

How workers mobilize in financializing firms: A theory of discursive opportunism

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Abstract

Firms' increasing focus on financial markets has undermined employment conditions, as well as workers' ability to mobilize. Taking a discursive approach to employment relations under financialization, this article develops a theory of discursive opportunism (DO) to explain how organizers can adopt management's discursive techniques for control and transform them into resources for collective action. The article makes two contributions. First, it illustrates that management's turn to market discourse under financialization varies across individual workplaces, even within a single firm. Second, it offers a theory of DO to explain how organizers can mobilize workers in financializing firms when they develop tactics appropriate to a workplace's distinctive discursive context. A comparative case study of tech workers responding to mass layoffs provides empirical support for this theory, showing that organizers' tactics are critical to shaping the path of financialization at the workplace level.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In twenty-first century capitalism, workers face numerous obstacles to mobilizing. From the erosion of industrial relations institutions to employer attacks on unions to the challenges of building solidarity across global value chains (Milkman, 2013; Baccaro & Howell, 2017; Brookes, 2019), workers' traditional resources for collective action have dried up just when they need them most. With the rise of financialization, firms increasingly focus their profit-making activities on financial markets, and managers seek to serve shareholder interests above all else (van der Zwan 2014:

107), which leads to deteriorating employment conditions as managers seek to lower costs by reducing their permanent workforce (Shin 2017). This article develops a theory of discursive opportunism (DO) to explain how, despite these obstacles, workers in financializing firms can mobilize against deteriorating conditions.

Financialization entails a handful of shifts in capitalist development with significant consequences for employment relations. As managers reject long-term commitments in favour of short-term financial gain, they have abandoned practices that defined employment in the twentieth century, from social dialogue to job security (Thompson, 2003). Workers' responses to deteriorating conditions, including job cuts, vary considerably, ranging from acquiescence to mobilization (Contu *et al.*, 2013; Erkama & Vaara, 2010). This variation suggests that financialization is not a uniform process, but instead takes different trajectories in different workplaces, depending in part on variation in worker behaviour. Taking up Cushen and Thompson's (2016) call to investigate the causal linkage between financialization and worker behaviour and perceptions, this article develops a causal mechanism to explain variation in worker responses to mass layoffs at financializing firms.

The article builds on discursive approaches to financialization, which show that managers in financializing firms have adopted discursive techniques for controlling the workplace that centre on the market. I argue that organizers can adopt management's market discourse and transform it into resources for collective action in order to mobilize workers in financializing firms. I introduce a theory of DO to describe these tactics, and illustrate how DO can make collective action possible under financialization by presenting a case study of different worker responses to mass layoffs in the early 2000s in the information and communication technology, or 'tech', sector. Tech represents the leading edge of capitalist development, not only because its firms produce innovative digital technologies that reshape profit-making activities (Hecker, 2005), but also because firms in other sectors model their management practices after those developed in tech (Burkus, 2016). Moreover, tech firms are often financialized, which we can observe in the centrality of finance capital to their business models (O'Mara, 2019; Rothstein 2021), as well as tech workers' job insecurity, especially during economic downturns (see Figure 1). Identifying the dynamics of worker mobilization against mass layoffs in tech thus provides broader insights into the character of employment relations under financialization.

The article makes two contributions to understanding worker mobilization in financializing firms, one primarily empirical and one primarily theoretical. First, it presents a comparative case study that documents the degree to which the path of financialization varies at the workplace level. Similarly situated workers react differently to the threat of layoffs, partly because management discourse can vary significantly at the level of the workplace, with managers at different sites within a single firm relying on different discursive techniques for control. This empirical observation motivates the article's theoretical contribution, which revolves around DO. DO allows distinguishing context from causal conditions, which is crucial for explaining worker mobilization in financializing firms, because the discursive context of individual workplaces shapes, but does not determine, workers' collective action. The article develops a four-part causal mechanism in order to explain how workers can mobilize in financializing firms by overcoming the obstacles to collective action posed by management's market discourse.

Section 2 shows why approaching financialization through the lens of discourse is promising for explaining worker mobilization in financializing firms. Section 3 extends this discursive approach by outlining the theory of DO, whereby organizers transform management's discursive techniques for control into resources for collective action. Section 4 applies the theory of DO to a comparative case study of tech workers responding to mass layoffs, showing how organizers at one site used

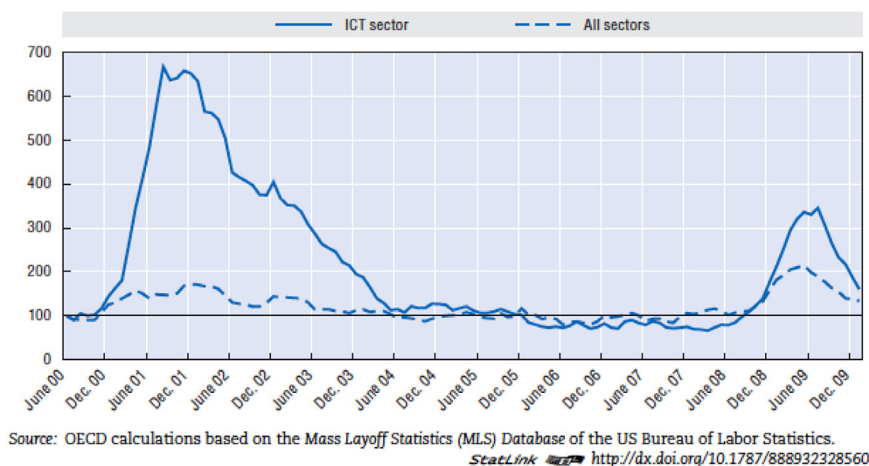


FIGURE 1 Workers affected by mass layoffs in the ICT sector and overall in the United States, June 2000–January 2010

[Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Note: 100 = June 2000, 6-month moving average

Source: OECD, 'OECD Information Technology Outlook 2010' (Paris: OECD Publishing, 22 November 2010), 134, DOI:10.1787/it_outlook-2010-en

management's discourse opportunistically to mobilize workers, while workers at the other site acquiesced because organizers failed to develop the tactics necessary for transforming management's discourse. The article concludes by considering directions for future research and lessons for union tactics.

