This article argues that the efforts of worker-run governance bodies are integral for securing worker citizenship at consumer cooperatives; however, are not immune to challenges associated with forging worker solidarity across racial and ethnic lines. Using a mixed methods approach that includes focus groups, individual interviews, and textual and policy analyses, this study looks at the impact of unions on the social, political, and civil rights of workers in two unionized food cooperatives in Vermont. It was concluded that unions provided critical opportunities for civic engagement and workplace democracy although more work was needed in the area of inclusion.

Introduction

This article investigates work in the food retail industry and the impact of consumer cooperatives and unions on worker citizenship. Specially, we examine how individuals and institutions (both inside and outside the workplace) construct citizenship, illuminating the factors that both constrain and encourage political engagement and workplace democracy in the food industry. This article draws upon ethnographic data collected through two case studies centered upon the only two unionized food cooperatives in Vermont: City Market and Hunger Mountain. The primary methods included interviews and focus groups conducted with workers, policy makers, and labor movement activists and advocates.

The broader study informing this article posed two central questions: How do citizenship practices and demographic variables of food workers in unionized food cooperatives and the broader regulatory framework inform the work of labor advocacy organizations and policy makers in Vermont? What types of strategies do labor advocacy organizations and policy makers employ to influence the impact of the broader regulatory framework on citizenship? Addressing these questions required an inquiry into workplace decision making, compensation and benefits, and the relationships between labor advocacy organizations, policy makers, and the broader regulatory framework concerning labor systems and workers rights.
This article illuminates the important connections between citizenship, unionization, and workplace democracy within unionized food cooperatives. While consumer cooperatives such as City Market and Hunger Mountain boast a commitment to sustainability and building community, the focus on consumer needs bears little impact on workplace decision making and the rights of retail food workers. We argue that the union, rather than the cooperative structure, is the principal means through which workers at unionized food cooperatives influence workplace decisions. Unions also serve to encourage civic engagement outside the workplace, providing the necessary traction to demand more sweeping policy changes that would affect unionized and non-unionized workers alike. Although workers view the consumer cooperative as a potential site for building community and making food more accessible, our findings show that the majority of study participants recognized the union and management as the primary decision makers. Unions play a critical role in promoting citizen engagement and workplace democracy in consumer cooperatives, though, as we describe below in a case study about refugee workers, unions are not always effective in forging worker solidarity across racial and ethnic lines.

Theoretical Approach

Citizenship and the State

Citizenship is broadly defined as the relationship between individuals and the communities in which they live and is most commonly understood as the relationship between the individual and the state (Dwyer 2010). Therefore, the degree to which one is involved in or excluded from one’s community, through both institutions and interpersonal relations, is a measure of citizenship. Social scientists have identified clear ways to gauge levels of access to the rights and obligations connected to citizenship. These approaches involve an emphasis on one or more aspects of the citizenship framework proposed by T.H. Marshall, which is comprised of social, political, and civil rights (Marshall 1964). According to this definition, social rights refer to one’s ability to meet their basic needs, such as healthcare and retirement while political rights are an individual’s ability to navigate the governance process and advocate for policy at various levels. Civil rights include protection from discrimination as well as freedom of thought and speech. This article employs this comprehensive definition of citizenship to explore the strategies workers employ to access these rights in the workplace.

Citizenship and the Workplace

Workplace democracy is a critical concept for understanding the degree to which workers engage in the workplace as citizens. According to George Cheney, workplace democracy can be broadly defined as “a system of governance which truly values individual goals and feelings as well as typically organizational objectives which actively fosters the connection between those two sets of
concerns by encouraging individual contributions to important organizational choices, and which allows for the ongoing modification of the organization’s activities and policies by the group (1995).” Integrating this perspective with Fantasia’s equation of workplace democracy with worker control, we explore how labor advocacy organizations embolden workers to participate meaningfully and make autonomous decisions in matters that are related to their livelihoods, both individually and collectively (Fantasia 1988).

In a study of workplace democracy in Venezuelan cooperatives, Maurizio Atzeni found that cooperatives with the highest levels of workplace democracy were those that “encourage[ed] as many workers as possible to actively participate in all important decisions, in an egalitarian environment given by a true equality of rights, duties and social status...” (Atzeni 2012). He found that standards for workplace democracy were elevated when workers sought to advance democracy outside of their own organization. The legal structure of capitalist firms constrains worker citizenship whereas shareholder investor control, which exists in consumer cooperatives, presents barriers to the total achievement of workplace democracy. In this article, we examine how unions and cooperatives both advance and hinder workplace democracy and civic engagement internal and external to the workplace.

**Constraints to Citizenship**

In a review of pertinent literature, Tonn and Peitrich document the constraints posed to citizenship in the everyday life of Americans, with the assumption that a democratic approach to governance is the most likely way to secure a sustainable future as a society (Tonn and Peitrich 1998, 784). The authors claim that an individual’s time to effectively participate in governance and his/her ability to bear the risks associated with participation are impeded by work, lifestyle (consumerism, lack of social capital, personal fears, and anxieties), and built environment constraints. For these authors, the future of democracy in the U.S. will continue to devolve if these constraints to citizenship are not assuaged. Therefore, they charge employers and government with the task of alleviating these constraints for workers through various means such as decreasing the number of hours people are expected to work. These scholars highlight the role of worker advocacy organizations and policymakers in encouraging worker participation in workplace and state governance and the factors that encourage and deter workers from engaging in these processes.

