

## RESEARCH

# Transcending Borders? Horizons and Challenges of Global Tech Worker Solidarity

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## Abstract

While the reach of tech firms has become planetary, the counterpower of their workforces often remains local. The article explores the challenges and opportunities to transnational solidarity among tech workers, the higher-paid employee strata of tech companies. Based on three recent cases of local and transnational organizing (Google walkouts, Tech Workers Coalition, 996.ICU movement), I argue that three markers stick out in the efforts: informal organizing instead of institutional power-building, the importance of labor mobility and the surprising lack of executing structural power. The article concludes with a consideration of what can be learned from low-wage worker organizing in this context and from institutional developments geared toward transnational worker representation.

**Keywords:** Labor, Collective Action, Tech Workers, Transnational, Trade Unions

## 1. Introduction

Big tech corporations such as Google or Amazon have become powerful actors in the contemporary economy, generating immense profits, concentrating power and reaching infrastructural capacity (Kenney and Zysman 2020). The controversies around this profound reach have in recent years given prominence to tech workers, the company's most cherished labor force of software engineers and other white collar professionals (Jaffe 2021). Although often considered as the *labor aristocracy* of tech, considerable parts have been engaged in labor activism, unionization and other political activity in the last years, using their strategic positions in value chains and

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visibility (Tarnoff 2020). *Walkouts* by tech workers as well as their interference into political debates have had increased impact in the last years (Tarnoff 2020). However, in contrast to the global reach of its corporations the scope of tech worker activity often remains local or national and does not reach transnational levels.

The issue of the global reach of capital in the world market and the local reach of worker power is an issue as old as the capitalist development. National legislation has limited the reach of unions specifically since the internationalization of value chains in the 1970s (Harvey 2011), an issue that has become even more pressing in the age of global tech companies. The goal of this article is to situate the challenges of tech workers within global tech corporations in this history and to systematize the existing hurdles and opportunities. More precisely, I ask when and how transnational forms of organizing have evolved within this field in the last decade. The underlying assumption of this article is that the global reach of tech corporations comes along with opportunities for workers in some field that deserve more attention – namely grassroots action, labor mobility and increased levels of structural power for certain worker groups. While those dynamics and potentials remain far from shifting the power dynamics in the industry, they present noteworthy phenomena that deserve scholarly attention. I also argue that tech workers can learn from the coordination of warehouse logistics and gig workers in other companies.

In this article, the term tech work relates to occupations such as software engineers, technical writers, UX designers and other employed white-collar staff at tech companies (Rothstein 2022). In my understanding, tech workers are wage-dependent employees who work predominantly on cognitive tasks, earn middle- to higher-ranged salaries and often possess (relative) secure employment status. Tech worker organizing has gained some attention in the last years. Even before the current wave of firings and crash of investment banks, tech workers have been able to challenge management and capital holders in the political arena (Molinari 2020). With 2022 as “the worst year that the tech industry had experienced [...] since the financial crisis of 2008” (Mickle and Grant 2023)<sup>2</sup> and the degree of conflict in the industry rising, it appears timely to assess the power structure and capital-labor contestations in this field. The article is structured in five sections. Following this introduction, the relevance of tech workers and their labor conflicts are explained and embedded into the recent history of transnational labor organizing. Then, an overview of local and national efforts of worker organizing in tech is given. This is

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2 According to reporting, the US tech giants Apple, Amazon, Alphabet, Microsoft and Meta lost around \$3.9 trillion in market value in 2022 (Mickle and Grant 2023).

followed by a section that describes three cases of existing or achieved transnational alliances of tech workers and their opportunities and hurdles. A concluding chapter elaborates on possible future developments and further research opportunities.

The analysis in this article is based on three sources. The main part stems from a review of academic literature, news reporting and grey literature on the issue (strategy papers, event announcements and event reports). To a smaller extent and with focus on the second case of this article (Tech Workers Coalition), the analysis draws from the analysis of ten qualitative interviews with tech workers active in current organizing efforts in Germany, as well as informal exchange with tech workers in the United States and Italy between 2021 and 2023. The analysis is also informed by ongoing ethnographic fieldwork on strategic events of organized IT workers (conferences, workshops, campaign events) alongside with trade unions, activists and other stakeholders in the same time period. As part of this fieldwork, I have also spoken to labor lawyers, unionists and other stakeholders in the industry. The article reflects first findings of this research in an explorative manner, and is an effort to map out the relatively uncharted field of contemporary tech worker organizing.

