

# Worker-Organization Goal Misalignment and Support for Collective Action

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## **Abstract**

As workplace inequality persists, understanding the psychological processes motivating collective action engagement becomes imperative. In one domain of collective action, labor unionization, membership in the U.S. has continuously declined since the 1980s. Despite this decline, recent surveys suggest that pro-union sentiment is rising. Amid workplace inequity and rising public interest in unionization, the researchers draw from research on collective action and organizational identification to examine whether exposure to worker-organization conflict and information about unions changes how workers evaluate existing and novel organizational grievance procedures, and consequently, increases pro-union sentiment. Across four studies ( $N = 3,143$ ), they find that exposure to workplace conflicts and information about unions reduces workers' perceived alignment with organizational grievance procedures and increases pro-union attitudes, relative to control conditions where participants are not exposed to information about unions. These findings have implications for employee wellbeing and for the psychological processes implicated in collective action organizing.

## **Introduction**

Labor unionization—a process by which workers organize collectively to protect their rights—has historically been associated with reduced economic inequality and compressed wage distributions (1), as well as greater life satisfaction and lower turnover (2, 3). Yet, since the 1970s, US labor unionization has continuously declined, and currently rests at 9.9%, the lowest unionization rate on record (4).

Some research suggests that exposure to localized inequality may increase workers' support for unionization (5). During the COVID-19 pandemic, workers reported being increasingly unhappy with their working conditions (6). In this same period, high-profile union campaigns have taken off and pro-union sentiment has risen; favorable public opinion of labor unions is the highest it has been in 60 years (7). Opposition to unionization has fallen dramatically in recent years and workers report greater openness to unionizing (8). How might conditions of increasingly salient workplace inequity influence workers' evaluations of labor unionization? In this research, we examine how contexts that highlight worker-organization conflict promote collective action attitudes related to unionization.

### **Worker and Organization (Mis)Alignment**

Inequality is related to workplace dissatisfaction, which has been linked to negative employee mental health outcomes, decreased organizational trust, and increased turnover (9, 10). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, pre-existing occupational inequalities became salient (11, 12). In 2022, upwards of 50 million workers quit their jobs, the highest documented number of employee resignations in a single year (13). The top reasons cited for quitting were low pay, no opportunity for advancement, and feeling disrespected at work (14). Given these conditions of

rising and salient inequality, one might assume that workplace dissatisfaction and unionization would be widespread.

Yet, organizations exert a countervailing force on workers, which maintains workers' commitment to and identification with their workplace. Management scholarship has emphasized the importance of fostering organizational commitment, internalizing company goals, promoting 'psychological attachment' to the company, and encouraging a sense of alignment between worker, team, and organization in order to promote organizational functioning (15-19). Organizations and managers have nearly universally applied these findings to their own management strategies—emphasizing the shared goals and interests of workers and the organization (20). Consequently, perceptions of labor unions as unnecessary and ineffective have risen dramatically over the past several decades, reinforcing workers' apathy towards unionization (21). If workers perceive their interests to be aligned with those of the organization, and if stereotypes of labor unions as ineffective persist, then workers will not see labor unions as instrumental to their goals and will be unlikely to spontaneously initiate a unionization process.

Disrupting these perceptions of alignment, therefore, may be critical to promoting engagement in collective bargaining outside of the organization. One pathway through which workers evaluate unionization as instrumental to their goals might consist of exposure to workplace conflict. Although the role of conflict in the psychology of collective action has been well explored, workplace conflicts may function differently than political or religious conflicts (22, 23). Conflicts between workers and their managers typically require workers to utilize internal systems of conflict resolution, such as human resources (HR). These experiences could disrupt workers' belief that their goals are aligned with those of their employer and provide an opening for workers to develop pro-union sentiment. However, given that the unionized

workforce is declining, non-union workers are likely unaware of what unions do. As such, workplace conflicts alone are unlikely to spontaneously generate interest in unionization. In order for exposure to worker-organization conflict to increase workers' interest in unionizing, workers must consider unionization as a viable alternative to their existing organizational structures. To accomplish this, workers may need to receive information about what unions do, and how union structures can independently serve worker goals (24).

We propose that workers evaluate unionization in comparison to their existing organizational structure. If workers perceive their interests and goals as aligned with those of their organization, then they will not perceive their goals as aligned with labor unions. Yet, if exposed to conflicts between workers and management, and introduced to basic information about labor unions, workers may see unions as aligned with their personal goals and express increased support for unionization.

### **Cultivating Pro-Union Attitudes**

Several lines of research provide preliminary evidence that exposure to worker-organization conflict and information about unions is likely to increase interest in unionization. Here, we refer to conflicts experienced by workers in which managerial interests are at odds with workers' interests as 'worker-organization conflicts'. We use the term 'worker-organization conflict' because organizations are likely to use HR to protect managerial interests in worker-manager conflicts and we are interested in how conflicts between workers and managers may, in turn, highlight the conflicting interests between workers and the organization writ large.

Tens of thousands of employees in the United States submit employment discrimination complaints to the US federal government every year, according to data obtained from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission website. Importantly, workplace conflicts often involve

procedures that highlight misalignment between workers and the organization. For example, if a worker reports experiencing harassment from a manager, the organization must manage its culpability while responding to this report.

In both private and public sector organizations, it is commonplace to utilize HR to navigate workplace conflicts. HR is typically a department within an organization that manages employees and fosters development within the organization. Although organizations have, in large part, successfully cultivated trust and commitment among employees, this success has not extended to one area—HR (25, 26, 27). As such, we predict that when evaluating the efficacy of HR grievance procedures in handling workplace conflicts, workers may perceive misalignment between their goals and those of the organization, and express interest in alternative forms of representation.

If workplace conflicts highlight the inefficacy and unfairness of existing organizational grievance procedures, then workers presented with information about labor unions may evaluate labor unions as more aligned with and instrumental to their goals, which, in turn, may increase their interest in unionization. Descriptively, non-union workers appear to be largely unaware of the material benefits of unionization, but informational interventions correcting misperceptions have effectively increased pro-union sentiment and willingness to unionize (24). Among union members, political education programs have successfully increased union participation (28), and union participation is associated with pro-union attitudes (29). These studies provide suggestive preliminary evidence that information about collective action through unions is related to pro-union attitudes and willingness to unionize.

Consequently, for our first hypothesis (H1), we predict that participants exposed to worker-organization conflict and information about unions will perceive a union grievance

procedure as more aligned with workers' goals than an HR grievance procedure. For our second hypothesis (H2), we expect that when exposed to worker-organization conflict and information about unions, workers will express more positive union attitudes. Given the gap between pro-union sentiment and unionization rates, we also explore whether exposure to conflict and information about unions shapes union-joining intentions. However, given that joining a union is a multi-part process, we are cautious in expectation of movement on these measures. For our third hypothesis (H3), we predict that when exposed to worker-organization conflict and information about unions, workers will report greater willingness to join unions.

### **Current Research**

We test the above predictions across four studies. In Study 1, we use a within-subjects experiment to examine how exposure to workplace conflicts combined with information about HR- and union-derived grievance procedures influences perceptions of alignment between workers and unions as well as union attitudes. In Study 2, we conduct an online experiment to test how exposure to workplace conflict and information about HR and union grievance procedures shapes union attitudes relative to a no-information condition. In Study 3, we again investigate exposure to workplace conflict and information about HR and union grievance procedures against control conditions that control for exposure to conflict, or exposure to information about unions. In Study 4, we replicate Study 3 among a targeted sample of workers.

This paper aims to make three contributions to social psychological research. First, we aim to identify the social contexts, related to worker-organization conflict and information about unions, that engender pro-union attitudes and predict support for unionization. Second, we aim to understand the psychology of pro-union sentiment by studying the contexts which increase perceptions of misalignment between workers and organizations, or alignment between workers

and unions. Third, we seek to contribute to research on the psychology of collective action by developing an experimental paradigm designed to clarify the organizational contextual factors that give rise to the psychological conditions under which workers respond to workplace injustices.