Constraints to citizenship in the workplace, such as threats to union security and welfare provisioning, create further barriers to practicing active citizenship in workplace governance. In his reflections on the labor movement, Rudy (2009) determines that the belief system of market fundamentalism is pervasive in the U.S.; workers are viewed by their employers as mere commodities and are therefore subject to wages and protections that correlate with their market value. “Low-skilled” workers are thus placed in low-wage jobs with few/limited protections. According to the same study, migrant workers are often hired over non-
migrants due to an assumption that it is acceptable to provide these workers with lower wages and fewer rights, which employers see as advantageous for maximizing profits. Accounts of racism as a constraint in the workplace are also well documented in labor research (Gordon and Lendhart 2007; Sawchuk 2009; Schlosser 2002).

Unions and Consumer Cooperatives

In 1844, a group of British flannel weavers who called themselves the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers established one of the first consumer food cooperatives after being fired and then blacklisted by their employers for attempting a strike the previous year. In addition to operating their store, the Pioneers managed a variety of cooperatives, such as common land and housing as well as production cooperatives. At around the same time, John Kaulback, a journeyman tailor from Boston, formed a group-buying club as a means through which to encourage involvement in his union. In 1845, the group met for the first time to divide and distribute the products and produce that had been bought. Founded on similar principles as the Rochdale pioneers, this group sought to elevate the interests of the laboring class through cooperation (Curl 2009). This marked the start of the cooperative store movement in the U.S., which, at its founding, was a combined response to the concerns of working people and consumers.

Other significant examples of consumer cooperatives and unions working together cropped up throughout the remaining half of the 19th century. In 1875, the Sovereigns of Industry built up approximately 100 local councils, operating cooperative stores and boasting 40,000 members in about twenty states (Curl 2009). Founder William H. Earle proclaimed that the organization was to be dedicated to “elevating the character, improving the condition, and, as far as possible, perfecting the happiness of the labor class” (Earle 1874). While fighting for higher wages and better working conditions for their 800,000 members, the Knights of Labor also built a massive chain of cooperatives with the mission of abolishing wage slavery and replacing the capitalist wage system with workplace democracy as part of a vision they called the “Cooperative Commonwealth” (Curl 2009). In 1896, the American Federation of Labor declared their support for Rochdale-style consumer cooperatives, stating that trade unionism and cooperation were “twin sisters,” encouraging the formation of consumer cooperatives wherever possible. This was followed by the development of several consumer cooperatives within unions, especially in the years leading up to the Great Depression (Curl 2009). In 1919, a butcher’s union opened a cooperative meat stall that would eventually serve as the basis of the Cooperative Food Products Association and expand into grocery stores (Curl 2009). Union critiques of consumer cooperatives extend as far back as the 1880s and stem primarily from the lack of worker autonomy that exists in this model. Over time, the relationship between unions and cooperatives eroded as the socialist and communist purges of the early 20th century occurred in both
unions and cooperatives, unions became more closely aligned with party politics, and consumer cooperatives came in and out of existence.

While unions and cooperatives once held strong relationships, they now face a dwindling existence and largely endure independently from one another. City Market and Hunger Mountain are rare examples of consumer cooperatives that are also unionized. In this article, we explore how consumer cooperative and union governance structures interact with one another as well as how their defining principles overlap and differ.

Context for Case Studies

The United Electrical Radio and Machine (UE) workers formed in 1936 as the first union chartered by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) after being rejected by the American Federation of Labor. Upon organizing workers employed by industrial moguls such as General Electric and Westinghouse, the UE reached its peak membership by 1945 of 500,000. Due to political disagreements, the UE was withdrawn from the CIO in 1949. In the coming months, the CIO and other political stakeholders launched a massive attack on the UE for their “communist” tendencies. As the anti-communist backlash continued through the 1950s, the UE lost more than half of its membership and faced public undermining by the media. While external organizing efforts in the 1960s and 70s made up for some of these losses, the UE took a major hit along with other unions in the 1980s. The UE was finally able to recover some of their losses in the 90s due to aggressive organizing initiatives and new independent union affiliation. Since recouping, the UE has gone from being a predominantly industrial union to a bastion for both public and private sector workers, representing workers at the Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity, theater workers in downtown Burlington, and service and maintenance workers at the University of Vermont.

City Market was founded by another name in 1973 as a buying club located in the Old North End of Burlington, VT. In 2002, having grown significantly in members and in physical size, the cooperative membership made the decision to move to its current location in downtown. In 2013, the store made a gross profit of over 13 million dollars and maintains a membership of approximately 9,100 people. Within the past decade, the gross profit and cooperative membership has been growing steadily each year (City Market Cooperative 2013).

Hunger Mountain began as a pre-order service in Plainfield, Vermont in the late 1960s. In the early 1970s, having outgrown their original location, the cooperative membership decided to move to a location in downtown Montpelier and eventually to a third location, where the store can be found today. In 2013, the store made a gross profit of over seven million dollars and boasted a membership of approximately 7,200 people (Hunger Mountain Cooperative 2013). Today City Market and Hunger Mountain are two of sixteen food cooperatives located in the state of Vermont.
The unionization efforts at City Market and Hunger Mountain were distinct in several respects. At City Market, the store was on the verge of collapse due to financial instability therefore employees bargained for higher wages, with a commitment from management to work toward livable wages, periodically disclose information about the store’s fiscal standing, and protect their benefits (Interview with Beverly Haskins 2013). Shortly after City Market unionized in 2003, a manager at Hunger Mountain who is now the President of Local 255 sought out the assistance of UE when the healthcare benefits of a majority of her coworkers came under threat by management. While one story speaks to the importance of union representation so that workers can safely and effectively advocate for the protection of the benefits that were thought to have been secured, the other sheds light on the advantages of transparency and accountability from management of which the union can make due request. In both of these instances, workers exercised their social, political, and civil rights as citizens in the workplace by exhibiting autonomy over business decisions that affect their social security and lives outside of work.

