1991, 2000). Like an incomplete wheel, the collective will struggle to function, to act collectively and change employment relations.

While necessary, associational power is often insufficient to improve employment terms and conditions. Shifting the balance of bargaining power often requires combining associational power with other power resources. Workers' dependency on employment for their livelihood means striking (and strike-like actions) risks immediate harm, loss of income. Therefore, workers can benefit from the support of a coalition. Coalitional power can help mitigate the risks for workers. Like associational power, however, coalitional power includes a solidarity component. Solidarity between workers and allies makes their coalition capable of acting as a collective, a capacity created through the process of dignity—allies and workers recognize each other's capacity to participate in rules, including those governing their interactions. In contrast, when allies do not recognize workers' dignity (or vice versa), coalitional power is weakened, lacking its solidarity component.

By combining associational and coalitional power, workers are more likely to pressure employers and state actors into recognizing their dignity, thereby gaining participation in the rules governing their employment. Sequentially, then, workers build bargaining power through processes of dignity between themselves, with allies and with employers and state actors. The more robust the processes, the more likely workers are to advance towards decent work. Figure 1 illustrates the dignity-based model of power building.²

Applying this conceptualization of dignity as a process to employment relations clarifies the importance of worker participation in the rules governing work. Observers have long pointed to such participation as a process through which workers develop class consciousness and improve working conditions (Barrientos et al., 2011; Fantasia, 1988; Leary, 2003; Marx, 1847). Dignity can be understood as the process of mutual recognition between workers and employers of each other's capacity to negotiate the terms and conditions of their relationship. It is, in Richard Hyman's (1975, p. 2) frame of employment relations, the mutually respected ability to participate in setting the limits of workers' duty to obey and employers' right to command. Understood as a dialectical process, dignity in the workplace mirrors alienation. If denying dignity is to deny

²The figure adapts the models used by process tracing theorists Derek Beach and Rasmus Pederson (2013). In my model, dignity approximates their concept of a causal mechanism, that which makes a particular outcome more likely, with the difference that it is unrealistic to conceptualize dignity as a static input given its character as a relational dynamic.

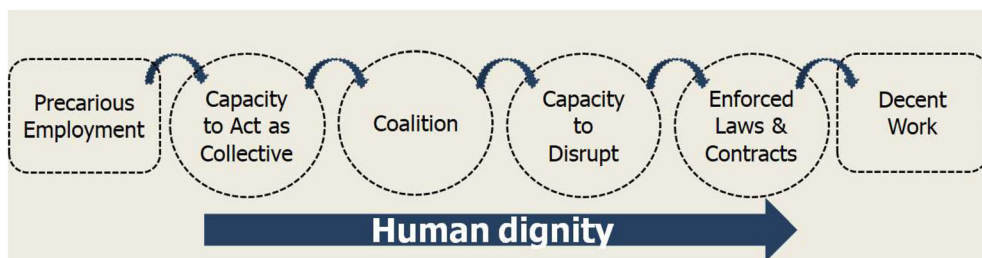


FIGURE 1 A model of power building by workers confronting precarious employment [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

identity as a human, denying participation in work rules is a critical implication of alienation, or treating labour power as separate from the human worker (Braverman, 1998; Marx, 1867). In understanding dignity's role in human fulfilment, it is evident that the demand for participation in work rules morally underpins class struggles (Honneth, 1995; Thompson, 1963).

4 | METHODS

The dignity-based model of power building crystallized from comparative analysis of labour struggles in the strawberry sector. To consider the question of why workers sometimes improve employment relations despite structural impediments, commercial agriculture, or agribusiness, is the focus due to its expansive scope and record of poor working conditions. Approximately one third of workers worldwide work in agriculture, and most live in poverty and endure dangerous conditions (FAO, 2016, 2018; World Bank, 2019). The strawberry sector is selected to consider the conflicts that have arisen in major production areas during the sector's 30 years of international growth. Three cases are presented for their variation in outcomes. At the berry production company Sakuma Brothers in Skagit county, Washington, USA, workers conducted multiple strikes, a boycott, and filed multiple lawsuits between 2013 and 2016, resulting in the organization of the union *Familias Unidas por la Justicia* (FUJ), collective bargaining that raised wages and benefits, established rules governing wage rates, breaks and leaves, and the organization of the workers' owned cooperative farm *Tierra y Libertad*. In the municipality of San Quintín in the Mexican state of Baja California, workers went on strike and shut down the highway used to export strawberries to US markets in 2015, resulting in limited increases of wages and social-security registration and the state registration of the union *Sindicato Independiente Nacional Democrático de Jornaleros Agrícolas* (SINDJA). In the Spanish province of Huelva, workers have filed numerous sexual-assault charges against managers; the *Sindicato Andaluz de Trabajadores* (SAT) union has led protests; and the *Comisiones Obreras* (CC.OO.) union has negotiated wages below national minimum rates in a sectoral agreement with the strawberry industry association *Asociación Agraria de Jóvenes Agricultores* (ASAJA).