## **2. Labor Conflicts in Tech: Global Power, Local Counter-Power?**

Although to different degrees, the history of capitalism has always been one of increasing integration between world markets and corporations (Marx and Engels 1978; Arrighi 2010). Especially through the waves of industrialization and financialization in the 20th century, the grip of globally operating firms on local economies and their value creation, labor processes and consumption patterns has increased. Following a series of crisis in the 1970s, the largely national production system of industrial capitalism was superseded by a more global system of long-distance value chains and increased capital mobility based on management patterns such as lean production (Brenner 2008; Harvey 2011). Following a wave of investments after the global recessions of 2001 and 2008, a new regime of global tech companies such as Amazon, Google or Uber has sped up and transformed these patterns once again (Srnicek 2017, Staab 2023). Along with them came the widespread implementation of accumulation models fueled by venture capital and based on remote tracking technologies, cybernetic management and new legal loopholes to undermine formal employment, evade taxes and concentrate market power (Dubal 2017, Altenried et al. 2020, Cooman 2021). As part of this process, production and value chains have become even more intertwined than before (Butollo et al. 2022). The tech industry with its complex net of production, logistics and labor is an illustrative example of such transnational capital mobility.

The capacities of organized labor stand in conspicuous contrast to this planetary reach. Despite continuous efforts and some achievements on an institutional level, unions and related associations still rarely operate globally but remain confined to the national, regional or shopfloor level (Bronfenbrenner 2007). Although globalization has created more favorable conditions for the creation of global union foundations such as UNI Global, coordinated collective action through such organizations has remained rare to this date. In fact, the inability to organize beyond national labor law and organizational nationalism has been considered a major Achilles heel of the labor movement since the 1970s (Silver 2008:1-40), and has manifested in decreasing union density, rise of anti-union legislation and deteriorating labor standards around the globe (Evans 2014:259). Notable exceptions include the campaign against Shell's involvement with apartheid South Africa in the 1980s and also cases of cross-border alliances by trade unions against companies such as Russell Athletics, G4S and several automobile manufacturers in later decades (Bronfenbrenner 2007:2; Evans 2014:259ff.).<sup>3</sup> In the aftermath of the anti globalization protests in Seattle and Porto Alegre, visions of a "new labor internationalism" (Waterman and Wills 2001) evolved arguing that labor movements could make use of transnational organization in similar fashion as corporate actors. The Euromayday movement in Europe used a similar momentum in public and transnationally coordinated protests against precarity in the 2000s (Fahlenbrach et al. 2014). On an institutional level, the cooperation between unions in the course of *European integration* within the EU has led to an array of strategic alliances such as the *European Trade Union Council* (ETUC) and even to political unity on issues such as a European minimum wage (Seeliger 2021:38f.). Tools such as the European Works Council are products of this development (Spiegelaere et al. 2022). Other recent, legally binding results of global powerbuilding have been the *International Domestic Workers Federation* (IDWFED) in the case of domestic workers, the *Maritime Labour Convention* (MLC) for seafarers as well as successful collective agreement struggles in the aviation industry (Boris and Fish 2014; Adăscăliței 2014; Spiegelaere 2020). Despite these success stories and improvements, it remains to be said that labor organizations have not been able to "match the other side's speed and mobility and capacity to change" (Yussuff 2006) and have largely failed to mobilize significant counterpower against global capital.

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3 Some examples include transnational alliances between United Steel Workers (USW) and United Autoworkers (UAW) in the United States with Brazilian unions, a transnational campaign against the security company G4S in 2008 or a campaign against the transnational company Russel Athletics in cooperation with anti-sweatshop initiatives (Evans 2014).