2 | WORKER MOBILIZATION IN FINANCIALIZING FIRMS

Existing research spotlights some open questions about the causal linkages between financialization and worker mobilization. Cushen and Thompson (2016: 360) document that workers in financializing firms are more likely to view employment through the lens of the market than other workers, which may obstruct their propensity to mobilize, and they call on scholars to investigate how exactly 'financialization reinforces market discipline and market attitudes'. While research on management behaviour in financializing firms abounds (e.g. Gospel *et al.*, 2014), scholars have also investigated how workers and labour organizers play a causal role in the trajectory of financialization (Cushen 2013; Doellgast *et al.* 2020; Palpacuer & Seigneur 2020). Building on this existing research, this article takes a discursive approach to explaining variation in worker mobilization under financialization.

Focusing on discourse is a promising approach to the question of worker mobilization in financializing firms because management discourse shapes workers' ability to mobilize, and because it has changed under financialization. Management discourse in the workplace is constituted by language that articulates and enforces particular ideologies, and thereby 'promulgates, however unwittingly, a set of assumptions about the nature of the objects with which it deals' (Barley & Kunda 1992: 363), namely, workers. These assumptions frequently underpin management's techniques for controlling the workplace, and discourse plays an important role in shaping worker behaviour, especially around collective action (Biernacki 1996). Under financialization, managers

have adopted new discursive techniques for controlling the workplace, and researchers have identified a common pattern across financializing firms in many sectors (Baud & Durand 2012; Erkama & Vaara 2010; Ezzamel *et al.* 2008; Holst 2016).

With financialization, management discourse has taken up a strain of rationality that revolves around the concept of the market (Kunda & Ailon-Souday 2005: 201). In the period preceding financialization, management in many firms had established an 'organizational culture', which framed the 'organization as a locus of shared values and moral involvement' (Kunda & Ailon-Souday 2005: 201). Embedded in management's normative discourse of 'cohesion and loyalty', workers came to see employment as a reciprocal relationship where workers' welfare was interlinked with their firm's (Barley & Kunda 1992: 383). The shift in management discourse under financialization echoes previous turns away from norms and towards rationality, but here the distinctive feature is that the market serves as the 'root image' (Kunda & Ailon-Souday 2005: 201). This market discourse is consistent with management's behaviour under financialization, whereby decisions are based on accounting indicators that reflect the firm's market performance (Cushen & Thompson 2016). Similar to earlier periods, workers have also adopted management's discourse, and have come to view the employment relationship as purely transactional, instrumental for financial rewards (Kunda & Ailon-Souday 2005: 207). Workers understand employment conditions as shaped by market forces beyond the firm, rather than reflecting long-term promises between workers and employers (Kunda & Ailon-Souday 2005: 206). This shift in how market discourse attributes employment conditions carries important implications for worker mobilization.

Research on discourse in worker mobilization would lead us to believe that when management uses market discourse, workers are unlikely to mobilize. One necessary condition for worker mobilization is that workers believe that collective can be effective (Klandermans 1984). In order for workers to believe that mobilization could potentially improve their conditions, a second necessary condition must be met, which is that workers 'blame an agency for their problems, rather than attributing them to uncontrollable forces or events. That agency can then become the target for collective organization and action' (Kelly 1998: 29–30; see also Snow & Benford 1988). Market discourse attributes employment conditions to market forces rather than management discretion, which disposes workers to believe they cannot improve their situation. Scholars have noted how workers in tech are prone to acquiesce to job cuts and justify their disinterest in collective action by engaging management's market discourse, which attributes layoffs to market forces beyond their control (Lane 2011; Neff 2012; Ross 2003).

However, while management's market discourse is a crucial aspect of financialization, it alone is not sufficient to explain variation in worker mobilization in financializing firms. Management discourse has an indeterminate effect on worker mobilization because labour organizers interpret management discourse and thus mediate how it affects worker mobilization (Lévesque & Murray 2013). Workers may face new obstacles to mobilizing when management deploys market discourse, but organizers can develop discursive tactics to transform it into a resource for collective action to enable workers to mobilize (Rothstein 2019). However, it is not the case that it is simply easier for workers to mobilize when management relies on normative discourse. Organizers were just as crucial to worker mobilization in previous periods, where management relied on normative discourse to control workers, and workers were prone to acquiesce to management discretion unless organizers developed tactics for collective action (Burawoy 1985; Fantasia 1988). Management discourse may 'enable' certain causal processes by providing certain contextual conditions, but because it is not causally productive on its own, management discourse is not a causal condition, and thus cannot by itself constitute a causal linkage between financialization and worker mobilization (Beach & Pedersen 2019: 78).

In order to identify the causal linkage between financialization and worker mobilization, this article focuses on labour organizers, which are the causal actors responsible for mediating the effects of management discourse in the workplace. The next section deepens this focus by outlining a discursive theory of opportunism.

3 | A DISCURSIVE THEORY OF OPPORTUNISM

Opportunism represents a classic and contested strategy for worker mobilization under difficult conditions. Offe and Wiesenthal's (1980) account of opportunism explains how workers face considerable obstacles to mobilizing, but that they can overcome these obstacles by adopting employers' logic of collective action. Opportunism provides a framework for situating organizers' tactics in context because it highlights the creative processes through which organizers transform obstacles into resources. This section outlines a discursive theory of opportunism in order to explain worker mobilization in financializing firms.

Opportunism is a useful concept for explaining worker mobilization in financializing firms because it captures the relationship between contextual conditions and causal conditions involving worker mobilization. These contextual conditions have mostly been considered from a structural perspective, but given that discourse is central to worker mobilization, particularly under financialization, I propose considering opportunism from a discursive perspective. Opportunism provides a strategy for mobilization even when workers are embedded in a context that obstructs collective action. Offe and Wiesenthal (1980) focus on how workers' structural position in capitalist production complicates their ability to co-ordinate common interests. From a discursive perspective, one way that financialization obstructs worker mobilization is that management's market discourse makes collective action appear hopelessly ineffective, because it attributes employment conditions to market forces beyond their control. While identifying how contextual conditions can obstruct worker mobilization, opportunism nonetheless centres organizers' tactics. Offe and Wiesenthal (1980: 106) show that organizers can overcome structural obstacles to collective action by adopting employers' own tactics. From a discursive perspective, organizers can overcome the obstacles posed by market discourse by adopting management's own discourse and transforming it to make collective action appear potentially effective at improving employment conditions. The tactics that characterize DO can be useful to workers in a variety of discursive contexts in addition to financialization, and may be useful for confronting discursive obstacles to mobilization that originate beyond the workplace in addition to those rooted in management's discourse (Spicer & Böhm 2007; Palpacuer & Seignour 2020).