While workers in food cooperatives earn 6.7 percent more than conventional grocery store workers, unionized blue-collar workers make 23.3 percent more than their non-unionized peers (Coop: Healthy Foods, Healthy Communities; Economic Policy Institute 2011). In addition, the wage disparity amongst women and people of color in unions tends to be smaller than in non-unionized workplaces (Economic Policy Institute 2011). Food cooperatives are traditionally structured as consumer cooperatives, empowering consumers to make decisions about product sourcing. While many retail food cooperatives were once primarily run by member volunteers in exchange for a discount, most stores now hire professional management and operate the store with paid staff (University of Wisconsin 2009). At City Market and Hunger Mountain, this includes a General Manager who is hired by the Board of Directors (elected by consumer owners) and is then responsible for hiring and firing all middle management and overseeing the hiring and firing of rank and file staff.

In 2013, 14.1 percent of grocery store workers were represented by a union. Although this is the highest industry rate in the retail trade sector, it has fallen from 20.4 percent of the workforce in 2000 (National Bureau for Economics Research). Despite the low density of unions in food retail, the difference between the rights of unionized versus non-unionized workers in this industry is stark. A 2002 study concludes that unionized workers in the food retail industry earn wages that are nearly a third higher than their non-unionized counterparts and that 68 percent of this group has health insurance through their employer as opposed to just 36 percent of non-unionized workers (Institute for Women’s Policy Research). Unionized workers are legally entitled to the right to bargain a contract with management, which must be followed by both parties in order to avoid the legal repercussions associated with a contract breach. Although this process does not always satisfy every individual worker’s needs, as is evident in the following interview data, Collective Bargaining functions to represent the collective interests of a group of workers through the contract process. The
union is typically the primary body charged with realizing and reinforcing these goals.

Constraints to citizenship for workers in the food industry are equivalent, if not worse in some areas, to U.S. workplaces overall. In a survey conducted by the Food Chain Worker’s Alliance, 86 percent of food workers were found to be earning poverty wages (2012). As is common in U.S. workplaces, the predominantly low-wage worker population surveyed in this study also lacked healthcare (83 percent) and paid sick day benefits (79 percent) (Liu 2012). The percentage of those making a subminimum wage is higher for people of color (Black, Latino, Asian, American Indian), than for Whites. Further, almost half (43.6 percent) of undocumented workers in the food system are reported to earn subminimum wages and are estimated to experience wage theft at a much higher rate than documented workers. Citizenship barriers, whereby an individual’s access to social, political, and civil rights is limited, exacerbate these racialized dynamics in the workplace.

Within the food system as a whole, retail food work constitutes 13 percent of employment in the food industry (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010). Front line workers in food retail, who make up the bulk of food industry jobs (86 percent), earn less than their counterparts in food production, processing, and distribution, and are only surpassed by front line workers in food service (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010). Food retail workers report part time employment as the most challenging aspect of their work due to the impact this has on their ability to maintain a secure income, access employer-sponsored health insurance, and plan their life outside of work (Food Chain Workers Alliance 2012). Although 62 percent of workers in food cooperatives are employed full time compared with just 43 percent in conventional grocery stores, according to a study on food cooperatives in northwestern New England, a large portion of food workers in both types of retail are part time (Hoffer 2013). Food system workers also use food stamps at more than 150 percent the rate of use by all employed frontline workers in the U.S. (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010).

The state of Vermont, while heralded for its progressive policies, is not immune to these dynamics. The Vermont food system accounts for approximately 16 percent (or 56,419) of all private sector jobs (Farm to Plate Strategic Plan 2012). Food workers provide the public with essential goods and help to preserve the quality associated with the Vermont brand. In addition, cooperatives are prevalent in Vermont as more crop up overtime throughout the state and at least two organizations, Cooperative Vermont and the Vermont Employee Ownership Center, are dedicated to fostering the continued development of cooperatives. As the local food movement in Vermont continues to grow, it is crucial that workplace democracy and citizen engagement also move forward. Rampant accounts about the lack of worker protections and benefits in the food industry indicate that there is a clear need for a workplace and a policy that reflects the varied self-interests of the people and specifically rank and file workers. In this article, we examine the emergence of similar workplace constraints that are seen on a national scale as well as others and how the citizenship
barriers discussed by Tonn and Peitrich come into play in unionized food cooperatives.

Methodological Approach

In following a Community Based Action Research approach, the following set of core values were central in this study—Collaboration, Participation, Transparency, and Accountability. We chose to engage this approach through working with the UE union as the body that represents rank and file workers at City Market and Hunger Mountain. Brad McKinley, a Vermont-based union representative for the UE as well as a former employee and chief steward at City Market, acted as a guide for this research process, providing invaluable input that aided in forming research questions and deciding the most appropriate methods. Beverly Haskins, the union representative for City Market and Hunger Mountain since unionization in 2003, has been crucial to developing a better understanding of workplace democracy at both case study sites.