The rise of a global tech industry, alongside with its high degrees of power concentration, deregulation and rent extraction has raised the question of power resources and (transnational) struggles within the labor movement once again (Basualdo et al. 2021). While the influence of the IT industry on global markets dates back at least to the 1980s (Kushida 2015), the status and influence of contemporary tech firms has been elevated in ways that today qualify them as a “leading sector” (Silver 2008:75) of capitalist development. Some aspects that qualify them as leading sector will be explained in the following: their degree of capital concentration in the overall economy, their function as governors of (critical) infrastructures, and their transformation in the world of work (see e.g. Srnicek 2017, Kenney and Zysman 2020, Staab 2023). Most visibly, the degree of capital concentration and global reach of contemporary tech firms is unprecedented. As of 2021, the seven most valuable public traded firms worldwide were tech companies (Kenney et al. 2019). Equally important appears the reach of these companies into social life, as many of them have evolved into “infrastructures of everyday life” (Barns 2019) from underwater sea cables to traffic data, public health or federal elections (Burgess 2022). This has increased the (geo)political and social relevance of these companies. Thirdly, tech companies have transformed the world of work in profound ways. Through various forms of deregulation (employment law, taxation, antitrust), firms often remain out of reach to both workers, unions or government authorities (Dubal 2017). Through the implementation of remote work technologies and data-based performance control, the grip of management in many fields (both low-wage and high-wage occupations) has risen or at least transformed itself. This is for instance reflected in the working conditions of IT workers in international teams who are often subject to informal or technologically mediated competition dynamics (comp. Boes et al. 2012), but also in gig work arrangements ranging from fields as different as social media creation, taxi driving and domestic cleaning (Niebler and Kern 2020, Altenried et al. 2020).

Deriving from these observations are two aspects that make the role of tech workers and questions around their organizing relevant. Although tech workers are bound by management directives, their role often comes with forms of “primary” power (Molinari 2020).<sup>4</sup> This goes both for the workplace itself and possible subsidiaries, but also concerns political issues (*code is law*) due to the increasingly infrastructural character of this work (Chun 2016). Secondly, their position in the production process makes them a somewhat ambiguous category of workers. While the privilege and reluctance of tech workers is emphasized in some debate positions (Roy 2021, Dorschel 2022),

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4 In labor conflicts, structural power is perceived the crucial “primary” power resource and a major lever of workers to stop or hinder the production process (Wright 2000).

others have highlighted processes of proletarianization and collective action (Steinhoff 2022, Rothstein 2022). Reflecting on these aspects, Tarnoff remarks from a Marxist perspective that “the class condition of tech workers is a combination of bourgeois and proletarian elements, which means they are pulled in two directions” (Tarnoff 2020). He sees a contingency towards different political horizons, where white collar workers in tech “can focus on the ways in which they are bourgeois, and identify with the capitalist class; or they can focus on the ways in which they are proletarian, and forge alliances with the working class” (Tarnoff 2020). This interesting ambiguity, along with the aforementioned structural importance of tech firms, make it relevant to take a closer look into transnational organizing efforts of tech workers. The argument underlying this article is neither that transnational collective action is particularly easier or more difficult for tech workers, nor do I take a process of economic degradation or elevation of tech workers for granted. Rather, my observation is that both the tech industry as a leading sector of contemporary capitalism and white collar tech workers in it play a structurally important (and interestingly ambiguous) role and that their labor conflicts therefore deserve attention.

Some early forms of transnational coordination in tech have taken place in recent years. Most well-known are transnational mobilization efforts by low-wage workers, by logistics workers such as *Amazon Workers International* or the *Transnational Federation of Couriers* (Cant and Mogno 2018, Transnational Social Strike Platform 2019). Unions like the *Alphabet Workers Union* in the United States indicate a certain degree of unionization of tech workers in the industry (Jaffe 2021). Still, apart from reports of early efforts and single cases, not much structured knowledge exists about the dynamics of cross-border organization. The aim of this article is to fill this gap by providing an overview of transnational efforts by tech workers as well as on their hurdles and further possibilities.

### **3. Tech Workers Organizing: Recent Developments and History**

According to statistics from 2020, tech workers made up around 4,6 percent of overall employment in the European Union, equaling around 9 million workers (Rothstein 2022). While many tech workers are employed in standard labor relationships, a considerable number also work as temp workers or contractors. The term tech worker is itself a signifier of the conflicts around the role of white collar *professionals* in tech, who have often been appealed to not as workers, but as entrepreneurial or creative subjects. The term was also employed with the idea of connecting the power of different workforce layers within the tech industry with each other. The employment of the term “was premised on a fundamental irony: that by recognizing

that they were workers like anybody else, the most privileged tech workers would become able to exercise their special power within their firms for common good” (Tan and Weigel 2022:216).