Under financialization, DO can take at least two forms. First, organizers can directly transform management's market discourse. Discourse always has multiple meanings, which enables organizers to develop counter-hegemonic strategies, whereby they engage management's discourse but develop an alternative interpretation that serves workers' interests, rather than management's (Steinberg 1999; Doellgast *et al.* 2020). For example, organizers can use market discourse in order to critique management's business analysis and show that market forces do not in fact require job cuts if managers would pursue alternative product strategies (Rothstein 2019).

Second, organizers can engage an alternative discourse that is present in the workplace. Management discourse may oscillate between dominant patterns, but it always remains in a state of flux, so that no workplace, firm or sector is ever completely dominated by a single discourse. As I show below, financialization, like any process of change, is marked by significant variation at the micro level of the workplace. While management increasingly frames employment in market discourse, vestiges remain of the normative discourse that preceded it. Normative discourse,

based on a notion of reciprocal obligations between workers and employers, implicitly attributes employment conditions to managers, rather than market forces, and thus provides a basis for organizers to demonstrate that collective action could be effective if workers can sufficiently pressure management to change course. Still, engaging even vestigial management discourses requires transformation because all management discourse is primarily a technique for control. Worker mobilization may be possible in financializing firms when organizers use DO to construct an alternative discourse that demonstrates the potential effectiveness of collective action while still resonating with the assumptions that workers inherited from management's discourse.

While organizers' adoption and transformation of management discourse may make worker mobilization possible in financializing firms, it amounts to opportunism because it entails 'strategic self-limitation' (Luxemburg 1974; Cited by Offe & Wiesenthal 1980: 105). Management discourse usually focuses on the firm, rather than surrounding society, and on a particular understanding of the firm, so remaining within management's conceptual framework restricts workers' ability to achieve significant and lasting change (Lévesque & Murray 2013). Therefore, we can identify each of Offe and Wiesenthal's three dimensions of opportunism in DO. First, substantively, management discourse leads workers to invert the means/ends relationship, focusing on 'immediately available means' (Offe & Wiesenthal 1980: 105), such as mobilization for a collective legal case to save jobs, rather than broader goals of class power or revolution. Second, temporally, management discourse leads workers to prioritize short- over long-term objectives, so that the goal of mobilization is just to help workers at this particular firm with this particular challenge. Third, socially, management discourse leads workers to privilege quantitative over qualitative goals, in that they seek to maximize gains within management's vision of the firm, rather than create pressure for a sustained shift in worker power, by, for instance, building institutions to increase workers' role in workplace governance. Management discourse thus limits the potential gains of worker mobilization, but, through DO, organizers can use it to make collective action possible in the first place.¹

Due to the obstacles that market discourse presents to worker mobilization, we expect workers to mobilize in financializing firms only when organizers engage DO. Based on the analysis above, we can conceive of DO as a causal mechanism, which is an 'entit[y] that engage[s] in activities that transfer causal forces from X to Y' (Beach & Pedersen 2016: 80). Causal mechanisms are composed of 'parts that transfer causal forces' (Beach & Pedersen 2016: 85), and, under financialization, DO is composed of four parts, each of which is constituted by a necessary condition: (1) Organizers adopt and transform management's discourse, so that (2) organizers demonstrate to workers the potential effectiveness of collective action. This discourse must resonate with workers so that (3) workers attribute employment conditions to management, rather than factors beyond their control and (4) workers believe that collective action could be effective (see Figure 2). These four conditions provide a set of falsifiable expectations for testing the theory of DO. The next section establishes initial empirical support for DO by substantiating each part of this causal mechanism hypothesized to link financialization and worker mobilization.

4 | CASE STUDY: MASS LAYOFFS IN THE TECH SECTOR

This section compares two cases of job cuts at IBM, which represents a typical case of a financializing firm, thereby offering broader lessons for understanding employment relations under financialization (Heckscher 1996; Gerring 2007; Lazonick 2009; Doellgast *et al.* 2020).

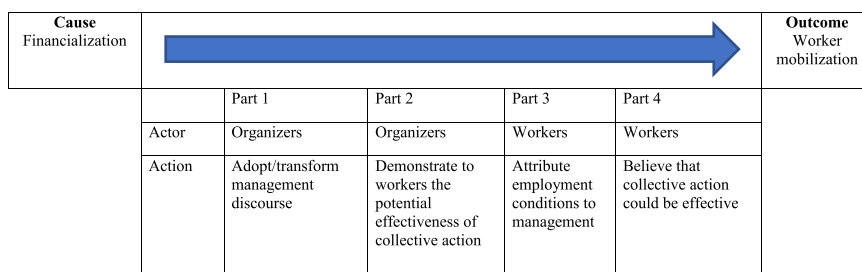


FIGURE 2 Discursive opportunism: a causal mechanism in four parts [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Structuring within-case and cross-case analysis around each piece of the hypothesized causal mechanism provides an initial test for the theory of DO.

In 1993, IBM’s board appointed Louis V. Gerstner as CEO, with a mandate to modernize the firm. Gerstner made dozens of changes, all of which reflected his goal ‘to make the marketplace the driving criterion for all of our actions and all of our behavior’ (Gerstner 2002: 211; Emphasis in original). Gerstner shifted the framing of the employment relationship from norms to market discourse, departing from IBM’s strong corporate culture, oriented around the ‘Three Basic Beliefs’, which included norms like ‘respect for the individual’ (*IBM100 — A Business and Its Beliefs 2012*). Basic management decisions were now based on accounting indicators tied to the firm’s market performance. Employee handbooks, for instance, now warned that ‘true employment security, however, can only be achieved through a successful, profitable business and the individual’s continuing contribution to that success’ (IBM 2002). In addition to linking employment security to market forces, Gerstner also restructured compensation so that market forces played a larger role. Salaries were primarily ‘driven by overall business performance’, and in 8 years, the number of non-executives receiving equity compensation increased from 500 to 60,000 (Gerstner 2001; IBM 2002). Immediately preceding mass layoffs in 2001, Gerstner presented workers with financial analyses of IBM’s performance during a company-wide telecast. He announced that ‘when we lose in the marketplace we’ve got to retrench (Gerstner 2001), attributing employment conditions to market forces beyond the firm, particularly rising competition and falling prices for IBM’s core products.