Data on these cases were gathered between the Winter of 2018 and Spring of 2021. Field visits were conducted to Washington, for a week in 2018 and 2 months in 2020, and San Quintín, for 2 months in 2020. Other fieldwork planned for 2020 was suspended due to travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, and remote interviews were conducted in 2020 and 2021 with key informants in production in Spain and food retail. Guided by protocols and questionnaires reviewed and exempted for human participant studies by the institutional

review board, a total of 154 interviews of workers, unionists, managers, government officials, scholars and activists were conducted and coded manually.³ Quotes and other information presented herein are from the interviews unless otherwise cited.

The findings are analysed following a historical-sociological approach towards mid-range theory (Bonnell, 1980). The patterns observed in each case are compared to identify patterns of practice in the strawberry sector, which are then illustratively compared with power resource concepts. The dual-level comparison produced the dignity-based model of power building.

5 | THREE WORKER STRUGGLES IN STRAWBERRY PRODUCTION

Workers have engaged in collective action to improve terms and conditions of employment in the harvest of strawberries in leading strawberry producing and exporting countries, the United States, Mexico and Spain. Three cases of worker struggles resulted in divergent outcomes, ranging from the improvements through collective bargaining to continued super exploitation. The variation points to the role of dignity in building solidarity and bargaining power.

5.1 | Dignity processes and power building: Workers path to improving work in the United States

On 11 July 2013, Federico López asked management of Sakuma Brothers to increase the wage rate by three cents per pound of strawberries for him and fellow berry pickers. Management fired López, instructing him to vacate company housing along with his family. Instead, hundreds of coworkers stopped working and, with their families, marched to management, demanded López's reinstatement, the increase of their piece rate, an overtime premium payrate, punch cards instead of digital scanners to record the boxes they pick, the discharge of a foreman, unpaid sick leave, childcare and an end to intimidatory treatment by certain managers.⁴ Over the next 4 years, they struggled for and achieved recognition of their union, *Familias Unidas por la Justicia* (FUJ), and negotiated improved terms and conditions of employment in union contracts.

FUJ built bargaining power through ever-expanding processes of dignity. As coworkers, they deconstructed social constructs dividing them and recognized each other's capacities to participate in the rules of the collective and beyond. They built a coalition with allies who

³One hundred fifty-four interviews included workers (41), unionists (6), managers (4), state officials (3), academics (6) and activists (7) in Mexico; workers (1), unionists (4), academics (4) and activists (1) in Spain; and workers (57), unionists (5), managers (2), state officials (1), academics (2) and activists (4) in the United States. Notably, 30 additional food retail and strawberry production companies were contacted and declined requests for interviews. Managers participated from the companies Driscoll's (marketing and transportation), Sakuma Brothers (production) and Wegman's (retail) in the United States and Molinos Produce, Rancho Nuevo, San Vicente Camalú and another production company that requested anonymity in Mexico. Unionists participated from Familias Unidas por la Justicia (FUJ), Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF), Sindicato Independiente Nacional Democrático de Jornaleros Agrícolas (SINDJA), Sindicato Andaluz de Trabajadores (SAT) and Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT).

⁴See Community to Community (2013) for the archived demands.

engaged on principle of recognizing workers' dignity. Through collective action, they compelled their employer to recognize their capacity to participate in work rules by negotiating their establishment and implementation.

Workers created associational power through deliberate processes of dignity. When they struck for López in 2013, they called on and took to heart the message of Rosalinda Guillen, local organizer of Community to Community (C2C) and former United Farm Worker organizer. Guillen told them, 'I'm here to listen to you, to what you need, and support you.' It's about building that confidence and that trust and equity in recognizing each other as leaders in an impacted community that want to create change.' The approach resonated. Workers adapted their prior experiences with traditional authorities, the model of deliberative community governance of the Mixteco and Triqui communities of southern Mexico, heritage lands of most workers at Sakuma Brothers. They elected leaders, who convened multilingual meetings in workers' housing camps to maximize participation. As a worker, 13 at the time, explained, 'I speak Mixteco, so I communicated with a lot of people who speak Mixteco. There's also a person who speaks Triqui and communicated with the people who speak Triqui. And my job was to listen to what they had to say and translate ... to make sure that everyone was able to speak.' Workers named their union Families United for Justice. Their elected union president Ramón Torres reflected, 'right away, democratic was the focus immediately, even though they didn't think of it conceptually, just that everyone needed to participate in decisions—majority or nothing.'