### **Study 1**

In Study 1, participants read through three workplace conflict scenarios and reported how much two unlabeled grievance procedures were aligned with an aggrieved worker's goals. The materials used were designed to mimic standard union and HR grievance procedures (see Method). Participants reported their preference between the two procedures, and were then informed that the previously unlabeled union procedure was derived from union grievance procedures. We then measured union attitudes along with other individual differences (see Method). We expected participants to perceive the union procedure as more closely aligned with workers' goals than the HR procedure (H1). We also examined associations between perceiving alignment between workers and the union grievance procedure and pro-union sentiment, exploring H2.

### **Study 1 Results**

One participant failed the attention check, and was consequently dropped from our final sample ( $n = 300$ ).

#### **Perceived Goal Alignment of Union & HR Procedures**

We expected that workplace conflict and information about unions would heighten misalignment between the goals of workers and the goals of the organization. As a result, we hypothesized that participants would perceive the union grievance procedure as more aligned with workers' goals than the HR grievance procedure (H1).



We averaged the union procedure items together to form a goal alignment scale (see Method for scale development). Given the within-subject nature of our design, we used a paired samples t-test for the union alignment scale and the HR alignment scale to test our prediction. We found support for our first hypothesis: Participants perceived the union grievance procedure ( $M = 3.35$ ) as being more aligned with workers' goals than the HR procedure ( $M = 1.98$ ;  $t(299) = -21.20, p < .001$ ; Figure 1).

### **Union Grievance Procedure Preference**

We predicted, consistent with H2, that in the context of a workplace conflict and information about unions, participants would report positive union attitudes. We tested this hypothesis indirectly by comparing overall preferences for the union and HR grievance procedures when the procedures were unlabeled, and thus free from any sentiment related to unions or HR. A one-sample t-test indicated participants' preference scores ( $M = 5.30$ ) fell above the scale midpoint, ( $t(299) = 36.223, p < .001, d = 2.027$ ), such that participants preferred the union procedure over the HR procedure.

### **Exploratory Effects on Union Attitudes**

Although our within-subjects design precludes us from examining how exposure to our study materials influences general union attitudes, we conducted post-hoc exploratory analyses comparing general union attitudes reported in this study to general union attitudes reported in a previously-conducted pilot study, wherein no information about union procedures or workplace conflict was provided.

We elected to use a pilot sample ( $n = 553$ ) of Prolific workers collected in May 2023 as the non-intervention comparison sample. Participants in this study read about exploitation in the

workplace, and then responded to a battery of psychological measures and union attitude measures. Given the moderate to high levels of correlation between union attitude items in the comparison sample we created a standardized composite measure of union attitudes ( $\alpha = .84$ ). Using Welch's two-sample t-test, we found a statistically significant difference in union attitudes between the pilot study and Study 1 ( $t(693.53) = -3.573, p < .001$ ; Figure 2), such that union attitudes in Study 1, where participants considered workplace conflicts and learned about union grievance procedures, were more favorable ( $M = 2.71, SD = 0.9$ ), than those in the pilot study, where they were not exposed to this information ( $M = 2.47, SD = 1.04$ ).

### **Study 1 Discussion**

Study 1 provides initial support for our hypotheses about the relationship between conflict, exposure to HR and union grievance procedures, and union attitudes. Our findings suggest that when exposed to worker-organization conflicts and information about unions, participants preferred a union grievance procedure, and perceived it to be more aligned with workers' goals than an HR procedure. Moreover, these preferences and perceptions predicted union attitudes more broadly.

However, several outstanding issues remain. First, our within-subjects design raises concerns about experimenter demand, which can be resolved with subsequent between-subjects experiments. Second, given demographic variability in union attitudes and occupational variability in union representation, there may be demographic or occupational patterns to workers' union attitudes. In future studies, we restrict our sample on the basis of union membership, occupational status, and age. In the following studies, we aim to shed more light on H2 and H3 by experimentally testing how exposure to workplace conflict and union-derived grievance procedures shape union attitudes and willingness to unionize.

## **Studies 2-4**

In Study 2, we designed a between-subjects experiment in which participants were randomly assigned to read through the study materials in Study 1, or to proceed to our study measures after a no-information control condition. In Studies 3 and 4, we extend our findings in Studies 1 and 2 by conducting experiments in which participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: a Combined Conflict & Information condition, which was identical to the experimental condition in Study 2, or to one of two control conditions where only workplace conflict (Conflict Only) or only information about union and HR grievance procedures (Information Only) was provided alongside three workplace scenarios.

## **Results**

In Studies 2 - 4 we used similar experimental manipulations and measured the same outcome variables (worker goal alignment, pro-union sentiment, and willingness to unionize). For ease of comprehension, we will present the results of our analyses as follows: For each set of analyses, we will report Study 2 first, followed by the results of Studies 3 and 4 together. After presenting the results of each individual study, we will report a mini meta-analysis across all three experiments (30).

### **Perceived Goal Alignment of Union & HR Procedures**

In Studies 2-4, as in Study 1, we predicted that participants would rate the union procedure as more aligned with workers' goals, relative to the HR procedure. In Studies 3 and 4, we also examined condition differences in union and HR alignment ratings. We expected to find a greater difference between union and HR alignment ratings among participants in the

Combined Conflict & Information condition relative to the other two control conditions, indicating more favorable union alignment ratings and more unfavorable HR alignment ratings.

In Study 2 we replicate our analyses used in Study 1 to examine within-subject differences in union and HR alignment ratings. We averaged the union procedure items together to form a goal alignment scale for the union procedure ( $M = 3.36$ ), and we averaged the HR items together to form a goal alignment scale for the HR procedure ( $M = 2.02$ ). Using a paired  $t$ -test of goal alignment for the union and HR procedures, we found that participants perceived the union procedure as being more aligned with workers' goals than the HR procedure ( $t(288) = -21.280, p < .001$ ; Figure 3).

Next, we examined union and HR alignment ratings as a function of condition assignment for Studies 3 and 4. We ran a  $2 \times 3$  mixed ANOVA, with alignment rating as a within-subjects factor (two levels: union vs. HR), and condition as a between-subjects factor (three levels: Combined Conflict & Information, Information Only, Conflict Only). Main effects are reported in the Supplementary Analyses 1. We found a significant interaction between condition and rating type in both Studies 3 and 4, (Study 3:  $F(1, 821) = 15.83, p < .001$ ; Study 4:  $F(1, 647) = 23.59, p < .001$ ) indicating that differences in alignment ratings between the union and HR options varied across conditions (Figure 4).

In Study 3 and 4, participants in the Combined Conflict & Information condition rated the HR procedure as significantly less aligned with workers' goals (Study 3:  $M = 2.20, SD = 0.79$ ; Study 4:  $M = 2.03, SD = 0.73$ ) relative to the union procedure (Study 3:  $M = 2.93, SD = 0.78$ ; Study 4:  $M = 3.36, SD = 0.64$ ), Study 3:  $t(821) = -14.08, p < .001$ ; Study 4:  $t(647) = -22.03, p < .001$ . This pattern emerged in the Information Only condition as well (HR ratings: Study 3:  $M = 2.59, SD = 0.72$ ; Study 4:  $M = 2.29, SD = 0.64$ ; Union ratings: Study 3:  $M = 3.02, SD =$

0.64, Study 4:  $M = 3.2$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ), Study 3:  $t(821) = -7.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Study 4:  $t(647) = -15.25$ ,  $p < .001$ , but the difference in union and HR alignment ratings was the greatest among participants in the Combined Conflict & Information condition.

### **Condition Differences in Union Attitudes**

In Study 2, we conducted an independent samples t-test of the standardized composite measure of union attitudes between conditions to examine whether participants in the experimental condition reported more favorable union attitudes compared to participants in the control condition. Our results lend support for H2: As predicted, we found that participants in the experimental condition reported more favorable union attitudes ( $M = 0.08$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ) compared to participants in the control condition ( $M = -0.08$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ) at a statistically significant level,  $t(592.92) = -2.324$ ,  $p = .021$  (Figure 5).