According to Tarnoff, workplace conflicts of tech workers tend to fall into three categories: issues around wages and working conditions, concerns for safe and equitable workplaces, and discontent about the social harms of company products (Tarnoff 2020). An additional challenge, it can be added, lies in the volatile and venture capital driven corporate culture, which is susceptible to job losses and fundamentally opposed to collective bargaining (Niebler 2023, Sheehan and Williams 2023). Tech workers have taken collective action around these issues in several ways, most visibly through walkouts, petitions and unionization. Public walkouts have been performed at firms such as Google and Amazon to protest the lack of proper conduct with sexual harassment or lack of environmental responsibilities. Petitions have been a common way to scandalize issues on a company level or beyond, with some of them addressing corporate involvement with defense or border surveillance agencies, and others challenging workplace issues such as exhaustive working hours (Wakabayashi and Scott 2018, Lin 2020, Tan et al. 2023). In the United States, workers launched successful unionization campaigns at companies like Kickstarter, Activision and Alphabet. In India, a wide variety of regional and industry-wide unions and associations for tech workers have been formed (Bhat 2023).<sup>5</sup>

Organizing workers in the IT industry is not a recent phenomenon as such. In the United States, unions such as the Communication Workers of America (CWA) organized for the interests of technical workers in the Bell system and later. Unions of engineers or technical workers have existed across the world and experienced stark growth in the mid twentieth century (Hyman and Price 1983:147-281). In several European countries, the participation of employees in companies like SAP or IBM as works councils or shop stewards is an established practice since several decades. On a more movement oriented level, groups like the IBM Black Workers Alliance in the United States organized collectively against their firm and engaged in political campaigns against the company’s relationship with Apartheid South Africa in the 1970s (Ford 2019; Haeyoung 2022).

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5 Tech worker unions in India include the All India IT Employee Union (AIITEU), Nascent Information Technology Employees Senate (NITES), Karnataka State IT/ITes Employees Union (KITU), and Forum for IT Employees (F.I.T.E.) in Chennai (Bhat 2023).

However, among the recent structures that workers and unions have developed so far, little were able to address and counter the transnational leverage of tech corporations that dominate contemporary economies. While local responses to lay-offs or other contested management decisions can be fought off in some countries, the global reach of corporation enables them to re-direct many of those decisions to other regions, especially Global South or BRICS countries. This has become evident during the recent wave of lay-offs across the world, which has left employees to their national branches and often hindered coordinated responses (Cassauwers 2023). Additionally, some recent research has also pointed to the reluctance of tech worker organizing deriving from their perceived privilege or to their competitive status in the labour market (Roy 2021, Lazar 2023:135). In contrast to this observation, three counter-examples of transnational tech worker organizing will be described in the following. Based on these cases, main indicators and obstacles for transnational tech worker organizing will be reflected on.

#### **4. Transnational Solidarity – hurdles and opportunities**

##### **Google: International Walkouts and Unionization Approaches**

The most prominent moment in recent tech worker organizing took place in November 2018, when circa 20.000 employees at Google staged a public *walk-out* in the company's headquarters and around the world. The protest, initiated as a campaign against the company's non-disclosure policy that protected perpetrators of sexual harassment, was coordinated worldwide: from Tokyo to Singapore over Haifa, Berlin, Zurich and London to several cities in the United States, employees left their offices to demand changes in the company management (Weaver et al. 2018). This protest, described as "one of the largest international labor actions in modern history" (Tarnoff 2020) emphasized the scale and power of organized labor in tech. Main demands consisted of ending forced arbitration in cases of harassment and discrimination, an end to pay and opportunity inequity, a sexual harassment transparency report, inclusive processes for reporting sexual misconduct and accountability structures for a lack of diversity (Tarnoff 2020; Jaffe 2021). The protest was unprecedented both in scale and format, and highlighted the grievances of tech workers on a global level – specifically the issue of gendered inequality and sexualized violence in the workplace. The transnational coordination of the walk-outs was preceded by exchange on the company's internal platforms and forums, which during this process were shut down in parts by management. Concrete preparations then took place through other communication platforms such as Slack and between personal networks of tech workers. Through the format of the walk-out,



employees broke with the anti-union tradition of their trade and industry. To some extent, the action also took place in contrast to established trade union strategies. Although the outcomes were relatively modest (only one of the five demands were met to a sufficient extent), the action set in motion a change of paradigm in the tech industry towards increasing contestation of management and business models even by higher paid workforces (Molinari 2020).

The walkouts at Alphabet, which triggered a wave of labor organizing among software developers and other tech workers in the industry, led also to more coordinated efforts at the company itself. By January 2021, the establishment of the Alphabet Workers Union (AWU) was announced, a cooperation with the union Communication Workers of America (CWA) in the United States. Shortly after, AWU announced a cooperation with the global union federation UNI Global Union. However, this effort appears to have not been fruitful and was tarnished by communication issues (Coulter 2021). From an official side, no further actions were announced after the announcement of the alliance. While the union work at Alphabet in the United States has reached some success despite its small size (see e.g. Jaffe 2021), transnational relations could not be upheld on this formal level.