The workers deconstruction of social constructs dividing them was the other half of their associational power building. Just as they bridged linguistic-cultural barriers, they had to replace patriarchal norms with equitable gender relations. Workers elected Torres for standing up to supervisors when they harassed women workers, and he too demonstrated the interpersonal changes through which the workers created solidarity. Just after being elected, Torres showed up to facilitate a meeting wearing a t-shirt with a beer advertisement featuring a sexualized image of a woman. Guillen noticed and told him to take it off. He refused, saying he would not let anyone tell him what to do. Guillen retorted, 'you mean you're not going to let a woman tell you what to wear.' Torres relented, changed the shirt, facilitated the meeting and then told Guillen, 'I'm sorry I got mad, because you were right, and I'll never do that again.' Guillen reaffirmed her confidence in him, noting that she knew he would not. Five years later, union members sent Torres to help workers with union organizing in another part of the state, where he supported women leaders. In these exchanges, workers were recognizing their capacities to participate in the rules of their union, workplace and society.

FUJ demonstrated their associational power through intermittent strikes, the organization of a boycott and blocking their employer's attempt to replace them. Sakuma Brothers responded by firing Torres, hiring security guards who surveilled and intimidated workers and hiring a union-avoidance law firm to advise its strategy. When management petitioned the U.S. Labor Department for approval to hire workers under the H-2A programme, workers submitted 490 letters stating their availability for the work to the Department, and the employer withdrew the petition.⁵ Once the union gained recognition, FUJ reinforced its associational power by

⁵Statutorily, Labor Department approval of employer petitions for hiring workers under the H-2A programme means 'A) there are not sufficient workers who are able, willing, and qualified, and who will be available at the time and place needed, to perform the labor or services involved in the petition, and B) the employment of the alien in such labor or services will not adversely affect the wages and working conditions of workers in the United States similarly employed' (8 U.S.C. § 1188(a)(1)).

indexing union officials' remuneration to the payrate negotiated for fieldworker members. The workers also realized that they needed to apply broader pressure.

The workers built coalitional power through dignity processes with allies. Unions endorsed FUJ as an independent union affiliated with the AFL-CIO and supported the boycott with members joining FUJ's public actions. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union also provided research that Driscoll's, a major buyer, was planning a new advertising campaign, leading FUJ to extend the boycott to the dominant berry brand. Lawyers represented FUJ in cases and won backpay for unpaid wages and injunctions against union-avoidance tactics used by the employer, under the Little Norris LaGuardia Act of Washington State.⁶ Local activists organized a first-responders network to protect the immigrant workers from workplace raids and advocated to limit federal immigration enforcement actions. The allies demonstrated recognition of workers' dignity. As a participating lawyer said,

I look at the legal work ... as air war for a ground game. We're not decisive, but we help. The [Little Norris LaGuardia] Act gave that cover. If people were intimidated by goons and a judge found that behavior against the Act, they enjoined against it and acknowledged the righteousness of the workers' struggle in public.

The workers' exercise of disruptive, or structural, power led their employer to negotiate. The work of 40 boycott committees shifted Driscoll's position. Prior, the company refused to meet with FUJ, and its vice president alleged workers' grievances were fabricated.⁷ Years later, the CEO said, 'We were pretty instrumental in working with Sakuma to do a voluntary [union] election Would they not if we didn't encourage it, I don't know.' Through collective bargaining, workers gained more job security, higher wages and access to healthcare; management has complied with labour laws; and workers and managers have resolved disputes, including through a grievance process that has binding arbitration as its final step. The union and management also negotiate wages each day through a test-pick process, and workers highlight breaks, access to toilets and water among valued improvements.

Employment relations have also changed to include worker participation in work rules through their union. During workers' strike and boycott, management sought to replace strikers, hired security guards and barred union activists from company property. First contract negotiations dragged on for 8 months. During the first year under the CBA, biweekly grievances

⁶The state of Washington enacted the Little Norris LaGuardia Act (RCW §49.32.020) in 1919. It states, 'WHEREAS, Under prevailing economic conditions, developed with the aid of governmental authority for owners of property to organize in the corporate and other forms of ownership association, the individual unorganized worker is commonly helpless to exercise actual liberty of contract and to protect his or her freedom of labor, and thereby to obtain acceptable terms and conditions of employment, wherefore, though he or she should be free to decline to associate with his or her fellows, it is necessary that he or she have full freedom of association, self-organization, and designation of representatives of his or her own choosing, to negotiate the terms and conditions of his or her employment, and that he or she shall be free from interference, restraint, or coercion of employers of labor, or their agents, in the designation of such representatives or in self-organization or in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protections; therefore, the following definitions of, and limitations upon, the jurisdiction and authority of the courts of the state of Washington are hereby enacted.'

⁷While workers at Sakuma Brothers were demanding recognition of their union FUJ, collective bargaining, and improvements including pay increases, the vice president of Driscoll's stated 'The reality of the situation that the pay is much, much higher than reported; the free worker housing is much, much better than reported, that there are also benefits that are not being reported. And while there were issues in the past at Sakuma, those issues got resolved' (Chefs Collaboration, 2016).

all went to arbitration for resolution. Over the subsequent 3 years, the union and management developed a problem-solving relationship, resolving most issues directly through daily communications. Management began sharing financial data with the union and permitting union access to workers on their property. The union communicated with members when market prices limited wage rates, refraining from strikes while maintaining the contractually established minimums, and its members have supported unionization efforts across their state of Washington.