In the late summer of 2013, we began to recruit workers at City Market and Hunger Mountain Cooperatives for interviews. Building upon prior relationships with stewards at both stores, we received crucial assistance with outreach and recruitment from union officers. The first author completed interviews with a total of 45 of City Market’s approximately 180 rank and file workers and 22 of Hunger Mountain’s 140. These interviews were conducted both one-on-one with individuals and through focus groups, depending on worker availability and scheduling. The biggest departments at both Hunger Mountain and City Market are Grocery and Prepared Foods, so recruitment efforts focused on those departments, with the goal of recruiting as representative a sample as possible of workers from a variety of rank and file positions.

Significant in terms of citizenship, the kitchen at City Market includes many refugee workers who speak English as a second language, whereas at Hunger Mountain this sub-department is relatively homogenous in terms of legal citizenship and language. Given these demographics, two focus groups were conducted with workers from Prepared Foods, one made up of workers who spoke English as a first language and another made up of workers that spoke Swahili as a first language, as well as an additional interview with a native English speaker. By recruiting people from a wide array of departments and positions and with varying English-speaking abilities, we aimed to focus in particular on the experience of workers with differential access to citizenship.

While only 1 percent of the population in Vermont is Black or African American and 4.1 percent are foreign born, 3.9 percent of Burlington residents are Black or African American and 9.6 percent are foreign born (Vermont Quick Facts, U.S. Census Bureau). Approximately 6,300 people have come to Vermont through the federal resettlement program since 1989, many of whom have settled in the Burlington area (7Days 2014). In Vermont, 9 percent of the foreign-born population is from Africa which means that immigrants in Vermont are
more than twice as likely to be from Africa compared with immigrants in the U.S.

Although there was proportionality in the number of people of color who participated in this study between the Prepared Foods Department and other front of the house departments, a majority of the refugee workers employed at City Market were confined to the Prepared Foods Department, usually in one of the lowest paid positions in the store—Prepared Foods Generalist. As we will discuss in the results section, this isolation tended to inform their perspectives toward and experiences of advancement opportunities, connection to union members and elected leaders, and the respect they experienced in the workplace. In addition, their lack of permanent residency status and perceived and actual language barriers interfered with their citizenship rights.

In addition to interviews with food workers, five stakeholder interviews were conducted with UE union representatives, union stewards, and key staff with the Vermont Workers Center. These individuals were selected because of the important roles they play in advocating for comprehensive and progressive labor reform. The Vermont Workers Center is a grassroots, member-run organization whose mission is to organize for human rights, with a particular focus on working with organized labor groups to strengthen workers’ rights. Workers Centers play a crucial role in organizing already unionized workers from various sectors and affiliates around struggles and labor policies. Chief stewards play an important role in increasing participation at union locals and therefore, tend to have a profound effect on the political rights of the workers they represent. The chief steward oversees all the grievances that are investigated and filed at their Local by workers throughout the store and also requests relevant information from management in order to process grievances in an informed manner. Given the vital function of chief stewards in a typical UE shop, we interviewed the chief stewards at both Locals to complement the interviews conducted with their coworkers.

Progressive labor legislation aimed at collective bargaining typically increases workers’ chances of successfully organizing a union while a worker who is unable to win concrete gains in their worksite may chose to advocate with other working people for progressive legislation. Either way, labor regulations have a significant impact on one’s ability to attain workplace democracy. As labor regulations increase worker wellbeing and autonomy through collective bargaining and guaranteed social benefits, workplace democracy becomes more widespread. Many stakeholders are involved in the legislative process, including lobbyists, policymakers, and community members who are anticipated to be effected by the legislation. Hence, the input from various stakeholders in the broader labor movement allows for a more well-rounded perspective on these issues and their impact on workplace democracy.

As experts in the field of organized labor, Haskins and McKinley were ideal candidates to ask about the effects that progressive labor legislation would have on unionized workers, including workers at City Market and Hunger Mountain Cooperatives. Interview questions centered upon the ramifications of proposed legislation on workers at both cooperatives. Finally, we interviewed Sean
Chadam, a local labor activist and long-time Director of the Vermont Workers Center. This interview focused on Chadam’s perception of the effects progressive labor legislation has on unionized workers.

Findings: Worker Perspectives

Before each interview and focus group, participants completed a brief demographic survey. To better contextualize the qualitative data that follows, we begin this results section with an outline of the results from these surveys. Based on the interview responses, we then examine who workers believed to be the power holders in decision making and what factors they saw as barriers to their own participation. Next, we synthesize workers’ perceptions of the different types of decision-making processes at each workplace, and their perceptions of the union. Lastly, we reflect in detail on a focus group conducted with two Prepared Foods General Staff at City Market that illuminates the particular experiences of refugee workers at City Market and the most blatant disenfranchisement of worker rights. In order to avoid redundancies, we present results from each cooperative together and note distinctions between the two workplaces where appropriate.

At City Market, the greatest percentage of participants had worked at the store for fewer than two years (56.5 percent), possessed a four-year college degree as their highest educational achievement (43 percent), made less than 20,000 dollars per year (56.5 percent), and identified as White (69.5 percent). At Hunger Mountain, the greatest percentage of participants had worked at the store for more than two years (71 percent), possessed a high school diploma (38 percent), made less than 20,000 dollars per year (38 percent), and identified as White (90 percent). Workers’ access to political, social, and civil rights varied by job title, department, employment status, and legal citizenship at both stores. While some workers were inclined to view their political rights as purely oriented to production decisions, others saw their political rights as pertaining to personnel decisions. This crucial difference in perspectives leads to a dichotomy within the workplace whereby some workers believe workplace democracy has been attained while others do not and/or feel that they must continue to work in order to maintain it. This difference ultimately affects the vitality of the union, for if workers believe that they already have decision-making power, they are less likely to participate in decision-making processes facilitated by the union leading to a less member-run union.