### **Tech Workers Coalition: Organizing on an Industry Level**

A group that grew in momentum during the Google Walkouts has been the *Tech Workers Coalition* (TWC), a group of tech workers organizing at the industry level. Founded in 2014 by a software engineer and a cafeteria worker in a tech company, TWC is a network with chapters around the world including New York, San Diego, Seattle, Austin, Berlin, Milan and Bologna as of 2023. Former chapters have existed in Bangalore, London and in countries such as the Netherlands and Brazil. The goal of the group is “to build worker power through rank & file self-organization and education” (TWC 2023), guided by a “vision for an inclusive & equitable tech industry” (TWC 2023). Some of the chapters have also merged with unions, such as *United Tech and Allied Workers* in the United Kingdom. While most chapters operate on a city level, some (such as TWC Italy) are more oriented towards the national level. Although the group consists largely of tech workers in the sense used in this article (higher paid white collar staff), the group retains a wide understanding of tech worker and sometimes actively aims to support struggles of maintenance, logistics or gig workers (Kraus 2022; Niebler 2023). While some chapters have remained loose networks, others have formed governance structures and operate as strategic organizations.

The transnational character of the Tech Workers Coalition manifests in two ways: first, through membership exchange on a local level and secondly, through explicit coordination on a global level. *Local-level membership exchange* on transna-

tional issues happens through the mobility and exchange among members. Tech workers transferring cities for new employment often then bring knowledge from one city to another, including knowledge on corporate strategy, organizing practices and legal tactics. For instance, tactics of a firm might differ from country to country but can have similar implications when it comes to layoffs. One example for such an initiative is the Open Salary Initiative created by HelloFresh employees in Germany, a campaign to establish salary transparency through a digital platform (HelloFresh Employees 2023). Besides the more informal exchange between local chapter members, also *explicit coordination on a global level* takes place at the organization. This happens through the global chapter of TWC, an effort to strategically exchange on experiences and strategies in each chapter. The exchange includes support of campaigns and knowledge sharing through monthly online meetings and a common Slack channel. One part of this includes support with infrastructural or advertisement work for new chapters. As one interviewee told me, “for instance we have people in [city] who can do layout and graphic design, so we connect them to other chapters who need it” (Interview, May 2023). On the groups’ communication patterns and structure, Tan and Weigel (2022) state that “TWC has used Slack to facilitate conversation among members of far-flung chapters. Even though the TWC remains a leaderless and decentralized organization, the TWC Slack – with nearly 3,000 participants – acts as a centralized space for its members to collaborate on projects, share knowledge, and host events.” (Tan and Weigel 2022:220). The elaborate use of agile office management tools like Slack for such purposes indicates that white collar workers in tech also make use of those tools in subversive ways.

Generally, the leverage of the TWC approach on both a local and transnational level appears to lie in its grassroots and pragmatic strategy towards organizing in tech. Besides their communication platforms and regular meetings, the group maintains no institutionalized structure in the form of registered associations or other entities. This provides a low threshold for people to join (compared to unions) and enables members to socialize quickly, which is a main objective of the group. The obvious disadvantage of this form is the lack of “institutional power” (Schmalz and Dörre 2014) which requires some TWC chapters to work together with established trade unions and other institutions. Examples for this are the cooperation of TWC in Silicon Valley with unions such as Unite Here to mobilize Facebook cafeteria workers in the company’s headquarters (Weigel 2017), the cooperation of TWC in Germany with *verdi* and *IG Metall* to defend works councils (Bulkeley 2020), or matchmaking activities between workers and *CGIL* unions in Italy to ensure appropriate legal aid and support. Despite setbacks in some chapters, the approach of TWC appears to be the most vivid and long term network of tech worker organizing and an important starting point for labor activists in the industry. At least in the case of Germany, this

appears to also stem from the fact that TWC sees itself not as a union: “The attractive thing about TWC is exactly that we are not a union. It is already difficult to explain to people what structures and subsection of verdi would even be responsible for them. So they are happy to not have to deal with that” (Interview, March 2023). While TWC has so far not launched transnational campaigns itself and has mostly just supported ongoing cases of collective action (such as the ones mentioned before and in the following), its value lies in the facilitation of a transnational tech worker network, a form of global and political community building that remains rare in the contemporary labour movement.