The ongoing collective bargaining relationship of course does not mean the absence of labour-management conflict nor ideal work. The jobs remain seasonal, and the wages do not cover annual living costs, reflecting the extractive organization of the strawberry sector (Fischer-Daly, 2022). Yet the workers and employer now resolve differences through dialogue, based on recognition of each other's rights to participate in the setting and implementation of work rules. Furthermore, some workers started their own cooperative farm, *Tierra y Libertad*, as an alternative livelihood.

5.2 | Stunted dignity processes and insufficient associational power in Mexico's strawberry sector

On 17 March 2015, tens of thousands of workers shut down production and transport of strawberries from San Quintín, Mexico, during peak harvest season in the export hub for winter berry sales in the United States. The strike organizers, the Alianza de Organizaciones Nacionales, Estatales, y Municipales por la Justicia Social (Alliance), demanded compliance with national laws, particularly freedom of association and collective bargaining rights, registration in the social security system (IMSS) to access health care and pensions, cessation of gender-based violence at work and living wages.⁸ The large scale of workers' participation reflected substantial associational power building. Yet the state repressed the strike; employers avoided collective bargaining; and divisions stunted workers' collective action.

The strike, perhaps the largest in Mexican agribusiness, resulted from deliberate organizing on class lines and across ethnic groups. Organizers began by forming the Alliance, which created five leaders and nine spokespersons, some of them community-elected authorities. Leaders deliberately united workers across diverse heritages. As one explained, 'I began with the Triqui community here. But internally wasn't enough. I had to unite all the groups of people.' Like at Sakuma Brothers, a majority of workers were first- and second-generation peoples displaced from indigenous communities in Southern Mexico since the 1980s. Leaders mobilized workers by articulating problems as collective challenges. As a striking worker explained, he joined because they 'spoke truth, a reality that we experienced' and took on the view that 'improving conditions of field workers is improving my own condition'. The Alliance also submitted petitions to multiple levels of government, whose non-response led workers to observe that the

⁸The 'March 17 Manifesto' demands, on file with the author, include the following: (1) revocation of protection contracts; (2) payment of pensions reflecting full tenure; (3) registration in the Mexican Institute of Social Security; (4) 6-day work week and paid leave on the seventh day, holidays and vacation; (5) payment of overtime wage rates; (6) maternity leave of 6 weeks prior to and 6 weeks after births; (7) paid paternity leave; (8) end of and zero tolerance for sexual assaults by managerial staff; (9) no retaliation against strikers; (10) daily payrate of 300 pesos, an increase from then prevailing rate of 120 pesos per day; (11) payrate of 30 pesos per box of strawberries, and double rates on Sundays and holidays; (12) payrate of 17 pesos per bucket of blackberries; (13) payrate of 8 pesos per bucket of tomatoes; and (14) just payment and good social coexistence between employers and workers.

state 'acted like they did not see our complaints'. In the words of another striker, workers participated with hope:

The country was designed to never stop producing cheap labor ... you begin to realize that many things are not accidental, and that so long as you continue the game, everything is perfect for them, but if you move, many things can happen.

However, participation in the strike plummeted after the first day, evincing stunted processes of dignity. Divisions between leaders and workers, especially women, impeded associational power building. Some strike leaders sidelined women. As one female striker recalled, 'I saw that I was the only woman and invited the leaders and their spouses to dinner to get to know each other ...;' none came. Another female activist said, 'The Alliance broke because power concentrated in three people ... they excluded us,' referring to women strike leaders. Multiple workers posited that when Alliance leaders entered negotiations, they disconnected themselves from striking workers generally. A male strike leader expounded on the divisions and critiqued other leaders' signing of the strike settlement, saying, 'I didn't agree that you should sign ... you have to consult ... if they [workers] are in agreement that you sign the document with its conditions, then good, but they're the only ones who can decide.' The divisions indicated that some leaders had yet to recognize workers' capacities to participate in the decisions of the collective movement, eroding solidarity and thus weakening associational power.

Ally actions also indicated lack of mutual recognition of capacities to participate in collective decision-making and fell short of forming a coalition. Labour organizations issued statements of solidarity,⁹ and some sent donations and filed a complaint with the US government, whose Labor Department encouraged its Mexican counterpart to meet with the Alliance.¹⁰ Leaders of the Alliance also announced a boycott of Driscoll's. Yet the effort, conceived and led by an organizer based in the United States, did not involve workers in San Quintín, who expressed concern that the boycott risked their income, or organize boycott committees and pickets, falling short of disrupting sales. In effect, ally actions insufficiently aligned with fieldworkers' needs. As a mother noted, 'I didn't participate. I had to care for my children Also, if you joined the strike, you risked being fired.' Although many workers expected state repression, given their prior experiences in the 1980s and 1990s (Velasco et al., 2014, p. 247), mitigatory measures appeared unplanned. Recalling the swift state use of force by the end of the first day of the 2015 strike, a participant reflected, 'that's when I realized that the people were not well organized to deal with that situation.'