Prior to the last round of contract negotiations before this study began, union leaders circulated a bargaining survey at Hunger Mountain and City Market. Workers at both worksites identified healthcare and wages among their top priorities for collective bargaining. In addition, training and advancement opportunities were two areas mentioned were improvements were needed. This feedback is somewhat reflected in the interview data detailed here.

Workers’ perceptions of autonomy and participation over production and personnel decisions were often impacted by their job title, department,
employment status, and legal citizenship. For example, workers in the Produce
department at City Market and Hunger Mountain tended to gauge the opportu-
nities for participation to be satisfactory despite the fact that most of these
opportunities exclusively pertained to production. At City Market, refugee
workers in Prepared Foods were more likely than non-refugee workers from
Prepared Foods and other departments to experience a lack of opportunities to
engage in production and personnel decisions and view their benefits and pay as
inadequate for meeting their needs and those of their families. Similar to partici-
pation in national or state-wide governance, time, interwoven with job title and
employment status, was the most common barrier cited for citizen engagement
in the two workplaces.

Workers’ access to political, social, and civil rights at City Market and
Hunger Mountain depended largely upon job title, employment status,
department, and legal citizenship. Workers who occupied higher paid posi-
tions closer to management, such as buyers, typically had more opportunities
to participate in personnel and production decisions that their counterparts
in lower pay scales while also benefitting from higher incomes and better
social benefits. Therefore, workers in higher pay scale positions possessed
greater access to political and social rights than workers in lower pay scales.
Part time workers, particularly substitute workers at Hunger Mountain,
tended to be less aware of how decisions were made and thus engaged less
in decision making than their full-time coworkers. This information suggests
that part time and substitute workers have fewer political rights as well as
social rights, given that their benefits are limited compared with their full
time counterparts. Part time and substitute workers were also usually com-
mited to either other jobs or obligations outside of work, which often mini-
mized the time they had to participate in workplace decision making.

Produce workers at both City Market and Hunger Mountain demonstrated a
particularly interesting pattern in the ways they engaged in production deci-
sions rather than personnel decisions, as opposed to many of their coworkers
in other departments who engaged in both types of decision making. Having
expressed satisfaction with the opportunities to participate in decision mak-
ing, these workers viewed their political rights as uniquely production-
oriented. In addition, their satisfaction with the decision making and general
sense of autonomy stunted their desire to further their political rights and
social rights as a way to better secure their access to basic needs. While
workers were often inclined to leave decision making up to either their
coworkers or management, the bargaining team made gains in the 2014–
2016 contract including lower costs associated with healthcare and increased
wages for a majority of employees, especially those at the bottom of the pay
scale. Both parties agreed to form a study committee made up of representa-
tives from labor and management was also established to evaluate and make
improvements to the training process.

According to the Food Chain Workers Alliance Report, food retail workers
across the U.S. are most concerned about the impacts of part time work on their
job security, personal well-being, and healthcare access. At the time of this study, approximately 20 percent of the workforce at City Market worked part time whereas approximately 50 percent of the workforce at Hunger Mountain worked part time or as substitutes. Therefore part time work is still very common at both stores and, as demonstrated by this study, negatively impacts worker engagement in decision making and workplace democracy. Although they have a certain degree of job security as union-represented employees at Hunger Mountain, their work schedules are such that they must stay available in order to attain the number of hours they need to live on their earnings. One substitute worker at Hunger Mountain compared his experience as a substitute to that of a “freelance grocery clerk” in which “you don’t know if you’re going to get the same amount in your check every two weeks.” As several participants also mentioned, many employees at Hunger Mountain start as substitutes and later progress to more permanent positions. The circumstances that led up to unionization at Hunger Mountain are similar to common practices at superstores such as Walmart where workers have either been demoted to part time employees or replaced entirely by part time or temporary workers since the passing of the Affordable Care Act. Like the administration at Walmart, Hunger Mountain management nearly agreed to this condition as a way to avoid providing employer-sponsored health insurance. While part time and substitute work still exists at City Market and Hunger Mountain, these workers have the opportunity to negotiate the terms of their employment unlike their counterparts at Walmart.

In both cooperative stores, the union’s contract with management guarantees a baseline of social benefits, such as healthcare, paid time off (or combined time off), and a series of pay grades within which an employee can advance, for all part time and full time employees. However when asked if they could support themselves and their dependents on what they make, a majority of the workers at both stores either said no or expressed hesitance and stated that they could “just get by” (a common phrase used by those who were living in accordance with their means) or that they would not be able to support dependents if they had them. A few people professed to have debt, which they suggested put their income needs at an unreasonable level, or a level unlike that of their peers, despite the fact that, in 2011, the average U.S. household was 70,000 dollars in debt (Census 2010–2011). One worker at City Market laid out her expectations for a livable wage, which her City Market wage did not live up to:

Well I just think, I mean like I said—we make more than this counterpart Price Chopper but still we don’t make enough money to live on our own or if you did you wouldn’t be able to have a vehicle, I mean you should be able live on your own, and have a vehicle, I’m not saying a Beamer or live in a high rise down by the lake but I mean you shouldn’t, if you don’t want to live with roommates, you should be able to make enough money working full time so that you could not have to deal with the roommate thing and live outside of the greater Burlington area which would mean you have to have a vehicle. You can’t do that on what we make...
A significant finding of the demographic surveys is that, compared with the food system as a whole, the retail workers interviewed at City Market and Hunger Mountain use food assistance from the government, particularly food stamps, at a higher rate than other food system workers. It is unclear whether this is due to external factors, such as differential food costs in the state of Vermont, or whether food retail workers do in fact use food stamps at a higher rate than frontline workers in other sectors of the food system. Regardless, the significantly higher rates of food stamp usage amongst food system workers compared with other industries points to a glaring contradiction; namely, that the workers who maintain the food system experience disproportionate rates of food insecurity.