In Studies 3 and 4, we conducted a one-way omnibus ANOVA using the three conditions as the predictor variable, and the standardized union attitudes composite measure as our dependent variable. In Study 3 we did not find support for our hypothesis (H2); we found no statistically significant difference between conditions ( $F(2, 1253) = 2.841$ ,  $p = .058$ ). We examined possible moderators of this relationship and found that age moderated this relationship (see Supplementary Analyses 2). Among older participants (those at or above the mean age), exposure to conflict without union information (i.e., the Conflict Only condition) reduced participants' pro-union sentiment, whereas among younger participants, exposure to conflict did not significantly reduce pro-union sentiment.

To explore this pattern of results in more detail, in Study 4 we controlled for age by restricting participation to individuals under the age of 40. We also restricted the sample to

workers in non-managerial roles in order to refine our sample to individuals in occupations that are more likely to unionize. In Study 4 (among a restricted sample of non-managerial workers under 40), a one-way omnibus ANOVA produced a significant difference in union attitudes between conditions ( $F(2, 989) = 7.864, p < .001$ ), indicating support for our second hypothesis (Figure 6).

Using a Fisher's Least Significant Difference (LSD) test, we found no difference between the Information Only control condition ( $M = -0.002, SD = 0.78$ ) and the Conflict Only control condition ( $M = -0.11, SD = 0.83$ ), ( $t(989) = 1.916, p = .135$ ). Likewise, there was no significant difference in union attitudes between the Information Only control ( $M = -0.002, SD = 0.78$ ) and the Combined Conflict & Information condition ( $M = 0.12, SD = 0.72, t(989) = -2.029, p = .106$ ). However, we did find a significant difference in union attitudes between the Combined Conflict & Information condition and the Conflict Only control condition ( $t(989) = 3.97, 95\% CI = [0.116, 0.354], p < .001$ , with an estimated mean difference of 0.240), indicating that participants who were exposed to information about unions and conflict reported significantly more pro-union sentiment compared to participants who were exposed to conflict, but not information about unions, lending support for H2 (Figure 6).

### **Condition Differences in Willingness to Unionize**

In Study 2, an independent samples t-test of the standardized composite willingness to unionize measure between conditions revealed no significant difference in overall willingness to unionize between participants in the experimental ( $M = 0.05, SD = 0.88$ ) and control conditions, ( $M = -0.04, SD = 0.97; t(592.15) = 1.19, p = .235$ ).

In Studies 3 and 4, the same one-way omnibus ANOVA was used to examine willingness to unionize. In Study 3, a one-way omnibus ANOVA revealed no statistically significant difference between conditions ( $F(2, 1253) = 2.803, p = .061$ ). In Study 4, a one-way omnibus ANOVA also revealed no significant difference between conditions ( $F(2, 988) = 0.62, p = .537$ ).

### **Mini Meta Analyses**

Internal meta analyses allow scholars to test effects measured across studies (30). Here, we conduct internal meta analyses testing our three hypotheses. Across studies 2-4 we examine condition differences in perceived alignment between workers and union/HR grievance procedures, union attitudes, and willingness to unionize. Specifically, we test our hypothesis that participants in the Combined Conflict & Information condition will demonstrate more pronounced differences in perceived alignment with the union and HR grievance procedure, more pro-union sentiment, and greater willingness to unionize relative to a combination of our two control conditions (Conflict Only and Information Only). We organize our mini meta analyses to examine pairwise comparisons between the Combined Conflict & Information condition and the average of the control conditions across our hypotheses. Our meta-analyses cover Studies 2-4, and includes a total sample of  $N = 2,843$  participants.

## **Results**

### **Combined Conflict & Information vs. Controls**

We first tested our first hypothesis that participants exposed to worker-organization conflict and information about unions would perceive a union grievance procedure as more aligned with workers' goals than an HR grievance procedure. We conducted meta analyses of the difference scores of union and HR ratings by condition. In order to measure the extent of the

difference between union and HR alignment ratings, we calculated the means and standard deviations of difference scores between union and HR alignment ratings across Studies 2 through 4, and by condition in Studies 3 and 4. We then converted the difference scores into effect sizes (Cohen's  $d$ ) and conducted two meta analyses, one for the Combined Conflict & Information condition (covering Studies 2-4; *Mean ES* = 0.948, 95% *CI* = [0.86, 1.04],  $z = 20.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and one for the Information Only condition (covering Studies 3-4; *Mean ES* = 0.641, 95% *CI* = [0.534, 0.748],  $z = 11.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Figure 7). Critically, as the non-overlapping confidence intervals attest, participants perceived a significantly greater difference in union and HR goal alignment in the Combined Conflict & Information condition compared to the Information Only condition.

We next tested our second and third hypotheses, regarding condition differences in union attitudes and willingness to unionize, respectively. Providing support for H2, participants exposed to both worker-organization conflict and information about unions did report more pro-union sentiment relative to the average of the control conditions (*Mean ES* = 0.121, 95% *CI* = [0.044, 0.198],  $z = 3.065$ ,  $p = .002$ ; Figure 8). Exposure to conflict and information about unions did not improve willingness to unionize relative to the average of the control conditions (*Mean ES* = 0.044, 95% *CI* = [-.037, .118],  $z = 1.03$ ,  $p = .303$ , Figure 8).

## **General Discussion**

For decades, despite rising pro-union sentiment, unionization has been on the decline. Today, fewer than 10% of workers in the US engage in collective action through unions (4). Economists, sociologists, policy experts, and labor scholars have attributed this decline to structural shifts in labor, such as the rise of offshoring (31), as well as to the corporate sector's intense anti-union stance: Corporations continue to lobby for policies that make it harder for



workers to unionize, hire anti-union agencies to intimidate workers from organizing, and in many cases, even fire workers leading unionization efforts (32). The barriers to unionization are numerous, but due to rising inequality within organizations, workers are expressing renewed interest in labor unionization (7). Using an experimental paradigm in which participants are faced with conflicts they might experience in a workplace, we find that exposure to labor union grievance procedures as a potential solution for workplace conflicts leads workers to perceive union-derived grievance procedures as more aligned with workers' goals than HR-related ones. Our research also reveals that exposure to information about unions, particularly when combined with worker-organization conflicts, consistently predicts increased pro-union sentiment. Notably, pro-union sentiment potentially increases the most among younger, non-managerial workers when they are exposed to both workplace conflict and information about unions.

Corporations spend hundreds of millions of dollars annually on anti-union campaigns, including hiring union-busting law firms, psychologically intimidating workers, surveillance, and threatening to fire workers to cultivate distrust of labor unions (33, 34). As a result of this, stereotypes of unions as bureaucratic entities which hinder individual growth persist, shaping workers' attitudes toward unions (34). Our research examines the efficacy of methods countering these prevailing narratives. Exposure to situations in which workers' goals are at odds with those of management may reduce workers' perceived alignment with the organization. When paired with information about what unions do for workers (relative to HR), this can meaningfully improve workers' perceived alignment with labor unions and even their pro-union sentiment.

Understanding the psychological processes and the contexts through which workers evaluate labor unionization has consequences that extend beyond the workplace. Labor unions have historically played a significant role in the political education of workers, and both

qualitative and quantitative research have demonstrated that increased participation in the workplace can profoundly affect workers' perceptions of political efficacy and their attitudes toward societal inequality and authority (28, 35). Future research should examine the potentially transformative effects of labor unionization on workers' conceptions of societal inequality.

Our work also sheds light on the dynamic role that exposure to conflict and information about unions plays in shaping interest and engagement in collective action. We find that pairing worker-organization conflicts with information about unions may shape workers' interest in unionizing in disparate ways: Our results suggest that conflict and union information may increase pro-union sentiment among younger workers, but dampen interest in unionization among older workers. These findings may help to explain why older workers tend to be less interested in unionizing compared to younger workers (8). While conflict might invigorate younger workers by highlighting injustice in the workplace, it could have the opposite effect among older workers, who may be skeptical of efforts to change the circumstances of their work environment. Future research should examine the effects of exposure to conflict — along with information about unions — on pro-union sentiment in different occupational settings and among different social groups.