The impressively large strike proved insufficient to contend with state force and employer capacity to avoid collective bargaining, in part reflecting the stunted processes of dignity among workers and with their allies. The national police arrested and assaulted strikers, according to

⁹Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales, Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos, Central Campesina Cardenista, Unión Nacional de Trabajadores, Nueva Central de Trabajadores, Sección XXII de la Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, Frente Popular Revolucionario, Familias Unidas por la Justicia, United Farm Workers, Farm Labor Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO.

¹⁰At the time of the strike, the United States Trade Representative was negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership investment and trade regime with 11 countries, including Mexico, and the US executive branch argued that it would raise signatory states' commitments to international labour standards, specifically freedom of association, collective bargaining rights and freedom from child labour, forced labour and discrimination at work. The US Congress never ratified it, and the executive branch withdrew the United States from the agreement in 2018.

the government's own report (SEGOB, 2017). Employers avoided negotiations with the Alliance. The strike settled with the federal government registering the independent union *Sindicato Independiente Nacional Democrático de Jornaleros Agrícolas* (SINDJA) and employer commitments to increase wages and IMSS registrations. Five years after the strike, employer-protection contracts continued to block collective bargaining,¹¹ inflation and work intensification eroded wage increases,¹² most workers remained unregistered in IMSS¹³ and gender-based discrimination remained pervasive.¹⁴

5.3 | Disconnected labour and weakened bargaining power in Spain's strawberry sector

Strawberry harvest workers have filed complaints of sexual assault against several companies since 2009 in Spain, and public records show an annual peak in abortions, almost all by migrant workers, during the harvest (Altamira & Badia, 2020). As the complaints lingered in the courts, the national union federation Comisiones Obreras (CC.OO.) and employers association Asociación Agraria Jóvenes Agricultores de Huelva (ASAJA) negotiated a sectoral agreement setting harvest wages below the national minimum wage. Why are workers formally represented by unions with the institutional power to negotiate sectoral agreements working in conditions characterized by high risk of sexual assault and poverty wages? While the strawberry sector is organized to extract value up from fieldworkers towards retailers, and much of society is shaped by patriarchal norms, change in employment relations necessarily involves collective worker action and is thus the focus here. The lack of voice of most workers harvesting berries in Spain reflects disconnects indicating unrealized processes of dignity.

Spain grew into the largest strawberry exporter worldwide symbiotically with retailers' capture of control over food systems and the European regional project, including its hardening of borders with nation states bordering the European Union. Spain's strawberry production is concentrated in the province of Huelva, in the autonomous region of Andalusia, and 80% of

¹¹Protection contracts allow an employer to pay a 'union' entity in exchange for protection from worker collective action, emerged from the corporatist labour relations system and proliferated since the 1980s as a means to avoid unions (Bensusán, 2020; Bensusán et al., 2007). When workers first began organizing in the San Quintín Valley in the 1980s, employers responded by signing protection contracts, primarily with the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (CTM), Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana (CROM) and Confederación Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos (CROC) (Velasco et al., 2014, pp. 237–239). In San Quintín, the protectionist unions receive direct payments from employers, and workers and Labor Secretariat officials, some with decades of experience, reported that they have never seen a representative of the protectionist unions.

¹²As several workers described in interviews, managers demanded more production for the higher wages following the strike, managers required 17 rows instead of eight or hired two workers instead of four to complete weeding, removing the plastic that covers the soil below the plants after the harvest, and other tasks (Interviews with the author, 2020). Inflation increased in Mexico annually 2.82% in 2016, 6.04% in 2017, 4.80% in 2018 and 3.64% in 2019, according to the World Bank, World Development Indicators. Inflation, consumer prices (annual %) – Mexico. World Bank Databank.

¹³Local IMSS office data showed a total of 46,165 employees registered in the social security system, 6000 of whom were registered as permanent workers, and, of those registered as temporary workers, 10,000 were in agriculture. Conservatively assuming 16,000 agricultural workers registered on any basis (despite the obviousness that some number of the 6000 permanent workers are in other industries) would suggest that 40% of the 40,000 workers employed in San Quintín agriculture were registered in IMSS in 2020, most only for part of the year.

¹⁴To date, a gendered division of labour excludes women from 'technical', higher paying jobs, most clearly indicated by a single production company in 2020 beginning to open all positions to women, as explained by its manager and an activist pressing such an opening to all companies in San Quintín.

product is exported, primarily to Europe, especially German retailers. Production companies regularly protest the prices received for their strawberries, including a March 2020 demonstration blocking the principal regional highway when ASAJA's president said, 'the ridiculous prices' and 'the very high and unjust costs ... unfair competition ... weigh on us and suffocate us' (Fresh Plaza, 2020).