Respect and Dignity in Prepared Foods

At City Market, a focus group with two refugee workers from Prepared Foods revealed the most notable disenfranchisement of citizenship rights. At the time of the interview, both participants were working at City Market as “Prepared Foods General Staff,” one of the two lowest paid positions at the store. These workers expressed extreme dissatisfaction with the opportunities they had for participation and advancement in the workplace. Neither of these participants could support themselves nor their dependents on what they make. Dialo concluded the interview by stating, “What we want is dignity and respect at work,” which seemed representative of the feelings both participants conveyed throughout the remainder of this focus group. At the time of this focus group, Dialo, who spoke Swahili as his primary language had worked at City Market for more than one year. His household annual income, which he used to support himself and his six dependents under the age of 18, fell below 20,000 dollars. Justine, also a native Swahili speaker, had also worked at City Market for just over a year at the time of this focus group. She used her annual income of under 20,000 dollars to support herself and her four dependents.

Interviewees from other departments at City Market generally described their interactions with customers and coworkers as positive aspects of their work. Both Dialo and Justine, however, explained instances in which they felt mistreated by their coworkers and/or bosses. In the following passage, Justine describes how she feels when her boss asks her to look at them in the eye, a behavior which the interpreter explained was disrespectful in some African cultures, “I don’t like them telling me that you have to look my eyes, look my face, I mean face to face, that is too much of American.—I feel very bad and I feel that I’m being forced. It’s like talking to me like you are talking to a young kid. That thing disturbs me so much.” Dialo added that being talked to in a loud voice and being bossed around were aspects of his work that he did not enjoy.

When asked who makes decisions about work-related matters, Dialo replied that there is a manager for scheduling and a manager for finances. Justine stated the following about how decisions are made and the extent to which she is...
involved, “They say that when we came here we don’t have so much we can say and whenever I go to work we just to whatever they tell us but for now, recently, things are changing at City Market.” She then spoke at length about scheduling issues, “Before we would call and say that you were not feeling well and they would accept that and no big deal but now if you happen to say, unless it is an emergency, the managers they talk...it doesn’t go well with the management.” According to Dialo, people who work as full-time Prepared Foods General Staff at City Market must work every other weekend, otherwise they risk having their hours cut.

Both Dialo and Justine felt that the opportunities they had to participate in decision making were minimal or non-existent. This sense of exclusion from the union was unique to this focus group and points to a major shortcoming at the time in terms of the union’s effectiveness at building worker solidarity across racial and ethnic lines. Dialo provided the following testimony in response to a question about opportunities for participation:

The answer is simply no because we are never involved in the decision making...we hear that City Market has a union but we are still not involved in the union. I’m sorry to say this but among us, though the Africans that are works there, none of them is even a member of the union. but we are only true that you are members because you get five dollars from every pay check for the membership of the union. They do their own meetings, they do whatever the solutions they come out with they just come to feed us the solutions but we are never in the decision making or in the meetings.

He went on to discuss the union council in which he said there are no representatives from the African workers at the store. When asked what he thinks are the barriers that keep him from participating, he said that the union leadership and members did not attempt to involve him. Justine added that she did not know how to vote in the council elections, especially on days that she is normally scheduled to have off.

On the subject of upward mobility, Dialo said that the opportunities were not substantive for refugee workers as a whole. According to Dialo, management has stated that he and his coworkers are hindered by their lack of English language and experience, even though some workers do, in fact, speak English. Dialo believes that management and supervisors are responsible for providing workers with the experience and training they need in order to achieve advancement and described his plight in seeking upward mobility as a refugee in the workplace as follows:

The same people who have been there four years are the ones who are showing the new cook how to mix all these and then the next day the person you showed is your supervisor...will be your supervisor and you are the one who showed him how to... that’s because he is a refugee...he doesn’t have papers, he doesn’t have the skills, and he doesn’t have the certificate...but he has all the skills.
Justine stated that she occupied the same position as the one in which she started and that, given the present situation, she did not see herself being promoted.

When asked about the benefits and downsides of having a union, Dialo first asked for clarification about which union—the labor union or the cooperative union? We found this overlapping designation of two different governance structures to be particularly interesting given the history they have in common. When this point was clarified, he said that he only hears about their union as an entity that provides them with job security but given his lack of involvement, he has no way of knowing whether or not this is true. When asked this same question, Justine said dismally, “They only get my five dollars.” While the union is made up of rank and file workers like Justine and Dialo who are responsible for the day-to-day operations of their organization, Dialo and Justine tended to speak about their union in third-party terms.

Dialo and Justine both valued healthcare more than any of their other benefits. As far as pay, both participants said that they were not able to support themselves and their families on what they make. Dialo alleged that, although the wages were enough to support a single person, they were not enough to support families and that, for this reason, he is forced to rely on the government for assistance. Justine said the following about her pay, “Even if this is not enough, even if I tell them it’s not enough they won’t put more than that...so we just accept whatever we get.” She then said that she accepts what they are given for pay.