At each IBM site targeted for layoffs, management relied on Gerstner’s market discourse to justify the measures. Workers fired from IBM’s site in San Jose, California, for instance, received letters announcing that, ‘As the needs of our customers and the industry continue to change, Storage Systems Group must respond and adapt to those changes to remain competitive in the marketplace’, so that ‘as a result you have been selected for permanent layoff’ (IBM 2002). On the other side of the country, in Burlington, Vermont, workers similarly read, ‘The IBM Microelectronics Division is refining its product portfolio in order to maintain its long-term posture. This action is necessary to reduce expenses in light of the severe semiconductor industry downturn. This requires some skills rebalancing and the elimination of a number of positions across the organization’ (IBM 2001). Across IBM, workers who were laid off all received similar letters, but the path of job cuts followed different paths at different sites.

The analysis that follows presents a controlled comparison based on Mill’s method of difference to explain variation in worker mobilization in financializing firms. IBM’s facilities in San Jose and Burlington were similar in many respects except the path of job cuts (see Table 1). San Jose was the headquarters of IBM’s storage division, focused on servers and disk drives, and hosted groups from

TABLE 1 Workplace characteristics: IBM Burlington and IBM San Jose

	IBM Burlington	IBM San Jose
Main product	Semiconductors	Storage and memory
Employees	8300 (approx.) (2001)	7000 (approx.) (2001)
Number dismissed (2001–2004) ^a	2950 [35.5% of site's workforce]	1830 [26.1% of total workforce]
Participants in collective legal case	155 [43.4% of total plaintiffs]	24 [6.7% of total plaintiffs]
Union members	0	0
Year-on-year change in revenue by location (2001–2002)	- 8%	- 6%

^aStatistics presented during *Syverson v. IBM* provide estimates of layoffs at each site. While one can imagine that different rates of layoffs might correspond to variation in worker behaviour, such a view would need to identify a causal mechanism to link the rate of layoffs to workers' responses. I propose that this linkage is, in part, discursive, because it must capture how workers understand the threat of layoffs and how they translate that understanding into action.

research and software divisions. Burlington headquartered IBM's semiconductor division. Each site was composed of roughly the same number of high-skilled workers who designed advanced computer technology and white-collar professionals tasked with coordinating the overall business segment. Workers at both sites also had contact with organizers from the Communications Workers of America (CWA), which activated its national network in the late 1990s to support IBM workers as part of a broader revitalization strategy (Katz *et al.* 2003), though the number of union members at each site prior to layoffs was the same: 0. Despite these similarities, when management announced layoffs in the early 2000s, workers at Burlington mobilized, while those at San Jose acquiesced.

On 28 November 2001, IBM Burlington terminated 500 workers, followed by subsequent rounds of layoffs, so that by August 2003, one-third of the site's workers had been terminated (Topel 2009). In the months following layoffs, workers in Burlington filed a collective legal case against IBM. A total of 358 workers from IBM's locations across the United States joined *Syverson v. IBM*, alleging that management dismissed workers illegally, based on their age. Workers associated with the *Alliance@IBM*, a group of IBM workers mostly from upstate New York who organized in the 1990s, initiated the case, and 155 workers from Burlington eventually joined the collective legal action, forming the largest group of plaintiffs. IBM settled in 2009, paying workers an undisclosed sum and amending their layoff policy to avoid future challenges (Interview, Former engineer and organizer (#33)).

On 22 May 2002, IBM terminated 200 workers from its global software group in San Jose. Subsequent rounds of layoffs cut more than a quarter of the jobs at San Jose by January 2004. Analyses presented during *Syverson* illustrate that workers at San Jose were subject to the same discriminatory treatment as workers at Burlington (Drogin 2008). Similar to Burlington, a handful of workers at San Jose organized with the *Alliance@IBM*. However, only 24 joined the legal case, constituting less than 7 per cent of the total plaintiffs (Nager *et al.* 2009).

Following existing research that explains variation in worker mobilization (Brookes 2018), I engage Mill's method of difference in order to test for each of the necessary conditions constituting the hypothesized causal mechanism. We can strengthen our confidence in the theory of DO if we observe that workers mobilizing under financialization engage these four conditions. Similarly, we can reject the theory of DO if we observe that workers in financializing firms can mobilize without engaging these four conditions. Breaking up the theory of DO into four necessary conditions allows more rigorous testing of the causal mechanism because 'if confirming

evidence is found for each part, the inference can be made that the mechanism linking C [cause] and O [outcome] as a whole was present in the case' (Beach & Pedersen 2016: 176). The high degree of causal homogeneity between San Jose and Burlington enables comparative analysis to dispatch alternative hypotheses and increase our certainty in the role of the hypothesized causal mechanism (Beach & Pedersen 2016).

Four alternative hypotheses are worth addressing. First, one might assume that workers in San Jose acquiesced to layoffs because it was easier for them to find re-employment than workers in Burlington. However, in the early 2000s, tech workers in Silicon Valley faced no better chances for re-employment than those in Burlington. California and Vermont sustained similar damage from the dot-com bust. In 2001, the number of jobs in California's tech sector fell by 8.5 per cent, while in Vermont, it fell by 5 per cent. Job losses in tech continued over the next 2 years, so that by 2003, California had lost 14 per cent of its tech jobs, and Vermont 17 per cent. In the same period, the number of tech jobs in the United States as a whole decreased by 10.5 per cent (US Census Bureau 2019). Job loss in Silicon Valley triggered long-term reductions in employment and wages. Up through 2008, tech employment in Silicon Valley remained 20 per cent below where it stood in 2000, and wages in tech remained 14 per cent lower (Mann and Luo 2010: 71). Unemployment in both Silicon Valley and Burlington was less than 4 per cent in 2000. By 2002, it had climbed to 8.3 per cent in Silicon Valley but stood at 3.6 per cent in Burlington (Employment Development Department, State of California 2019; Vermont Department of Labor 2019). Firms in Silicon Valley were simply not hiring.