Interestingly, we did not find support for our third hypothesis: willingness to unionize did not improve after exposure to information about unions and worker-organization conflict. Bridging the attitude-behavior gap is likely to be uniquely difficult in the case of labor unionization (36). Given the high start-up costs of organizing or joining a labor union, and given the structural and policy barriers to successful collective bargaining and winning a contract, it is not surprising that shifting union attitudes is more easily done than shifting willingness to unionize (37). Future work should examine differences in union attitudes and willingness to

unionize in terms of the attitude-behavior gap and measure support for labor reform policies that create conditions where workers are better able to unionize. Future work should also test how challenging stereotypes of union efficacy might serve to shift not only union attitudes, but also willingness to unionize.

The scope of our research is limited in several ways. First, our studies are conducted among online convenience samples, and thus may not be representative of those who are in a position to engage in workplace collective action. Future research would benefit from studying the psychological antecedents of collective action within a single organizational context, or within an occupational sector with moderate levels of union density. Second, we simulate workplace conflicts using a vignette design, and although the conflicts workers read are commonly experienced, they do not equate to the first-hand experience of worker-organization conflict. Future research should examine how first-hand experiences of conflict shape workers' support for and interest in workplace collective action. Lastly, although we speculate about the role organizations play in fostering organizational commitment and anti-union sentiment, we do not experimentally manipulate these conditions in the present research, so we are unable to make empirical claims about their effect. Recent work in this domain suggests that union busting (aggressive efforts to inhibit unionization) can induce backlash effects and reduce organizational identification among workers (38). Future work should explore how exposure to corporate anti-union campaigns shapes workers' relationship to the organization and their interest in unionization.

## **Conclusion**

For decades, the prevalence of labor unions has declined; today, only 9.9% of the workforce is unionized (4). Yet, unions have recently begun to receive renewed interest, and this

interest coincides with the growing salience of workplace inequity. Our findings suggest that under existing conditions of inequality, and amid rising cultural awareness of labor unions, workers—particularly young workers—may be increasingly interested in unionizing. We hope this work opens the door for future study into the psychology of collective action and unionization.

## **Methods**

### **Study 1 Method**

The methods and materials for this study were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Yale University.

### **Participants**

We recruited 301 participants through Prolific Academic (140 women,  $M_{\text{age}} = 37.77$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.68$ , 67.7% White, 12.3% Black, 7.3% Asian, 5% Latinx; Household income:  $M = 5.26$ , or \$50,000 - \$74,999,  $SD = 1.94$ , Political party: 49.3% Democrat, 16.7% Republican, 28.3% Independent). Participation was restricted to individuals currently living in the United States with a Prolific study approval of 90% or higher, and who were currently working (part-time or full-time) or would begin working within the next month. Participants received \$3.00 as payment for their participation in the study.

### **Procedure and Materials**

Participants consented to participate, and then read a short introduction describing the aims of the study. Participants were then presented with two options for handling workplace conflicts. Because Americans may have misperceptions of what unions do (24), we chose to

examine participants' reactions to the features of a labor union without the "union" label. Similarly, research suggests that workers hold negative opinions of HR, so we presented participants with the features of typical HR grievance procedures without labeling them "HR" (39). We will refer to these two forms of representation (referred to in the materials as "Option A/B") as the "union grievance procedure" and the "HR grievance procedure" for the remainder of the paper. Participants learned that both procedures involve a third-party individual to represent the employees involved in the conflict, and that the procedures varied in terms of the scope of representation, their goals, their procedures, and how each representation team is held accountable. Participants were then told about two fictional people who work at the same company, Tina and Eric. Participants were informed that Eric is the managing director of the marketing department at the company, and Tina is a worker in the marketing department. Eric is not Tina's direct supervisor, and he is ranked much higher than her in the company. To illustrate the hierarchy of their workplace, participants were shown an organizational chart (see Supplementary Methods 1). Participants then read through three scenarios describing different workplace conflicts (see Supplementary Methods 2) between Tina and Eric. These scenarios were based on common workplace conflicts (according to human resource management firms), such as those resulting from workplace injuries, sexual harassment, and biased hiring and promotion decision-making. After reading each scenario, participants were asked to rate both procedures for handling workplace conflicts. Participants then read a message indicating that the union procedure (referred to as "Option B" in the materials) was based on union representation, "A labor union is defined as an organization of workers formed to protect and promote workers' interests. Option B, which you previously read about, demonstrates the role of unions in handling workplace grievance procedures." Participants then reported their union attitudes and

demographic information. Lastly, participants were thanked and debriefed, before being returned to the Prolific website and receiving payment.

### **HR and Union Grievance Procedure Materials**

The HR procedure consisted of a standard human resources procedure for handling workplace conflicts, and was developed by aggregating language about the goals, procedures, and services offered by human resource departments from websites catering toward human resource management. All of the features described in the explanation for the HR procedure (see Supplementary Methods 4) were repeatedly found in conflict management materials for human resources specialists.

The union procedure described the procedures for handling a workplace conflict if the workplace has a union contract (see Supplementary Methods 4). The features of the union grievance procedure were aggregated from human resource management websites catering to organizations that have union contracts. The intended audience of these websites were human resource specialists, and the materials were developed by human resource managers, not union representatives, indicating that the materials did not carry a pro-union skew.

### **Worker Goal Alignment Ratings**

Participants rated the HR and union procedures on a scale containing four items, which was developed to relate to two psychological mechanisms that we expected to predict union attitudes: goal alignment and union instrumentality. Participants were asked to rate the extent they agreed with each of the four statements in relation to the HR procedure and the union procedure on a four-point Likert scale ranging from “not at all” to “very”. The first two items were related to worker-organizational goal alignment: “Aligned with Tina’s goals”, and

“Designed to have Tina’s best interest in mind”. The latter two items were related to instrumentality: “Effective at representing Tina’s wishes”, and “Likely to be effective at winning Tina’s case”. These items were stylistically derived from questions used in Pew Research Center surveys.

### **Factor Analysis of Worker Goal Alignment Scale**

Participants rated the union and HR procedures separately, on 4 items (two measuring perceived instrumentality, and two measuring perceived alignment), so we first conducted a factor analysis with all eight items (see Supplementary Analyses 2). Because participants’ perceived goal alignment and instrumentality ratings did not load onto separate factors, and given their high internal consistency, we will hereafter subsume the instrumentality measure into participants’ overall procedure rating scores, and refer to participants’ procedure rating scores as ‘worker goal alignment’ or ‘alignment’. We averaged the union alignment items together to form a single union alignment scale ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ,  $\alpha = .96$ ), and we averaged the HR alignment together to form a single HR alignment scale ( $M = 1.98$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ,  $\alpha = .95$ ).

### **Overall Preference**

After reading through all three scenarios and rating the union and HR procedures for each, participants were asked to report which of the two procedures they preferred overall. They were reminded of the goals of each procedure, and then reported which procedure they preferred on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“Definitely Option A [HR]”) to 5 (“Definitely Option B [Union]”;  $M = 5.03$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ).

### **Union Attitudes**

Participants reported how effective they believed labor unions are at rectifying workplace exploitation on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Not at all effective” to “Very effective” ( $M$

= 4.13,  $SD = 0.82$ ). Participants also reported the extent to which they believed “workers need unions to protect them from exploitation” on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from “Not at all” to “Very Much” ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ) .

Participants then responded to two measures of union attitudes adapted from Gallup and Pew Research Center. The Gallup poll is one of the longest-running union attitude polls, and Pew Research Center has consistently measured union sentiment since the late 1990s (7, 40). The measure adapted from Gallup asked, “Do you approve or disapprove of labor unions?” and is a trinary choice (“yes”, “no” or “no opinion” which we re-coded such that 1 = yes, 0 = no opinion, and -1 = no;  $M = 0.71$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ). The measure adapted from Pew Research Center asked, “Are labor unions having a positive or negative effect on the way things are going in the country these days?”, and participants respond on a slide scale ranging from ‘Negative’ at -5 to ‘Positive’ at 5 ( $M = 2.51$ ,  $SD = 2.24$ ). For our analyses, we compiled these four items (including perceived need and efficacy) into a single ‘union attitudes’ measure. We first standardized each item and then averaged the four items together ( $M = 0.0$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ,  $\alpha = .80$ ).

### **Attention Check**

To assess whether or not participants were paying attention to the questions they were asked, we included an attention check item. The question read, “Please select 'strongly agree' to show you are paying attention to this question.”