At the end of the focus group Justine and Dialo stated their remaining feelings about their union and working at City Market more generally. Justine summarized her feelings as follows, “You need to talk to the union secretary because if they are in the union, they need to know what does the union does for them because they should not be having problems at their place of work if the union is there so the union should start working, it should be working.” Dialo then added, “Because we consider the union as the syndicate and the syndicate must be strong to fight for the right but the union is under the management so that is not our benefit but it is the management’s benefit.” In this respect, Dialo charges his union with the function of acting as a syndicate for the workers. As he states, if the union is not serving its purpose, management will benefit by putting their interests before those of the workers. In the event described in the next section, Dialo acts through his union as a syndicate for himself and his peers in the Prepared Foods Department, hence challenging the notion of the union as a separate agent. Dialo and Justine’s testimonies, however, demonstrate that issues related to their social and political rights, which are often interwoven with their demographic, are often disregarded or neglected by the membership at large. Dialo suggested that there be more representation of the refugee community in the union’s elected board as a way to shed light and focus on these struggles.

Shortly after conducting a focus group with Dialo and Justine, an incident involving an English Only policy in prepared foods mobilized several kitchen employees to participate in decision making, many of whom were multilingual...
refugees. This rule held that workers in prepared foods would be “encouraged” to speak English by their managers to ensure their safety and well being.

In accordance with the grievance procedure protocol, the union filed a first-step grievance and then a second-step grievance when the first-step was denied by management. In a grievance procedure, there are three grievance steps that can be pursued in order to force management to reconcile with the issue. At a first step grievance meeting with management, one prepared foods worker from the refugee community brought his immigration papers in which the federal government assured him that he would be never be discriminated against. Upon showing this paperwork to management, he asked management how they could initiate such a discriminatory policy when the federal government made him this promise (Personal Interview, December 3, 2013). Nonetheless, management refused to engage with the issue so the union pushed the grievance forward to step two.

On November 18, 2013, in response to the supposed “rumors” of an English Only policy in the kitchen, the General Manager of City Market, sent an e-mail to City Market employees, where he stated that there is no English Only policy in the prepared foods department or in any part of City Market. In addition, he wrote, “Rather than this being a grievance, it seems to me as though this is a mis-communication. We believe all of this started from one inappropriate remark from a Manager, regarding speaking English only in the kitchen.” Although not included in official store policy, the English Only rule was declared and enforced by managers within the prepared foods department to supposedly “reduce conflict” between prepared foods general staff, a position that is primarily done by refugee workers at City Market (McKinley 2013). On November 21st, just three days after the general manager sent this initial e-mail, he agreed to meet with the employees affected by the policy in order to apologize and assure them that they could speak their own language when talking with each other. This action suggests that he conceded that such a policy did exist in some form. On November 22nd, UE Local 203 circulated a flier to employees at the store entitled Words Count—Actions Count More: What’s Really Going On At City Market. The flier reads: On October 24th, a department manager told employees during a meeting that there would be a new “no Swahili” rule—that is, employees would not be allowed to speak in their own language. When a union representative objected, management said they would allow “only Swahili when necessary.”

This event received a tremendous amount of attention on social media sites and in community racial justice groups. On the UE Local 203 and Vermont Change Committee Facebook pages, there is clear evidence that patrons of City Market organized to submit notes in City Market’s customer suggestion box opposing the English Only Policy. On November 25, 2013, as a small group of community members waited outside the store to hear about the outcome of the grievance, a two-part settlement was reached between management and the union. First, management would issue a written and verbal statement that stated that employees in the kitchen were allowed to speak their native language when speaking with each other without fear of management instructing them
otherwise; second, the union and management would collaboratively arrange a racial diversity training for managers and employees. Had the grievance not resulted in a positive outcome for the refugee workers, community members planned to picket outside the store that same night. Many months after this incident, a refugee worker who was a leader in challenging the English Only Policy was transferred from Prepared Foods to the Grocery Department upon the recommendation of several managers.

Shortly before this incident came to a head, one kitchen employee who was a member of the refugee community stepped up to become a union steward in the prepared foods department after being heavily involved in the English Only Policy grievance process. Throughout these months, he worked closely with the Chief Steward who was also an employee of the Prepared Foods Department and likely played a role in encouraging this individual to consider becoming a steward. According to Collom’s study, job dissatisfaction leads to a greater desire for worker control over production and personnel decisions and access to some degree of participation generates a desire for more control. Therefore, incidents that cause worker dissatisfaction such as these may act as catalysts for workers to become more involved in their union and, furthermore, increase their desire to have more control over decision making in their workplace.

Although the union at City Market attempts to engage with refugee workers in the prepared foods department, as is clear from incidents like the English Only Policy, there appears to be room for improvement. Logistical factors limit the union’s ability to reach out to these workers in certain capacities. For example, the union once considered having the contract translated into Swahili so that certain workers in the prepared foods department who do not read English could have full access to the contract. However this forty-three-page document would cost them upward of nine hundred dollars to translate, making this task financially unfeasible for the union. The overturning of the English Only Policy represents a clear victory for refugee workers in terms of civil rights protection. Nonetheless, the focus group with Justine and Dialo demonstrates that refugee workers in this department occupy a marginalized standing at the store overall and possess lesser social and political rights than their coworkers.