Moreover, even if firms had been hiring, they were unlikely to look at the workers that IBM laid off. Age discrimination is rampant in Silicon Valley (Xia & Kleiner 2001), and the majority of those dismissed were over 40 (Drogin 2008). Workers at San Jose knew that their prospects of re-employment in tech were slim:

Guess what, I have a pharmacy license ... Because I have a Plan B. If they lay me off ... They [other firms] don't want me. I'm too old, you know. I'm not young and innovative, but I'm too young for Social Security, so here I've got my pharmacy license and I'll go down and start applying to any local drugstore, Safeway, you name it.

(Interview, Software manager (#8))

Finding employment in other sectors was conceivable for dismissed workers at IBM San Jose, but the pay cut this would entail made it plausible to consider fighting to remain employed at IBM, just like their colleagues in Burlington. Workers at San Jose did not acquiesce because they believed it would be easier to find employment elsewhere. Explaining workers' acquiescence therefore must examine what led workers to believe that acquiescence was more reasonable than mobilizing, which directs analysis to discourse in the workplace.

Second, one might think that variation between each site's product markets could explain variation in workers' responses to layoffs. Because San Jose's disk drive division faced external customers while Burlington's microelectronics division mostly faced internal customers (Interview, Former site executive (#24)), one might conclude that Burlington had more room for manoeuvre. However, while each site headquartered distinct divisions, there was significant overlap in functional units. Therefore, even if external-facing divisions were subject to greater market pressure than internal-facing divisions, there was significant heterogeneity within each location in terms of the market conditions that confronted workers. This heterogeneity makes it impossible to formulate clear expectations about how each site's structural position would affect workers'

willingness or capacity to mobilize. In addition to heterogeneity within each site, the overlap of functional units entailed significant homogeneity across the sites, illustrated by the pattern of layoffs, whereby a single ‘resource action’ in the Microelectronics Division on 4 June 2002 cut hundreds of jobs at both San Jose and Burlington (Topel 2009). Given that there was more causal homogeneity in terms of product markets across the sites than within them, we can set aside the alternative hypothesis that variation in product markets led to variation in worker responses to job cuts.

Third, variation in worker profiles and the type of work performed between the two sites could have played a role in worker mobilization. However, here too there was more variation within the two sites than across them. Both San Jose and Burlington employed workers with a variety of job titles and ‘band levels’, indicating variation in responsibility and pay. However, workers at both sites were compensated similarly, with pay tied to the firm’s performance, and workers at both sites received equity in IBM (Interview, Former manager (#14); Interview, Former worker and organizer (#32)). Moreover, workers at each site performed similar enough tasks that there was frequent exchange of personnel between San Jose and Burlington (Interview, Former engineering manager (#29); Interview, Former site manager (#11)). While observing homogeneity across the sites, we also observe heterogeneity within each, as both sites were composed of a mix of professionals and skilled technicians. San Jose’s and Burlington’s interdependence in IBM’s business structure established a significant degree of homogeneity across the two sites, at least in terms of structural factors like labour markets, product markets and worker profiles.

Fourth, despite these similarities, the sites were situated in distinct cultural and ideological contexts, and the variation between Silicon Valley and rural Vermont could have shaped workers’ responses to job cuts. This variation is important for the theory of DO because the context surrounding the workplace shapes management’s discourse and techniques for control (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007). However, just as management discourse represents a contextual, rather than causal, condition that shapes worker mobilization, the cultural context surrounding each site is also just that: context. Recognizing how variation in the surrounding context affects worker mobilization in financializing firms does not challenge the theory of DO, which focuses precisely on how organizers creatively interpret management discourse in particular contexts.

I performed fieldwork at the San Jose and Burlington sites in 2014 and 2015, interviewing nearly 40 workers, managers, labour organizers and public officials.² I also collected 4500 documents from the legal case, *Syerson v. IBM*, along with archived press coverage of the layoffs from national and local sources, and 124 primary documents from interview subjects. Triangulating between the different sources increases the confidence in inferences based on these data (Gallagher 2013: 194). I transcribed interviews verbatim and coded them, along with primary documents, in MAXQDA, according to a grounded theory approach that allowed constructing analytical concepts to make sense of the cases at hand (Clarke 2005). I employed the critical approach to discourse analysis outlined by Fairclough and Fairclough (2012), paying close attention to tactics of persuasion. I present the results of this analysis below, testing for the presence of each of the four necessary conditions constitutive of DO in order to illustrate how workers can mobilize in financializing firms when organizers engage the tactics of DO.

4.1 | Acquiescence at San Jose

Given that workers at IBM San Jose acquiesced to job cuts, rather than mobilizing, we expect to observe the absence of DO’s four constitutive conditions. This section establishes the absence of

each condition to show how organizers' failure to adopt and transform management's discourse at San Jose led workers there to acquiesce to job cuts.

CWA expended considerable effort to mobilize workers at San Jose, publicizing statistics showing age discrimination by posting flyers near the IBM site and contacting local Congressional representatives (Alliance@IBM, Communications Workers of America 2002.; Olvera & Sperry 2003; Sperry 2003), but these efforts fell flat because organizers did not adapt their discourse to the specific context that management established at San Jose. Organizers believed they did not need to adjust their tactics at such an early stage of a campaign, but also admitted that they never learned enough about the workers at San Jose to ensure that this was true:

I knew very little about the company [IBM]. I did not have a lot of information. I didn't, like, know what the hell they were really doing in there, in Cottle Road. Making hard disks. Okay. But what types of workers there were? I did not have a good understanding of that. I mean, were these people like hands-on assembling stuff? Clean rooms? Or were they mostly engineers, software people designing stuff? I didn't even know that, really.

(Interview, Former organizer, CWA (#9))

Organizers' distance from the workplace prevented them from adopting and transforming management's discourse into resources for collective action, and explains why we observe the absence of DO. Instead, organizers simply recycled materials from CWA's engagement with IBM workers at other sites, which were formulated in normative discourse. In November 2001, for instance, organizers distributed a flier at San Jose that framed job cuts in normative discourse: 'The workers who built IBM deserve much better treatment than they've received this week' (Alliance@IBM, Communications Workers of America 2001). While normative discourse may have been appropriate at other sites, it clashed with the market discourse that management established at San Jose.