The Spanish state provided employers a labour-cost reduction strategy in the form of a seasonal foreign worker programme. Unemployment in Andalusia has averaged nearly 24% between 2002 and 2021. Yet the state initiated the 'contracting in origin' programme in 2000, under which, through multiple iterations, employers have recruited, specifically, mothers from rural Morocco, where decades of structural adjustment programmes contributed to dispossession and underemployment of agriculturalists. The approximate share of Huelva's strawberry harvest workforce comprised by Moroccan mothers rose to 85% in 2010 and was 26% in 2019 and 2020 (Altamira & Badia, 2020; Cabanillas, 2019; FIDH, 2012). As employers reported their advantage, whereas EU citizens might access other jobs, 'to have a contract in origin, they know that until the boss says, "The campaign is over," they cannot leave', and 'The woman is more docile than a man' (quoted in Reigada Olaizola, 2013, pp. 215–216).

Unions have struggled to build power in Spain's booming strawberry sector. Nationally, union membership shifted in recent decades from manufacturing to services industries (Köhler, 2018), and the largest federations CC.OO. and Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT) consolidated and focused on employment protection (Richards, 2008). Low levels of union representation of young, female, immigrant and part-time workers have corresponded to their low incomes and precarious conditions (Köhler, 2018; Richards, 2008; Rueda, 2005, 2014). In Andalusia, anarchist-sindicalist and communist unions demanded agrarian reform and led more than 1000 direct actions in the 1970s and into the 1990s. Leading activist union Sindicato Obreros del Campo (SOC) took on the role of administering the state's response, a programme subsidizing unemployed workers, creating public administration jobs and offering technical training. In 2007, SOC renamed itself the Sindicato Andaluz de Trabajadores (SAT), reflecting the relative growth of non-agricultural service sectors and marking a decline in militancy in the fields.

In the strawberry sector, divisions between unions and their disconnects from workers have debilitated associational power. The CC.OO., UGT and SAT visit farms, although some employers do not accept SAT representatives, and all three lobby for state labour law improvement and enforcement. The UGT said of its peer federation, 'CC.OO. sold out to the employers. They agreed to a wage table that sets rates below the minimum wage.' A SAT organizer added, 'I personally and many coworkers think of CC.OO. as the employers' union.' Immigrant workers led protests and organized the Colectivo de Trabajadores Africanos to demand respect of their rights in informal living camps, but there is not clear coordination between the unions and collective. Activist lawyers field the complaints of sexual assaults, again without evident coordination by the unions. While the unions appear to be attempting to address conditions in the strawberry harvest through political means, engagement of fieldworkers, especially immigrant women, is low. The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH, 2012, p. 28) reported,

Moroccan women told the FIDH mission that they had received a visit from some people but did not understand who or what they represented. These people asked the women to sign a document that they were unable to read In fact these people were representatives from one of the major unions This situation clearly

illustrates the distance between the Moroccan women pickers and trade union representatives, as well as the lack of resources of the unions.

Union organizers acknowledge the lack of capacity to act as a collective. One said, 'There are no strikes in Huelva. You can't, because the workers are too afraid to lose the income from the work.' Another unionist said, 'The temporary workers tend not to because it's temporary, and permanent workers have to abide by the Convention's strike rules.' Under the Convention, or sectoral agreement, employers can suspend workers for missing work.

Without processes of dignity extending to fieldworkers, labour's process of building bargaining power in Spain's strawberry sector has been stunted. Clearly, the precarious position of workers, especially their replaceability by employers and lack of alternative income opportunities, presents a tremendous challenge for unions to affiliate and involve them in collective action. Yet the disconnect between established unions and workers translates into incapacity to pressure employers and government actors through collective actions. It indicates a degree of organizational fetishism, in this case of the unions' perceiving their power to be self-reproducing instead of derived from workers acting as a collective. In the context of Huelva's strawberry sector, employers have evidently perceived that the existing unions lack the ability to lead the workforce in collective action, in other words, lack associational power. Low wage rates and under-enforcement of laws and contractual terms reflect employer's bargaining power advantage.

6 | DISCUSSION

The degree to which workers have been able to improve terms and conditions of their employment in the harvest of strawberries has corresponded to the extent to which processes of dignity occurred. Figure 2 illustrates the processes of workers building power in the three cases of strawberry harvest workers, FUJ in the United States, the Alliance in Mexico and unions in Huelva. In each case, the extent to which workers recognized each other's dignity contributed to the level of associational power evinced in each case. The more workers recognized each other's capacity to participate in rules, the stronger their associational power. Stronger associational power enabled strikes and effective engagement of allies. Coalitional power expanded the scope of collective action. Assertions of combined associational and coalitional power brought employers to collectively bargain. When workers fell short of recognizing each other's dignity, and when non-recognition was evident between leaders, allies and workers, workers had insufficient bargaining power to persuade employers to negotiate improved employment terms and conditions.