### **Union Involvement & Demographics**

Lastly, participants responded to two questions regarding their (or their family members’) involvement in labor unions, provided their employment and education background, as well as their race, age, sex, household income, political party affiliation, and subjective social status.



## **Study 2-4 Method**

The methods and materials for these studies were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Yale University. We pre-registered our hypotheses for Study 2 and our pre-registration can be found [here](#). Our hypotheses for Study 3 are pre-registered and can be found [here](#), and our hypotheses for Study 4 are pre-registered and can be found [here](#). Due to an oversight in the pre-registration, we did not register our prediction that participants would perceive a union grievance procedure as more aligned with workers' goals than an HR grievance procedure (H1).

In Study 2, we designed a between-subjects experiment in which participants were randomly assigned to receive the study materials used in Study 1 or a no-information control condition. In Studies 3 and 4 we developed a between-subjects experimental design with three conditions, allowing us to isolate the effect of exposure to conflict from that of exposure to information about labor unions. Importantly, on the basis of our findings in Study 3, we restricted our sample in Study 4 to include only non-managerial workers under the age of 40.

### **Participants**

Our samples across Studies 2-4 are generally similar, so we will describe these samples in aggregate.

For Study 2, we recruited 600 participants through Prolific Academic, which allowed us  $n = 300$  per condition. We generated this sample size based on experimental findings from similarly-designed studies (41). For Study 3, we ran a power analysis in G\*Power using 90% power to detect a small effect size (Cohen's  $d = .20$ ) and found that we would need  $N = 1200$  observations. We used the power analysis from Study 3 to determine our Study 4 sample size of  $N = 1200$ . We originally collected a sample of  $N = 1200$  in Study 4, but due to experimenter

error, our sample erroneously included participants who were unemployed. Because we were interested in the perspectives of individuals who are currently working, we excluded participants who indicated that they were unemployed ( $n = 195$ ). We ran our analyses with the original full sample, as well as with our restricted sample, and found no difference in the results of our analyses, so we will report the results of our sample of currently employed individuals.

Study 2: Two participants were dropped after indicating that their age was under 18, and three participants were excluded for failing a simple attention check, leaving us with a final sample of ( $N = 595$ ).

Study 3: 27 participants were dropped for indicating that they were under the age of 18, resulting in a final sample of ( $N = 1256$ ).

Study 4: 10 participants were dropped for indicating that they were under the age of 18, and three participants were excluded for failing a simple attention check, resulting in a final sample of ( $N = 992$ ).

Across all studies, participation was restricted to individuals currently living in the United States and who were currently working in part-time or full-time jobs (Studies 2-4) or who would begin working within the next month (Study 2 only;  $N = 595$  (246 women,  $M_{age} = 37.93$ ,  $SD_{age} = 11$ , 67% White, 8.2% Black, 10.4% Asian, 6.2% Latinx; Household income:  $M = 5.21$ , or \$50,000 - \$74,999,  $SD = 1.9$ , Political party: 49.6% Democrat, 18.3% Republican, 28.2% Independent). In Study 3 ( $N = 1256$  (636 women,  $M_{age} = 45.35$ ,  $SD_{age} = 11.33$ , 70.3% White, 14.6% Black, 3.5% Asian, 5% Latinx; Household income:  $M = 5.18$ , or \$50,000 - \$74,999,  $SD = 1.81$ , Political party: 34.8% Democrat, 32.6% Republican, 25.7% Independent), participation was restricted to non-union workers. In Study 4 ( $N = 992$  participants (525 women,  $M_{age} = 28.46$ ,  $SD_{age} = 5.57$ , 46.1% White, 11.5% Black, 20.6% Asian, 9% Latinx, 11.5% multiracial;

Household income:  $M = 4.92$ , or \$50,000 - \$74,999,  $SD = 2.09$ , Political party: 56.6% Democrat, 13.8% Republican, 24.1% Independent) participation was restricted to workers under the age of 40 in non-managerial work roles. Studies 2 and 4 were recruited from Prolific Academic and only included individuals with a study approval rating of 90% or higher, and Study 3 was recruited through Centiment.

## **Procedure**

In all studies, participants consented to participate, and then read a short introduction describing the aims of the study. In Study 2, participants were then randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the experimental condition, participants were presented with the same materials used in Study 1. In the no-information control condition, participants did not read about workplace conflicts or union and HR grievance procedures and did not rate the union and HR grievance procedures. Participants in both conditions reported their union attitudes, responded to several psychological measures, and reported their willingness to unionize and demographic information.

In Study 3, after consenting to participate, participants reported their gender, age, and occupation status. Participants who were under the age of 18 or who were not employed part-time or full-time were screened out, and sampling was balanced on the basis of gender.

In Studies 3 and 4, participants were then randomly assigned to one of three conditions. The goal of using three conditions was to separate out the effect of conflict from the effect of learning about unions to determine the effect of each on pro-union sentiment and willingness to unionize. All of the study materials and procedures were adapted from Study 2. The Combined Conflict & Information condition replicated the experimental condition in Study 2. The

Information Only condition was identical to the Combined Conflict & Information condition, except that the scenarios were bureaucratic in nature, rather than conflict-oriented. The Conflict Only condition was identical to the Combined Conflict & Information condition, except that participants did not learn about the union procedure, and rated only the HR procedure.

In the Combined Conflict & Information condition, participants received the same materials used in Studies 1 and 2: they read through the three workplace conflict scenarios, and completed the worker goal alignment ratings of the union and HR procedures for each scenario. In the Conflict Only condition, participants read through the three workplace conflict scenarios used in Studies 1 and 2, but only completed the HR goal alignment ratings. In the Information Only condition, participants read through three workplace non-conflict scenarios (i.e., a case for promotion), and rated the two unlabeled grievance procedures (used in all studies).

Participants in the Combined Conflict & Information and the Information Only conditions were then informed that the union-derived grievance procedure was union-derived. All participants then reported their union attitudes and willingness to unionize, responded to the same psychological measures used in Studies 1 and 2, and reported their demographic information.

## **Measures**

All items measured but not reported below can be found in our Supplementary Methods 3, which were collected as part of a larger study.

**Worker goal alignment ratings.** We used the same worker goal alignment scale used in Study 1 to measure perceived alignment between workers and a union-derived grievance procedure, and workers and an HR grievance procedure (union: Study 2:  $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ;

Study 3:  $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ; Study 4:  $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ; HR: Study 2:  $M = 2.02$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ,  $\alpha = .96$ ; Study 3:  $M = 2.36$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ; Study 4:  $M = 2.16$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ).

**Union attitudes.** To measure union attitudes in Studies 2-4, we used the same four items from Study 1: (Pew: Study 2:  $M = 2.46$ ,  $SD = 2.19$ ; Study 3:  $M = 1.88$ ,  $SD = 2.60$ ; Study 4:  $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ; Gallup: Study 2:  $M = 0.73$ ,  $SD = 0.6$ ; Study 3:  $M = 0.45$ ,  $SD = .74$ , Study 4:  $M = 0.80$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ; Union Effectiveness: Study 2:  $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ; Study 3:  $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ; Study 4:  $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ; Union Need: Study 2:  $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ; Study 3:  $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ , Study 4:  $M = 3.5$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ).

For Study 3 and 4, we added a new measure of labor union attitudes, which we incorporated into our composite measure. This new item measured participants' perceived personal need for a union, "How much do you think you and your co-workers need unions to protect you from exploitation?" on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "not at all" to "very much" (Study 3:  $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ; Study 4:  $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ). For our analyses, we compiled these items into a single measure of union attitudes for each study. We standardized each item and averaged the items together: Study 2:  $M = 0$ ,  $SD = .84$ ,  $\alpha = .86$ ; Study 3:  $M = 0$ ,  $SD = .8$ ,  $\alpha = .8$ ; Study 4:  $M = 0$ ,  $SD = .78$ ,  $\alpha = .84$ .