Organizers' failure to adapt their tactics undermined workers' ability to mobilize at San Jose because of the site's distinct discursive context. At San Jose, management framed the employment relationship in market discourse. Managers based decisions on accounting indicators that tied the employment relationship to market forces beyond firm. Decisions about staffing, for instance, were justified in terms of quarterly revenue projections (Karlsson-Dion 2008: 31), and teams' budgets were based on the previous year's profits, which led workers to keep a close eye on IBM's market performance (Interview, Former manager (#14)). Management relied on market discourse to justify layoffs as well, telling workers that the measures were necessary due to challenges that IBM faced in its product markets:

Disk drives became commodities, and that's where the market was. But IBM's never been big in the light bulb business. They want to make product that's differentiated in some way, always did. And when that clearly wasn't the case anymore, that's when they got rid of it.

(Interview, Former engineering manager (#16))

According to managers at San Jose, there was nothing they could do against the market forces that demanded job cuts.

Workers at San Jose attributed employment conditions to market forces beyond the firm, rather than to management discretion. Embedded in management's market discourse, workers believed that employment 'is not an emotional deal. It's a business deal. Just the bottom line' (Interview, Former engineer (#12)). Workers recognized that management decisions played some role in employment conditions, but believed that managers were beholden to market forces beyond their control. According to one worker, layoffs 'became necessary', although they 'probably would not have become necessary if the situation that made it necessary had been avoided to begin with. Which was possible' (Interview, Software engineer (#21)). In this case, managers could have chosen not to set a target of \$20 earning per share, but they did, 'and in order to do that, they started focusing much more on cost-saving programs', including job cuts (Interview, Software engineer (#21)). In addition to facing pressure from capital markets, workers also believed that managers faced pressure from product markets. Drawing on management's market discourse, workers believed that layoffs were unavoidable:

Disk drives, along with telephones, televisions, and personal computers, simply became a commodity... And when a product just becomes a commodity, and your competitors start undercutting your profit margin by so much, you can't afford to be in that business anymore.

(Interview, Software engineer (#21))

Workers at San Jose adopted management's market discourse along with its implication that there was nothing they could do to stop job cuts.

With workers attributing job cuts to market forces beyond their control, it was reasonable for them to conclude that collective action would not be effective in protecting their jobs. Even workers who supported fledgling efforts to form a union at IBM believed that 'a union cannot, by itself, prevent layoffs. It does, however, improve conditions for the "next guy"' (dividedwefall_ibm 1999). According to one union official, workers at San Jose did not believe that collective action was a reasonable response to job cuts. Instead, workers 'just sort of looked around and said, "this is what's been happening." And we never really got to the point where they could have believed that, that we could have built that kind of belief with them. That we could at least put up a good fight' (Interview, Union official, CWA (#19)). Organizers could have developed tactics to demonstrate the potential effectiveness of collective action, but their distance from the workplace undercut any possibility of engaging DO.

Workers acquiesced to job cuts at San Jose because organizers failed to adopt and transform management's discourse into resources for collective action. In one sense, this account is consistent with the view that management's discourse undermines workers' ability to mobilize in financializing firms. After all, workers' acceptance of management's justification of layoffs as inevitable led them to view collective action as ineffective, and thus to acquiesce. However, had organizers engaged the tactics of DO, they could have creatively re-interpreted market discourse, or engaged another discourse present in the workplace, in order to demonstrate to workers that layoffs were not necessary and that collective action could be effective, so that mobilizing would appear as a reasonable option.

As the next section shows, there are multiple discourses present in financializing firms, and management's discourse varies across individual workplaces within a single firm. Worker mobilization in financializing firms certainly depends on management discourse to some extent, but organizers are equally important because they can develop tactics appropriate to the specific

discursive context in which workers are embedded. Workers in financializing firms can mobilize when organizers engage the tactics of DO.

4.2 | Mobilization at Burlington

In contrast to San Jose, workers at Burlington mobilized against job cuts, leading us to expect to observe the four conditions characteristic of DO. This section establishes the presence of each condition to show how organizers' adoption and transformation of management's discourse at Burlington led workers to mobilize against job cuts.

As noted above, IBM's sites at San Jose and Burlington shared many similarities, but one crucial difference was variation in management's discourse. While managers at Burlington justified layoffs in the same market discourse as managers at San Jose, they generally continued to rely on IBM's traditional normative discourse into the early 2000s, emphasizing that business decisions were made with workers' and the community's interests in mind. One manager underlined that, even during market slowdowns, IBM left Burlington open in part out of their concerns for the community:

There's a human factor, a community factor. So with a fairly small incremental investment at the right time to stop [layoffs] from happening is a very reasonable thing to do [sic]. And even if it's not necessarily going to prove to make a lot of money for IBM, but to keep the facility running, keep the people employed. And it has a huge impact on the community, the impact of IBM on the community [sic]. All those things matter a lot to the senior executives at IBM.

(Interview, Technical manager (#31))

Of course, managers were first and foremost concerned with running IBM as a profitable business, but the fact that they were compelled to present themselves as caring for the community demonstrates the degree to which they deployed normative discourse at Burlington (Interview, Former manager (#27)). For decades, managers at Burlington controlled the workplace by establishing normative discourse as hegemonic, disposing workers to view employment as a relationship between workers and managers constituted by norms of reciprocity: '[When] I started with them, it was really like a family affair. Truly. You know, everybody cared about everybody' (Interview, Former engineer (#25)). Workers believed that if they gave maximal effort, management would take care of them. Layoffs shattered this norm of reciprocity, and while management's normative discourse gave workers reason to feel betrayed, it was organizers' tactics that pushed them to mobilize.

Rather than recycling tactics from other sites, organizers at Burlington developed tactics that reflected the site's discursive context. Unlike at San Jose, organizers at Burlington were drawn directly from the site's workforce, so they were deeply familiar with management's discourse. Earl Mongeon, one of the main organizers, had worked at Burlington since 1979 (Mongeon 2006), and another, James Leas, had joined in 1984 (*James Leas | LinkedIn n.d.*). Organizers were thus deeply aware of management's discourse, which enabled them to adopt that discourse and transform it into resources for collective action. When Leas wrote a letter to IBM executives in July 2002 protesting the job cuts, he engaged management's discourse to establish a common frame of reference for workers' and managers' interests: 'I am writing this letter as an IBM employee

who cares about the company and is concerned about a serious problem' (Leas 2002). Leas's letter is one example of how organizers at Burlington engaged DO. Despite the collegial tone, Leas nonetheless used management's discourse to frame workers' demand: 'immediate action'. Leas suggested that 'one approach would be to not layoff a disparate proportion of older employees by hiring back a number of older employees who were improperly laid off'. When executives did not respond, Leas joined Mongeon and others in mobilizing workers against layoffs. In contrast to San Jose, organizers at Burlington succeeded because they engaged DO.