### **Countering Geopolitics of Tech: China/US Alliances on Github**

A third and instructive example of transnational collective action among tech workers took place during the evolution of the 996.ICU movement, a protest movement against the excessive working time culture at tech companies in China.<sup>6</sup> The rise of tech firms like Tencent, Alibaba or Baidu has created employment opportunities for knowledge workers across the country, who had accepted their company’s overwork culture “as a tradeoff for higher salaries in a prospering sector” (Lin 2020:54). However, this turned around when the industry’s growth slowed down and exchange on grievances among workers expanded (Li 2019). The movement against 996 gained momentum in March and April of 2019 and spread quickly, gaining national recognition and new reporting besides the lack of free press in the country.

The campaign, which mainly spread on the open source development platform Github, consisted of three parts: first, a crowdsourced blacklist of tech firms who maintain 996 rules to warn potential applicants, secondly, promotional material for anti-996 software in China that would make it possible to report violations against article 36 of China’s labor law which states that workers should not work more than 8 hours a day. Thirdly, it consisted of an online forum where workers discussed their own experiences with excessive working time. Additionally, a Slack workspace helped the group to coordinate and served as a “private space to congregate and strategize” (Tan and Weigel 2022:213).

The use of Github site as a platform for protest and communication was done strategically to prevent censorship in China, as the platform is “used as critical engineering infrastructure by Chinese Tech companies” (Tan and Weigel 2022:213). However,

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6 According to the initiators, the term 996.ICU refers to “Work by ‘996’, sick in ICU”, an ironic saying among Chinese developers, which means that by following the “996” work schedule, you are risking yourself getting into the ICU (Intensive Care Unit).” (GitHub 2023).

some of the companies blocked the platform and after a while, concerns grew that the platform owner Microsoft might be pressured to shut down the 996 site. This was noticed by groups of organized tech workers, most notably by members of TWC, who launched a “support.996.ICU” campaign on Github and mobilized counter-pressure in order to prevent the shut-down of the website. In their analysis of this transnational cooperation, Tan and Weigel highlight the importance of “preexisting relationships between Chinese labor organizers, US-based Chinese academics, and Chinese immigrants working in the US tech sector” (Tan and Weigel 2022:219) as basis for the cooperation. Specifically, a member of TWC who had attended informational events on labor organizing in China at a university conference in the United States and who worked at Microsoft at the time drew the attention to the issue at the company and the need to build up pressure (Tan and Weigel 2022). Tan and Weigel maintain that although it is unclear whether Microsoft in fact considered putting the project site offline, efforts by Chinese corporations to pressure the company did indeed exist.

The transnational cooperation between Chinese and US tech workers appears remarkable in contrast to the unsuccessful efforts by institutional actors in the United States and China, specifically unions, to advance cooperative action on a transnational level in recent years. Lin (2020:57) remarks that “[d]espite years of both high-level union exchanges and people-to-people discussions, actual communication and solidarity actions in support of one another remain uncommon.” (Lin 2020:57). Although the de facto impact of the action remains difficult to evaluate or quantify, the case suggests that informal coordination through tools such as Github or Slack as well as coordination through non-union groups such as TWC can serve as powerful tools to mobilize worker power against corporations.

The public recognition of the 996.ICU campaign and its methods had several repercussions in both China and other countries. In China, a “freedom of information campaign” was launched in order to make it able for employees to report breaches of employment laws accordingly (Lin 2020). Some Chinese companies banned the specific site on Github on their networks but a countrywide ban was never established. Generally, tech workers around the world have since made use of Github as a tool or platform for organizing efforts, for instance against the US company Palantir or by software developers from Iran to protest sanctions of their work on Github (Tan and Weigel 2022).

### **Common Denominators for Success and Challenges**

Overall, the three cases laid out here show that despite a lack of institutional arrangements, transnational solidarity has been present in some of the recent organizing efforts among tech workers. Notably, it can be said that some of them have led to

the establishment of the (current) tech worker movement itself. While institutionalized successes remain rare to this date, it has been possible to build up public awareness and momentum (Google Walkout, 966.ICU) as well as sustained pro-labor networking (Tech Workers Coalition), building associational power resources and the public attention necessary to build up and accelerate collective action in tech.