**Willingness to unionize.** We measured willingness to unionize using three items to capture a range of participants' prospective interest in unionization. To approximate participants' voting behavior, we asked, "Imagine your workplace is voting to unionize — how likely would you be to vote yes to create a labor union in your workplace?". Participants reported how likely they would be to vote yes on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1, "I would definitely vote no" to 4, "I would definitely vote yes" (Study 2:  $M = 3.17$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ; Study 3:  $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ; Study 4:  $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ). To measure general interest in unionizing, we asked, "If your

workplace unionized, how interested would you be in joining the union?”. Participants responded using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from “(1) Not at all interested” to “(6) Extremely interested” (Study 2:  $M = 4.58$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ; Study 3:  $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ; Study 4:  $M = 4.67$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ).

Lastly, we measured the extent to which participants would be interested in learning more about unions, given their potential benefits, “Research has indicated that unions can be an effective tool in fighting against exploitation in the workplace. How interested would you be in learning more about unions?”. Participants responded using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from “(1) not at all interested” to “(6) extremely interested” (Study 2:  $M = 4.43$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ; Study 3:  $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ; Study 4:  $M = 4.48$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ). For our analyses, we compiled these three items together into a single measure of “willingness to unionize”. We standardized each item and then averaged these items together to form a composite (Study 2:  $M = 0$ ,  $SD = .93$ ,  $\alpha = .92$ ; Study 3:  $M = 0$ ,  $SD = .93$ ,  $\alpha = .92$ ; Study 4:  $M = -0.02$ ,  $SD = .92$ ,  $\alpha = .86$ ).

### **Data Availability**

The datasets analysed during the current study are available in the Open Science Framework repository, <https://osf.io/kyajv/>.

### **Code Availability**

The datasets analysed during the current study are available in the Open Science Framework repository, <https://osf.io/kyajv/>.



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### **Author Contributions**

M.E.B. and M.W.K. designed the research and collected the data. M.E.B. analyzed the data.

M.E.B. and M.W.K wrote the paper.

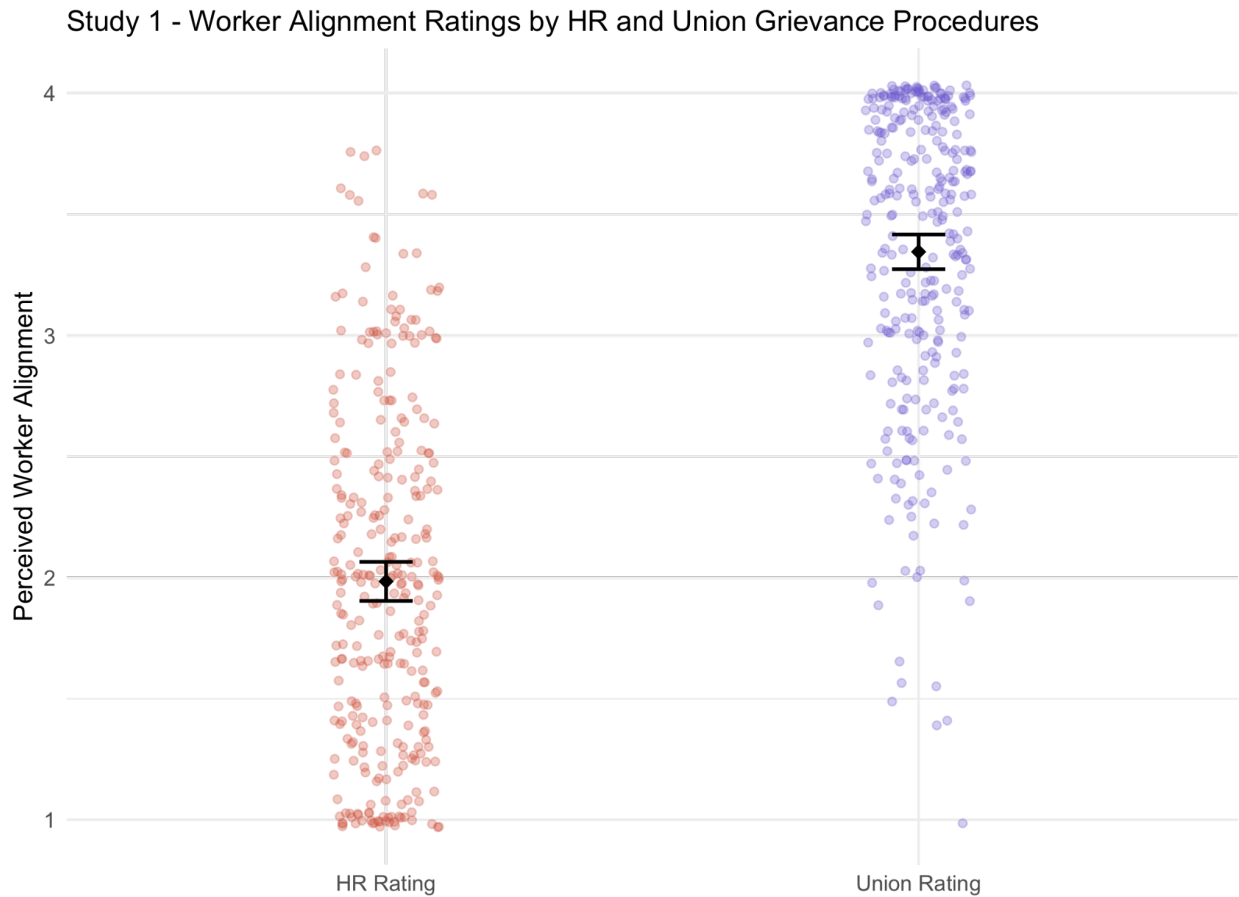
### **Competing Interests**

The authors declare no competing interests.



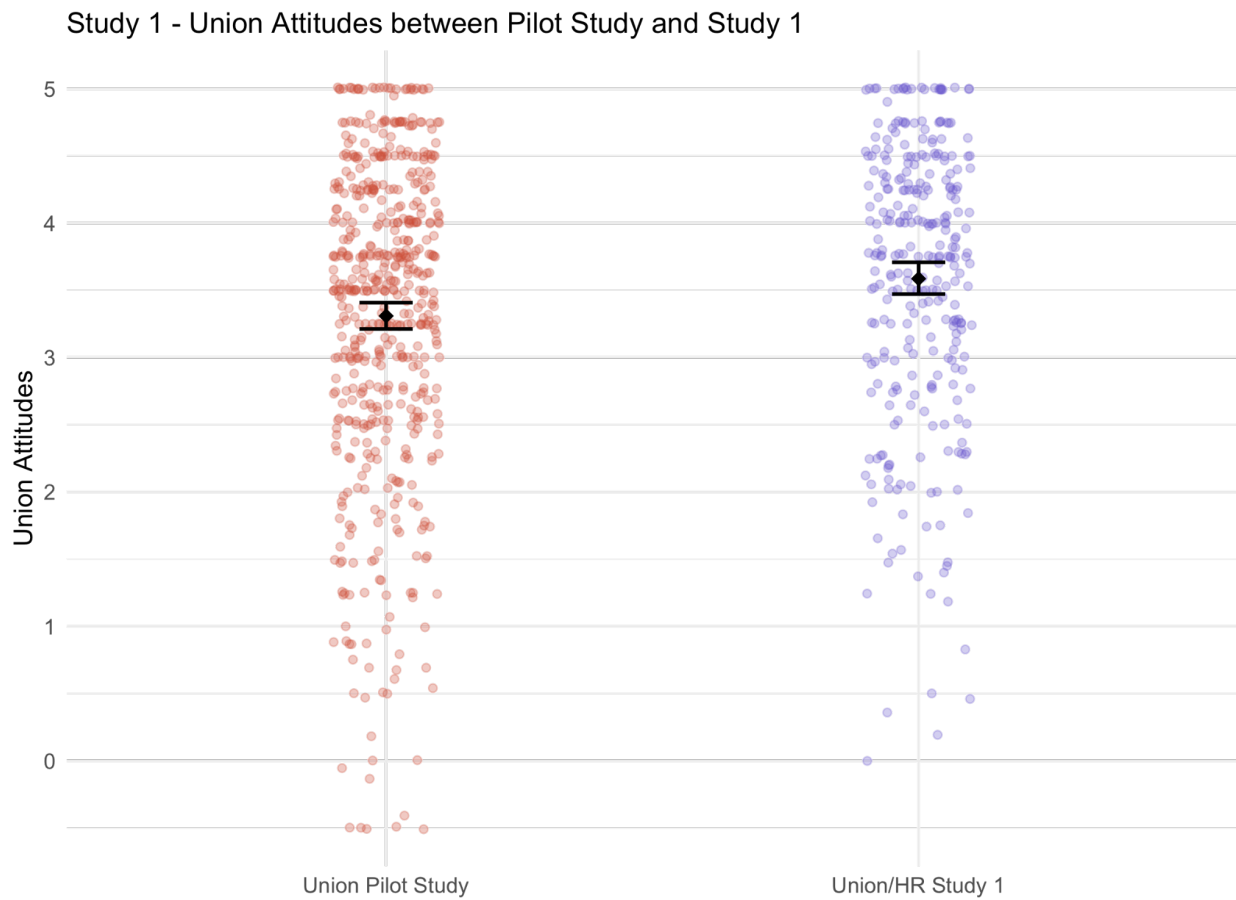
## Figures

Figure 1. Study 1 Union and HR Alignment Ratings.