Findings: Stakeholder Perspectives

As interview data indicated, although Workers Centers play a crucial role in supporting collective bargaining for those who are not yet unionized, they also serve to mobilize already unionized workers around struggles and labor policies that are more likely to affect their non-unionized counterparts. From the perspective of Chadam, the Director of the Vermont Workers Center, it is currently the job of the legislature to lay the foundational standards for labor law and the responsibility of the workers to build unions in order to make any further improvements they wish to see in their workplace. According to his logic, the better the foundational standards, the higher the union’s goals are for making change. Although Haskins argued that progressive labor legislation, such as
minimally increasing the minimum wage, would not have any immediate impacts on workers at City Market or Hunger Mountain, McKinley took the stance that progressive legislation would likely increase the union’s leverage to win further gains. UE’s Political Action committee meets every year at the Annual Meeting to discuss how to make change at the legislative level. This committee, which consists of rank and file UE members, has engaged in a range of actions, from drafting statements to organizing mass marches or rallies in support or opposition of legislative decisions. In addition, UE members have consistently testified at the statehouse in favor of progressive labor legislation such as paid sick days and an increase in the minimum wage. These proactive measures prove their dedication to working within the realm of policymaking and also outside of it. As McKinley emphatically stated at the close of the interview, “Workers’ political action should look more like the occupation of the Wisconsin statehouse and less like a campaign for the democrats.”

Labor advocacy organizations play a salient role in encouraging participation from workers and union members in the legislative process in ways such as testifying at the statehouse and issuing formal statements in support or opposition of legislation. A clear example of this engagement was the involvement and eventual arrest of three UE Local 203 and 255 members in an action opposing Governor Shumlin’s abandonment of healthcare reform. As Chadam highlighted in his interview and as is demonstrated by the heightened activity of members from Locals 203 and 255, unionized labor constituents are the primary group of advocates for the labor movement as a whole. The Vermont Workers Center and the UE especially spend a great deal of time mobilizing their membership to support current union drives and organizing efforts as well as pushing legislation that would allow new groups to organize unions. Chadam and Haskins share the ideology that unions are the best way for people to achieve goals pertaining to workers’ rights. As Haskins pointed out, workers who are unionized can advocate for themselves without fear of retaliation. Whereas policy changes affect all workers uniformly, unionized workers make choices as to what they want to change about the conditions in which they work. Progressive labor legislation has the potential to improve conditions for unionized and non-unionized workers alike, including refugees, depending on the extent of the legislation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Along with having more CSAs and farmer’s markets than any other state per capita, Vermont touts a growing number of cooperative businesses such as retail food cooperatives. Although food cooperatives boast better wages and healthcare coverage for their employees than conventional grocery stores, it is evident from this study that employees in food cooperatives undergo many of the same challenges in maintaining fair and equitable working conditions and provisions as employees at non-cooperative businesses (Coop: Healthy Foods, Healthy Communities).
As far as bringing about immediate change and improvements to worker engagement and citizenship at City Market and Hunger Mountain, we believe it is vital to explore the following areas as the two points in which there is the most versatility: employment and legal citizenship status. Currently, substitutes and part-time employees constitute a large portion of the workforces at both stores. In order to increase the amount of time and commitment workers are willing to dedicate to workplace improvement, it is essential that workers at both stores advance steps to phase out and replace these positions with full-time positions. Justine and Dialo revealed the plights of being a refugee worker at City Market, including the disrespect they often felt from their manager and coworkers and their exclusion from their union. Although one refugee worker went on to become a steward following the English Only Policy incident, workers from the refugee community did not occupy a single seat on the Executive Board, the union’s official governance body. As a means of working toward meeting the needs of this group, it would be very beneficial if refugee workers were trained and activated to become part of one or both of the union’s official decision-making bodies, the Executive Board and Bargaining Team. In addition, the more attentive elected union officers are to the challenges faced by this group, the more credibility and respect they are likely to gain from refugee workers, furthermore increasing this group’s engagement in their union. Improvements to factors such as job title and department would require a complete reorganization of the departments and overhaul of the traditional, hierarchical workplace structure and therefore are not as likely to occur.

While policy-making is not a realm through which workers can enact change quickly or in a way that is long-term, the legislature does present workers with an additional sphere of influence over not only their own working conditions, but also those of their unorganized peers. In no way does the Statehouse need to be a hub of political action in order for comprehensive reform to occur, as demonstrated by labor history and the wins that were made long before labor regulations were put into place. However, it is clear that legislators could potentially make engagement easier for these constituents by soliciting them for public participation ideas.

Based on the results of this study, unions and workers centers, particularly the United Electrical Radio and Machine Workers Union and the Vermont Workers Center, play an important role in civic engagement. The United Electrical Radio and Machine Workers union provides needed assistance through testimony in support of progressive labor legislation and organizational clout with their designated Policy Action committee. The Vermont Workers Center views unions as vital partners in passing progressive labor legislation and allowing others the opportunity to organize a union free of intimidation from management. Although they acknowledge that unionized workplaces will likely not be significantly impacted by progressive labor legislation, Sean Chadam of the Vermont Workers Center asserts that this will likely raise the floor for all workers, regardless of whether or not they are unionized. As Beverly Haskins states, the biggest most universal benefit a union can offer is just cause employment,
which ensures that workers are not fired without good reason. The one guarantee associated with forming a union is that workers fundamentally change the way decisions however in order to genuinely assume their identity as equal partners in decision making, the union must make strides to better represent and advocate for their foreign-born peers.

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Notes

2. For more information on worker cooperatives as an alternative to traditional workplace structures and the state of worker cooperatives nationally, see Alperovitz, Gar, Ted Howard, and Thad Williamson. 2010. The Cleveland model. *The Nation* 1:21–4.
3. Individual names are pseudonyms, per IRB guidelines.
4. This is a pseudonym per IRB guidelines.
5. These names are pseudonyms.

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