One apparent aspect of all cases described here concerns the *grassroots character, informal networking and direct action tactics* that workers have used in these examples. The non-existence of any representative bodies in the highly deregulated tech sectors is surely one reason for the development of this “decentralized and networked model of organizing” (Lin 2020:58). However, even their existence in the form of conventional modes of unionization, which the case of (the so far inactive) cooperation between Alphabet Workers Union and UNI Global Union, do not appear successful on transnational level so far. This is different from the national level, where groups such as the AWU have reached some success even in their position as a *minority union* at the company. The high density of tech worker unions in countries like India (see section 3) also speak to this contrasting success potential between unionism on a national and on a transnational level.

In the cases shown here, the issue of *labor mobility and migration* appears to have played an important role. The networks between tech workers across the world, which have been established through the transnational mode of the industry but also actively through the workers themselves are based on (and accelerated by) the steady movement of workers in tech and help to circulate critical knowledge on organizing tactics. The Tech Workers Coalition is the clearest manifestation of this, and its potential reveals in concrete campaigns such as the Google walkouts and the transnational support at Microsoft during 996.ICU campaign. Of course, migration movements are not always of transnational nature but also exist in domestic labor markets.

Furthermore, it appears notable that although tech workers have made use of public attention and have built associational power through communication platforms and campaigns, they have made little use of their *structural power* as tech workers.<sup>7</sup> In a critical reflection on strategies of the tech worker movement, the organizer Carmen Molinari (2020) refers to this when remarking that “[s]urprisingly small groups of tech workers have the power to halt Uber pickups, prevent shipping of items from every

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7 In labor conflicts, structural power is perceived the crucial ‘primary’ power resource and a major lever of workers to stop or hinder the production process (Wright 2000).

Amazon warehouse around the world, or disrupt services like Google Drive that businesses in other industries rely on” (Molinari 2020) This argument holds even more true for forms of transnational organizing (and the disruption of global tech infrastructures), but it appears not to have been put into practice so far. Such reluctance is surely connected to the severe legal and material consequences workers face for such actions. Still, it remains unclear why the potential of disrupting the infrastructural power of tech has not been a more substantial part of the debates around organizing in tech so far.

Lastly, given the fact that tech workers are not the only group of workers organizing in their industry, a consideration of other transnational collective action in tech (as mentioned in section 2) might be insightful. Although organizing in the tech industry has generally remained experimental and often temporary, low-wage workers have been able to build up transnational organizing campaigns. Most notably, the *Amazon Workers International* organizing network has been able to mount quite sophisticated cross-border organizing campaign (Transnational Social Strike Platform 2019). The group, which was founded in 2015, connects Amazon warehouse and logistics workers from the United States, Turkey, Germany, Poland, Slovakia, France and other countries to coordinate collective action (Transnational Social Strike Platform 2019). When planning strikes and protest actions for symbolic, internationally advertised days such as *Prime Day* or *Black Friday*, the group coordinates with warehouses in other countries so that the company is not able to reroute its deliveries. Such tactics have led to the improvement of conditions, increase in wages and in the case of Italy even to a collective agreement. Organizers and activists highlight the novelty of such organizing that does not follow “an already established model to be followed” (Transnational Social Strike Platform 2019:5) and how they challenge unions while working together with them at the same time. In several countries, workers of the network were able to cooperate with trade unions, while at the same time challenging their national focus: “Amazon workers are [...] very clear about the need to push trade unions beyond their limits as national structures, in so far as they can be obstacles rather than tools to produce and maintain a political communication across borders” (Transnational Social Strike Platform 2019:5). Since 2022, Amazon workers in the European Union have also formed a European Works Council, which provides slight degrees of corporate transparency as well as training and time resources for works council members and collective meetings.

The *Transnational Federation of Couriers* was a transnational federation of platform delivery couriers founded in 2018 (Cant and Mogno 2020). While the group appears to be not active anymore, it has held several international physical meetings, launched a media campaign to highlight the rising number of rider deaths connected to the

working conditions of platforms, planned coordinated protest actions and produced political information material for workers (Cant and Mogno 2020). Amongst other things, the meetings have helped riders across countries identify market strategies of their companies. This last aspect appears particularly relevant, since tech firms in the gig economy follow specific scripts of market entry (such as a period of attractive conditions in the beginning to secure market dominance) that are crucial for the situation of workers and their leverage against the company. The importance of such physical, strategic and transnational meetings remains visible in the form of similar and more recent formats, such as International Gig Worker Congress in 2023 by the service sector union SEIU in Los Angeles.