In all three cases, workers faced precarious employment. They lacked freedom of association and collective bargaining rights. For FUJ, national law excludes agricultural workers from protection, and immigration policy builds in the risk of deportation to union organizing activity. For the Alliance, employer-protection contracts with compromised unions block workers from collectively bargaining. In Huelva, sidelining of women and immigrant workers from unions involved in sectoral bargaining has the effect of denying workers in the sector their labour rights. In all three cases, workers endured poverty wages, gender-based discrimination and lack of healthcare access into the mid-2010s, conditions that most significantly improved in the case of FUJ. In the US and Spanish sectors, workers further face deportation as a constant risk. These employment conditions reflect the organization of the strawberry sector

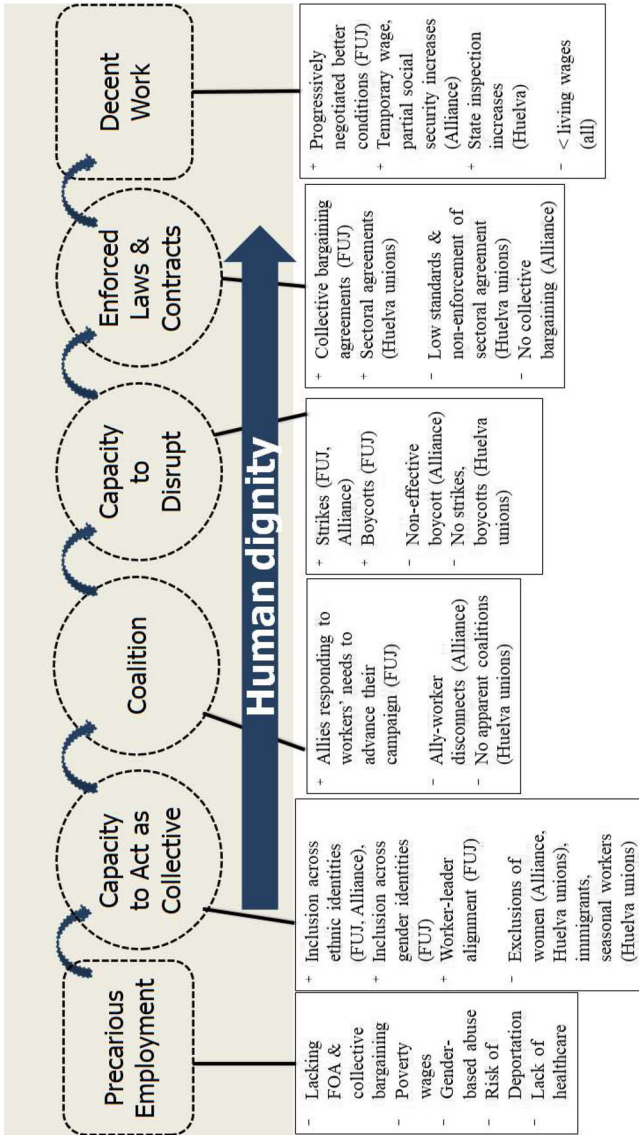


FIGURE 2 Model of workers' efforts to build bargaining power in the strawberry sector [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

(Fischer-Daly, 2022). Production companies employing fieldworkers are squeezed by oligopolistic input suppliers and oligopsonistic buyers and sustain profitability by super exploiting workers. National states support production companies with the creation of surplus and replaceable labour supplies and exemptions and under-enforcement of labour laws, and social constructs of race and gender are mobilized to divide fieldworkers from the broader working class and from each other (Ibid).

Building the capacity to act as a collective, associational power, was essential and dependent on internal processes of dignity. The organization of FUJ and the Alliance hinged on workers of diverse cultural and linguistic identities recognizing each other's capacity to participate in rules of their emergent collectives and beyond, that is, engaging in processes of dignity. In its organizing project, FUJ extended the inclusive approach to gender, breaking down patriarchal norms between workers. Furthermore, FUJ rejected the hierarchical tendencies of organizations through such practices as mass, multilingual meetings and indexing union officials' salaries to fieldworker members' wages. In contrast, the process of building associational power was stymied in San Quintín, where Alliance leaders distanced themselves from striking workers and sidelined women, and in Huelva, where unions have insufficiently engaged migrant and women workers.

Greater associational power within workers' collectives positioned them to engage allies in processes of dignity. In FUJ's process, allies applied their respective capacities to needs articulated by the workers. That is, workers and allies recognized each other's dignity. Lawyers represented the union in obtaining backpay, reinforcing members' perception of their effectiveness as a union. Community activists buffered the immigrant workers from harassment and deportation by authorities, creating space for public collective actions. Unions facilitated a boycott, increasing pressure on the employer, which was partly insulated from strikes by workers' dependence on wages. In contrast, ally actions in support of the Alliance did not address workers' immediate concerns of daily income and protection from state repression. Indicative of distance between leaders and fieldworkers, the boycott lacked workers involvement and did not disrupt sales. In Huelva, while lawyers and human rights activists have represented workers in complaints and reported abuses, they act independently of the unions, with the effect of no coherent coalition.