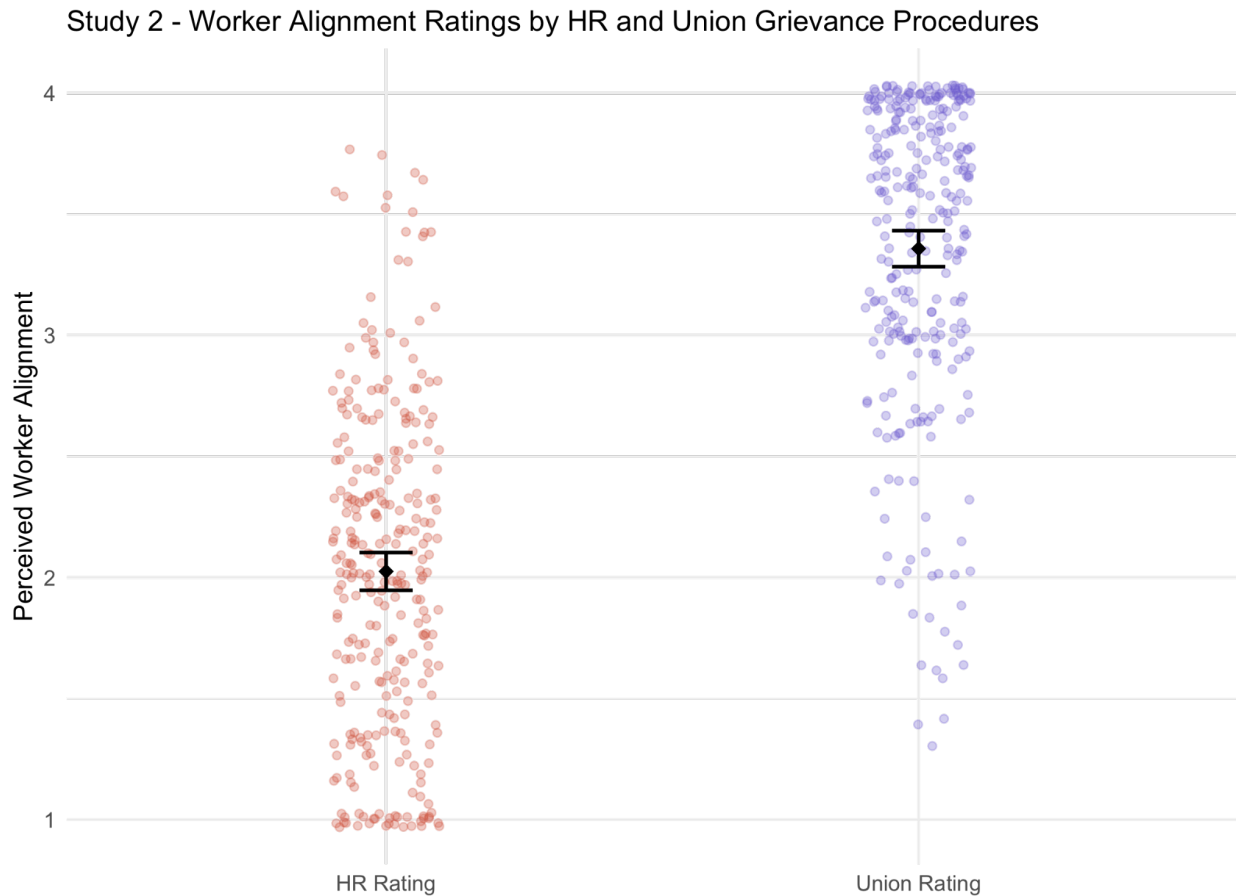
Note: Individual colored dots represent unique responses, whereas single black dots indicate means and bands represent 95% confidence intervals. HR ratings are represented in red dots and union ratings are represented in blue. Higher scores indicate greater perceived alignment with workers' goals.

Figure 2. Study 1 Union Attitudes Between Pilot Study and Study 1.



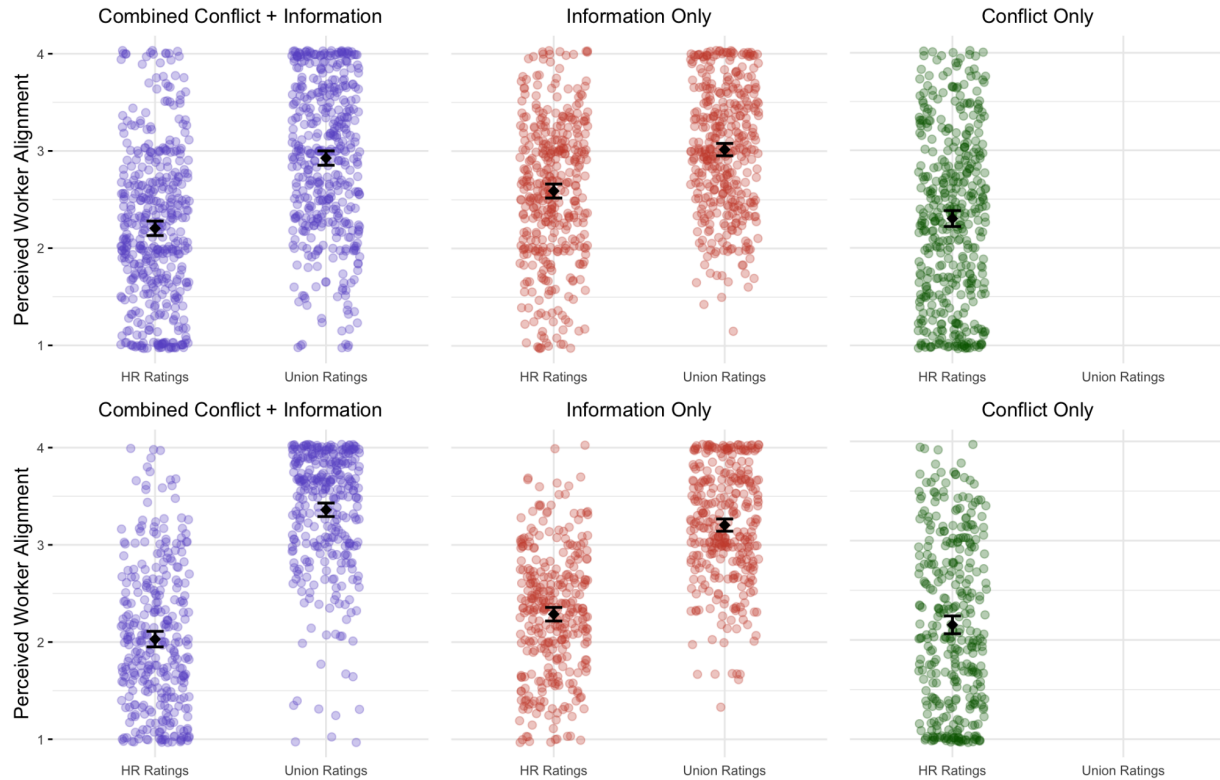
Note: Individual colored dots represent unique responses, whereas single black dots indicate means and bands represent 95% confidence intervals. Union attitudes in the pilot study are represented in red dots and union attitudes in Study 1 are represented in blue. Higher scores indicate more favorable union attitudes.