For tech worker mobilization, three insights appear relevant here. First, the possibility to interrupt production processes on a cross-border level and to prevent companies from rerouting production processes is also a possibility for white collar workers. While it remains easier for firms to reroute cognitive labor to contractors or offshore destinations, developing cross-border labor networks between workforces in different countries can result in material counter-power for workers and unions. Those can be a starting point for campaigns around wage justice, a demand that Amazon workers have formulated in the course of their transnational efforts. Horizontal and bottom-up networks like TWC appear to offer a fertile basis for such strategies. Second, challenging unions while working with them is something that appears useful for tech worker groups as well. Both low-wage workers and high-wage workers in tech share grievances (capital-heavy market entries, remote control, data-based surveillance, new work ideologies) and counter-tactics in their struggles that have been hard to comprehend for traditional trade unions. To reflect on learned lessons from other groups in the same industry could be benefitting in this context. Third, the possibility to join forces with the efforts of low wage workers can pose an attractive opportunity in some cases. This has happened already to some extent in the form of exchanges between groups like Amazon Employees for Climate Justice and Amazon Workers International (Amazon Employees for Climate Justice 2020), and appears especially useful if concrete interests overlap, such as in the fight against corporate surveillance or during large-scale layoffs. In some corporate contexts (global firms with low-wage workers and high-wage workforces), this can offer commonly viable targets for cross-status organizing.

## 5. Conclusions

This article has looked at forms of transnational solidarity between white collar tech workers around the world. Building worker power across borders has been a challenge for the labor movement since its emergence, and the rise of a global tech industry has raised the question of how to tackle those hurdles once again. Although organizing and unionization have become prominent in local and national contexts recently, collected and structured knowledge about transnational solidarity networks remains scarce so far. On the basis of three cases and drawing from existing literature and background interviews, the article shows that transnational solidarity among tech workers has been an important element of contemporary tech worker organizing. While it remains easier to build power on the level of a single corporation or nation state level, transnational organizing can bear powerful momentum and even appears necessary in many cases to disrupt or pressure the operations of a firm. This has become clear through the walkouts at Google, which exemplified the disruptive potential and symbolic value of globally coordinated work stoppages. Additionally, continuous networking of tech workers on a local and global level within the Tech Workers Coalition has contributed to transnational ties within the movement. Concrete action such as the cooperation between Chinese and US tech workers for the 996.ICU campaign has been based on such ties and challenge both the prevalent mode of competition among tech workers as well as the assumption of a nationally siloed workforce. From all three cases of transnational action and networking introduced here, some common dynamics stick out: first, the grassroots character of the actions, second, the role of labor mobility for the circulation of knowledge and networks, and third, the surprising lack of structural power in these actions so far.

Although this article showed that early steps of transnational tech worker organizing have been made, the lack of longer lasting forms of power has to be highlighted. To address these issues, tech workers could learn from the campaigns of logistics workers or gig workers at companies such as the Amazon Workers International network, where successful cross-country coordination has taken place in the past and some institutionalization has taken place (Transnational Social Strike 2019). Furthermore, the use of regulatory frameworks and their reforms can be taken into account. One example in Europe is the reform of the European Works Council (EWC) system through a recent directive in the European Union, which could give works councils more power and some co-determination rights on a transnational level (Spiegelaere et al. 2022). In March 2023, a first agreement was signed to establish such a EWC at Google/Alphabet in the EU, UK and Switzerland (UNI Global Union 2023). However, the de facto leverage of such entities remains low and largely symbolic so far. Given the reach of global tech companies today, researchers and political actors are well



advised to expand their attention beyond the national level. Transnational actions and networks, such as the ones introduced here, contain important leverage within the globally entangled landscape of tech. The cases introduced here show that white collar tech workers can be powerful actors in such conflicts. Their power building efforts present a contrast to the perceived passivity, individualism or lack of worker consciousness often attributed to them.

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## Appendix

### Interviews

#	Occupation	Organized	Gender	Date	Location
1	Software Engineer	Yes	male	15.04.22	Berlin
2	Software Engineer	Yes	male	25.07.22	Berlin
3	Software Engineer	No	male	03.11.22	Berlin
4	Software Engineer	Yes	female	13.11.22	Berlin
5	Software Engineer	Yes	female	23.11.22	Berlin
6	Data Scientist	Yes	male	31.03.23	Berlin
7	Software Engineer	Yes	male	06.05.23	Berlin
8	Software Engineer	Yes	male	10.05.23	Berlin
9	Software Engineer	Yes	female	17.05.23	Berlin
10	Software Engineer	Yes	female	12.07.23	Berlin