The strength of each group's associational and coalitional power manifest in collective actions. The more solidarity between them, the more the actions disrupted capital accumulation, pressuring employers towards negotiation. FUJ engaged in intermittent strikes with nearly universal participation, indicating high levels of associational power. With its allies, FUJ won in the courtroom, led public marches without immigration enforcement interference and led 40 boycott committees—actions indicating the extension of the capacity to act as a collective to include worker-ally relations. The Alliance also exhibited associational power with a mass strike, yet collective unity was insufficient to overcome police repression, employer-protection contracts and fieldworker dependence on wages. While the boycott led by allies might have compensated for the inability to sustain the strike, the lack of engagement with workers' needs for income and protection from state use of force reflected a lack of mutual recognition of workers' and allies' capacities to participate in rulemaking of a collective project.

Each group's assertions of structural power, or capacity to disrupt capital accumulation, led to correspondingly varied establishment and enforcement of contracts and laws. FUJ negotiated collective bargaining agreements and enforced clauses, initially entirely through the grievance process and over time through continual dialogue with management. Additionally, FUJ won court cases on behalf of its undocumented members, workers in a sector excluded from national

labour laws and socially marginalized. In other words, FUJ gained the right to make claims, to participate in the rules of the workplace and society. The Alliance's demand for collective bargaining failed to gain traction with employers, reflecting the latter's overwhelming bargaining power. In Huelva, the existence of sectoral bargaining marks a prior assertion of union bargaining power, yet the sectoral agreement's low standards and lack of enforcement highlight a lack of current leverage with employers and state actors.

Improving terms and conditions of work depended on processes of dignity. The further workers extended mutual recognition of capacities to participate in rules to actors involved in their employment relations, the more improvements they achieved. FUJ negotiated progressively better conditions and instituted union collective bargaining as a process to continue improvements, reflecting the extension of dignity processes to worker-management relations. The Alliance obtained commitments to increase wages and social security registration, yet without institutionalizing negotiations, wage gains eroded over time while registrations waned. The most comprehensive improvement from union pressure in Huelva over the last decades was a state commitment to increase inspections, a defensive measure highlighting employers' capacity to control work rules nearly unilaterally. Notably, wages from strawberry harvests do not allow fieldworkers to cover living costs year-round in any of the three locations. This limitation on remuneration in the sector highlights its organization as a commodity network, in which food retailer demands for specific volumes and characteristics pressure production companies into monocultures and thus seasonal employment of labour.

The comparison of the three cases highlights the catalytic effect of dignity. When mutual recognition of each other's capacity to participate in rules occurred between workers, associational power strengthened, between workers and allies, a coalition formed, between workers and employers, negotiation of work rules was institutionalized and between workers and state actors, legal claims received due process. In other words, dignity, the process of mutual recognition, created solidarity, not out of thin air but through deliberate human interactions. And, consistent with the literature, solidarity increased workers' bargaining power.

7 | CONCLUSION

This article has considered the act of creating solidarity by comparing three cases of workers struggling to improve terms and conditions of employment in the strawberry sector. While the import of solidarity to labour bargaining power is a cornerstone of employment relations, this analysis has sought to consider the creative process that builds it. The comparison of cases with divergent outcomes highlighted dignity as that creative process. Through mutual recognition of each other's capacities to participate in rules with coworkers, allies, employers and state actors, workers improved their working conditions. The article argues that dignity is the foundation of workers' bargaining power. Through processes of dignity, workers can build associational power, extend collective action with coalitions, disrupt capital accumulation and improve terms and conditions of their employment. In contrast, non-recognition weakens labour's bargaining power by impeding collective action through neglect of one component of associational power, solidarity, and fetishizing its second component, organization, as a self-generating source of power.

Identifying dignity as the catalyst of worker power building and ultimately shifts in employment relations points to intra- and inter-organizational practices of worker organizations, labour-supporting coalitions and workplaces. Understanding that mutual recognition of each

other's capacities to participate in rules creates solidarity and thus power underscores democratic practice. Equitable and inclusive participation becomes neither formal performance to comply with laws or norms but the means to improve workers' livelihoods. At the workplace, the notion that union collective bargaining enables material improvements partly captures the function of more democratic negotiation of work rules. In addition to highly appropriate material changes such as increased wages, collective bargaining involves a degree of mutual recognition between workers and employers of their roles in the production process. Short of direct producer ownership, this recognition mitigates workers' alienation, reinforcing their self-confidence as people whose capacity to organize production is acknowledged, not rejected.

The argument of this article advances a dignity-based theory of bargaining power based on observations of three groups of workers in the strawberry sector. As such, it is limited in scope to their processes of struggle and the methods used to articulate their wider meaning. The model of sequential processes of dignity to shift the balance of bargaining power and thus change employment relations would be usefully assessed in other contexts.

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