Workers at Burlington mobilized against job cuts because organizers adopted management's normative discourse and used it to demonstrate to workers that collective action could be effective in protecting their jobs. Framing collective action in normative discourse enabled organizers to attribute layoffs to management discretion, which implied that collective action could be effective if they sufficiently pressured management. Once they began to focus on mobilizing workers for the legal case, *Syverson v. IBM*, organizers emphasized how management had broken their obligations to workers. The Alliance@IBM website, for instance, published a collection of 'Stories from Employees', which showcased the personal experiences of laid-off IBM workers recounting their service to the firm and attributing job cuts to management discretion, rather than to market forces (Alliance@IBM 2001). Organizers made this attributional assumption explicit by designing charts that presented statistical evidence that managers had selected workers for layoff based on age, and they publicized these charts widely to make sure that workers saw them, posting them online and setting up an information table near the site (Interview, Former engineer and organizer (#33); Rivera 2003). Adopting management's normative discourse enabled organizers to attribute job cuts to management discretion, and thus to demonstrate to workers that collective action could be effective. Presenting their statistical analyses of the job cuts, organizers made a strong case to workers that they could prevail in court (*Channel 3 News* 2003).

Hundreds of workers at Burlington joined *Syverson v. IBM* because they believed that collective action could be effective in protecting their jobs. Local media reported that workers 'hope they'll either be reinstated in their jobs or receive some sort of financial settlement' (*Channel 3 News* 2002). Workers' belief in the potential effectiveness of collective action was anchored in their attributing job cuts not to market forces beyond their control but to management, which they could pressure through a number of channels, including the legal case. Workers were unpersuaded by managers' accounts that job cuts were the unavoidable response to market forces beyond the firm, and believed instead that management was responsible for layoffs: 'Oh, they [managers] had to say what they were doing: "Yeah, we are doing it [layoffs] because we are losing business and we are ... Everybody will lose if some don't lose". You know, unfortunately, I don't understand that logic. Because IBM did not do layoffs until that first one' (Interview, Former engineer (#25)). Following management's announcement of layoffs, organizers polled workers at Burlington, asking if they believed that job cuts were necessary. After sharing information about IBM's financial performance, the poll asked, 'Do you think IBM needs to Cut Jobs [sic] based on these results?' Two workers answered, 'yes', and 120, 'no' (Alliance@IBM 2002). Believing that rescinding layoffs was within management's power, hundreds of workers at Burlington mobilized, rather than acquiescing to job cuts.

Organizers distributed the exact same materials to workers at San Jose and at Burlington, but these materials aided mobilization only where they were consistent with management's discourse. At Burlington, organizers adopted management's normative discourse and transformed it in order to attribute job cuts to management and to demonstrate to workers that mobilizing could be effective in protecting their jobs. At San Jose, however, organizers simply recycled the materials that organizers had developed at Burlington, but because management had established market

discourse as hegemonic at San Jose, organizers' normative arguments for collective action fell flat there. While this variation in management's discourse provides an important contextual condition for explaining variation in worker mobilization, such an explanation remains incomplete unless we integrate the role of organizers in constructing tactics that resonate with the discursive context of the workplace.

Management's normative discourse at Burlington provided workers resources for mobilizing, but only because organizers transformed management's techniques for control into resources for collective action. Just as organizers were able to justify mobilizing against job cuts by referring to management's obligations to workers, one can also imagine that notions of loyalty could hold workers back from participating in collective action. However, because organizers at Burlington were so familiar with the site's discursive context, they were able to frame mobilization as consistent with IBM's traditional values. Just as Leas originally wrote to executives as a 'concerned employee', organizers underlined that 'We want our company to be successful, and we are not ungrateful or disloyal because we want a voice in our workplace' (Alliance@IBM, n.d.). The endurance of this normative conception of employment at Burlington illustrates that the workplace is always characterized by multiple discourses. This multiplicity is one reason that, even when a firm embraces financialization, workers can still mobilize against deteriorating conditions when organizers engage the tactics of DO.

5 | CONCLUSION

This article investigated how financialization affects workers' ability to mobilize. Under financialization, managers are prone to adopt market discourse but this contextual condition does not by itself explain variation in worker mobilization in response to deteriorating employment conditions. Instead, organizers' tactics mediate the effects of management discourse on worker mobilization. The article outlined a theory of DO to formalize these tactics as four inter-related necessary conditions, which must be met in order for workers to mobilize in financializing firms. Applying DO to a comparative case study confirmed the theory's expectations that workers mobilize only where these conditions are met, and that they do not mobilize where these conditions are not met. At IBM San Jose, workers acquiesced to job cuts because organizers did not adapt their tactics to the site's discursive context, which prevented them from persuading workers that collective action could be effective. At IBM Burlington, workers mobilized against job cuts because organizers adopted and transformed management's discourse in order to demonstrate to workers that collective action could be effective. At each site, management discourse obstructed mobilization, but organizers at Burlington developed opportunistic tactics to transform management discourse into resources for collective action.

These findings raise two questions to be investigated in future research. First, how have management's discursive techniques to control the workplace evolved over the past decades? How useful is DO if the trend of financialization has receded or if management no longer relies on market discourse? In Silicon Valley, at least, large-N analysis suggests that management may have embraced a new normative discourse of 'solutionism', which frames firms as solving social problems (Nachtwey & Seidl 2017). Just as this article investigated how market discourse affects worker mobilization, future research can investigate how solutionism and other types of management discourse present distinct obstacles to, and resources for, collective action, depending on organizers' tactics. As this article showed, management discourse can vary significantly between individual workplaces, so researchers would be well-advised to complement large-N analysis with detailed

case studies of particular workplaces. Second, while this article illustrated the value of investigating the workplace, the rising incidence of remote work — especially due to COVID — raises questions about where researchers should look for a discursive arena that approximates the workplace in an era when ever fewer workers have one. In some firms, communication largely takes place online, whether between management and workers, among workers or between workers and organizers, providing one more reason to double down on online research methods. Recent research on collective action among platform workers illustrates how researchers need to follow workers online if they wish to analyse what amounts to workplace discourse in the current era of production (Tassinari & Maccarrone 2020; Vandaele 2020).

Just as production can be directed through online platforms, moving online need not hinder labour organizing. Recent cases of collective action in tech illustrate how the theory of DO outlined in this article helps explain worker mobilization even in this online environment, and thereby highlights the lessons available for unions.

Over the last several years, workers at Google have repeatedly mobilized. In January 2021, workers announced the formation of the Alphabet Workers Union (AWU), a solidarity union supported by CWA that is open to workers at firms owned by Alphabet, including Google and YouTube, among others. Since the first public demonstrations against Google's management, organizers have engaged the tactics of DO. During the Google Walkout in November 2018, when tens of thousands of Google workers around the world walked off the job, organizers announced, 'From the moment we start at Google, we're told that we aren't just employees; we're owners. Every person who walked out today is an owner, and the owners say: Time's up' (Stapleton *et al.* 2018). Adopting management's discourse, organizers transformed the framework of empowerment in production into a framework of empowerment in collective action. Similarly, organizers involved with establishing AWU have used management discourse to justify their efforts. The union's website declares: 'Alphabet's guiding principle used to be "Don't be evil." Help us be Alphabet's conscience' (Alphabet Workers Union (AWU) *n.d.*). Raksha Muthukumar, a Google software engineer and union organizer, explained a common reason that workers joined the union, 'We've seen an increase of Google doing things that don't align with the values that we signed up to be a part of' (DiFelicianantonio 2021). In each of these cases, organizers adopted management's discourse and transformed it into resources for collective action. As this article showed, organizers must adapt their tactics to fit management's discourse. When facing market discourse, organizers' main task is to demonstrate the potential effectiveness of collective action. At Google, organizers have used management's stated commitment to certain principles as a common language for workers to justify participating in collective action.

Situating the recent success of AWU against the backdrop of organizing efforts at IBM illustrates the continued relevance of DO, but also raises questions about its limits. Does DO entail the same degree of strategic self-limitation as traditional notions of opportunism? Offe and Wiesen-thal (1980) note that opportunism may help workers mobilize in the short term but may undermine efforts to build power in the long term. Indeed, the degree to which management discourse focuses exclusively on the firm, rather than surrounding society, may limit the potential of workers' collective action to effect change beyond the workplace. However, it may be the case that some types of management discourse do in fact provide resources for building long-term and far-reaching worker power — as long as organizers recognize them. Management's turn toward 'solutionism' in tech may represent one such possibility, given that this discourse explicitly sets the workplace in the context of broader social change. Organizers can adopt this discourse of solving social problems and transform it so that it is workers directing the process of social change, rather than managers, approximating the strategy of 'Bargaining for the Common Good' used

so effectively by educators in recent years (McCartin *et al.* 2020). Tech may thus represent one sector where opportunistic discursive tactics make collective action possible without limiting its potential gains.

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NOTES

¹ These limitations echo the distinction between mobilizing and organizing (Han 2014; McAlevey 2016), with opportunism enabling workers to mobilize, but not to organize. Unfortunately, space constraints prohibit full consideration of the issue here.

² See Appendix 1 for a list of interviews.

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APPENDIX I

Interviews performed: IBM Burlington and IBM San Jose

Number	Date	Subject	Location
1.	6 March 2014	Former IBM employee and organizer, <i>Alliance@IBM</i>	Telephone
2.	27 August 2014	Labour representative	Telephone
3.	11 September 2014	Public official	San Jose, CA
4.	16 September 2014	Union official, CWA	San Jose, CA
5.	19 September 2014	Former site executive, IBM	Telephone
6.	19 September 2014	Journalist — Bay Area press	Telephone
7.	22 September 2014	Former researcher, IBM San Jose	Telephone

(Continues)

Number	Date	Subject	Location
8.	8 October 2014	Software manager, IBM San Jose	Telephone
9.	2 March 2015	Former organizer, CWA	Oakland, CA
10.	3 March 2015	Former programmer, IBM San Jose	Walnut Creek, CA
11.	7 March 2015	Former site manager, IBM San Jose	San Francisco, CA
12.	9 March 2015	Former engineer, IBM San Jose	San Jose, CA
13.	19 March 2015	Former engineering manager, IBM San Jose	San Jose, CA
14.	22 March 2015	Former manager, IBM San Jose	San Jose, CA
15.	24 March 2015	Former organizing director, CWA	Telephone
16.	26 March 2015	Former engineering manager, IBM San Jose	Mountain View, CA
17.	27 March 2015	Former manager, IBM San Jose	San Jose, CA
18.	5 April 2015	Union official, CWA	Telephone
19.	6 April 2015	Union official, CWA	Telephone
20.	9 April 2015	Former IBM employee and organizer, <i>Alliance@IBM</i>	Telephone
21.	9 April 2015	Software engineer, IBM San Jose	San Jose, CA
22.	13 April 2015	Former software engineer, IBM San Jose	Telephone
23.	20 September 2015	Former consultant, IBM Burlington	Telephone
24.	20 September 2015	Former site executive, IBM	Telephone
25.	11 October 2015	Former engineer, IBM Burlington	Burlington, VT
26.	13 October 2015	Technical manager, IBM Burlington	Burlington, VT
27.	13 October 2015	Former manager, IBM Burlington	Burlington, VT
28.	13 October 2015	Former production worker, IBM Burlington	Burlington, VT
29.	14 October 2015	Former engineering manager, IBM Burlington	Burlington, VT
30.	14 October 2015	Former engineer and organizer, IBM Burlington	Burlington VT
31.	14 October 2015	Technical manager, IBM Burlington	Burlington, VT
32.	15 October 2015	Former worker and organizer, IBM Burlington	Burlington, VT
33.	15 October 2015	Former engineer and organizer, IBM Burlington	Burlington, VT
34.	15 October 2015	Engineering manager, IBM Burlington	Burlington, VT
35.	16 October 2015	Engineering manager, IBM Burlington	Burlington, VT
36.	16 October 2015	Former production engineer, IBM Burlington	Burlington, VT