Figure 3. Union and HR Alignment Ratings in Study 2.



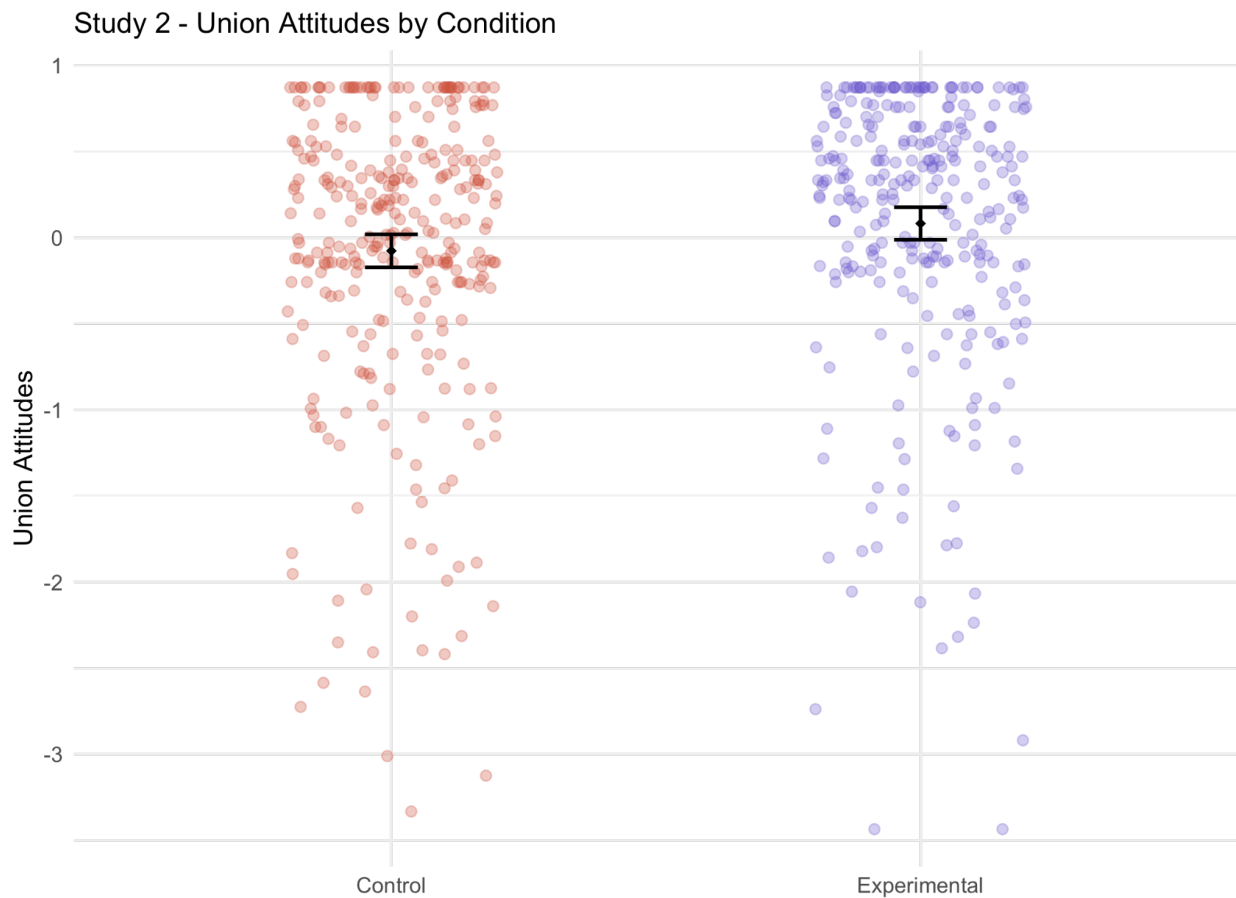
Note: Perceived alignment with the union and HR grievance procedures within the experimental condition. Individual colored dots represent unique responses, whereas single black dots indicate means and bands represent 95% confidence intervals. HR ratings are represented in red dots and union ratings are represented in blue. Higher scores indicate greater perceived alignment with workers' goals.

Figure 4. Union and HR Alignment Ratings by Condition Assignment in Study 3 and 4.



Note: Perceived alignment with the union and HR grievance procedures by experimental condition assignment for Study 3 (top) and Study 4 (bottom). Individual colored dots represent unique responses, whereas single black dots indicate means and bands represent 95% confidence intervals. Condition assignment is represented by color and labeled along the X axis. Higher scores indicate greater perceived alignment.

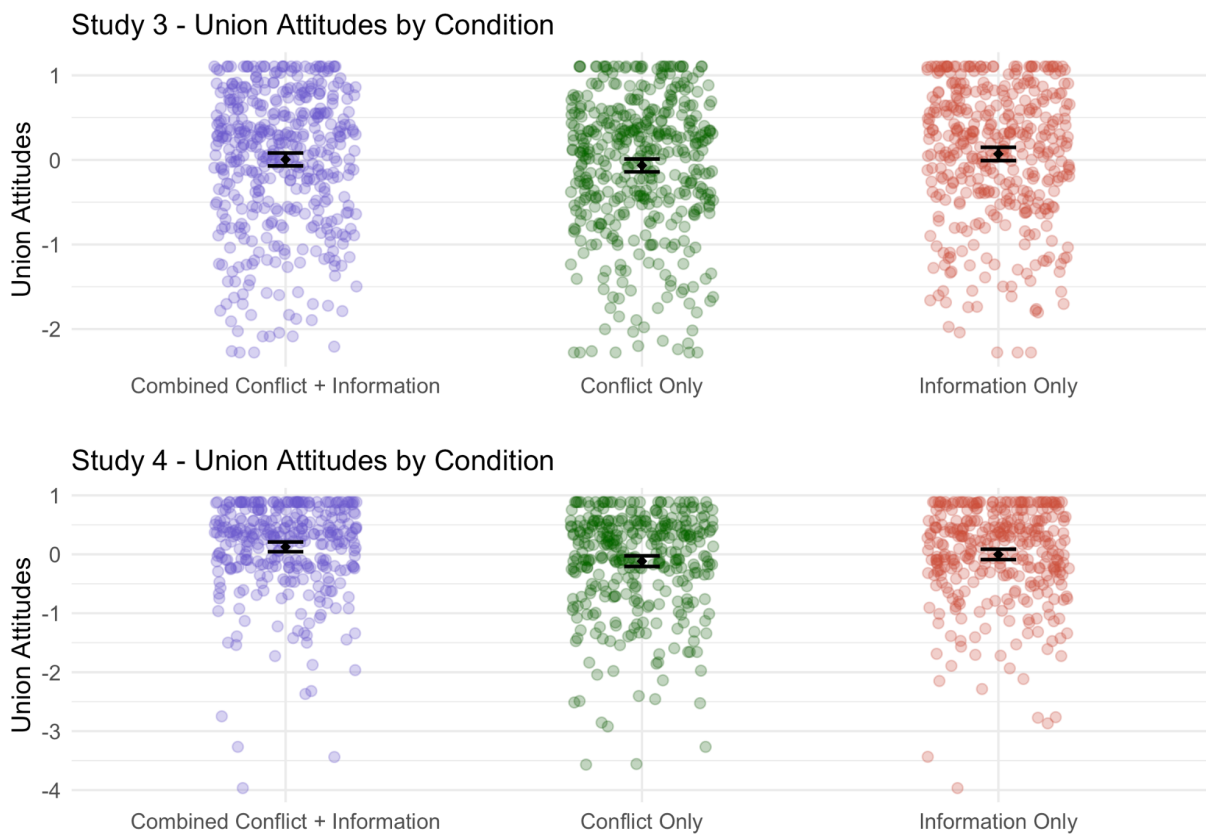
Figure 5. Union Attitudes Across Conditions in Study 2.



Note: Positive attitudes toward labor unions as a function of experimental condition assignment for Study 2. Individual colored dots represent unique responses whereas single black dots indicate means and bands represent 95% confidence intervals. Higher scores indicate more positive union attitudes.

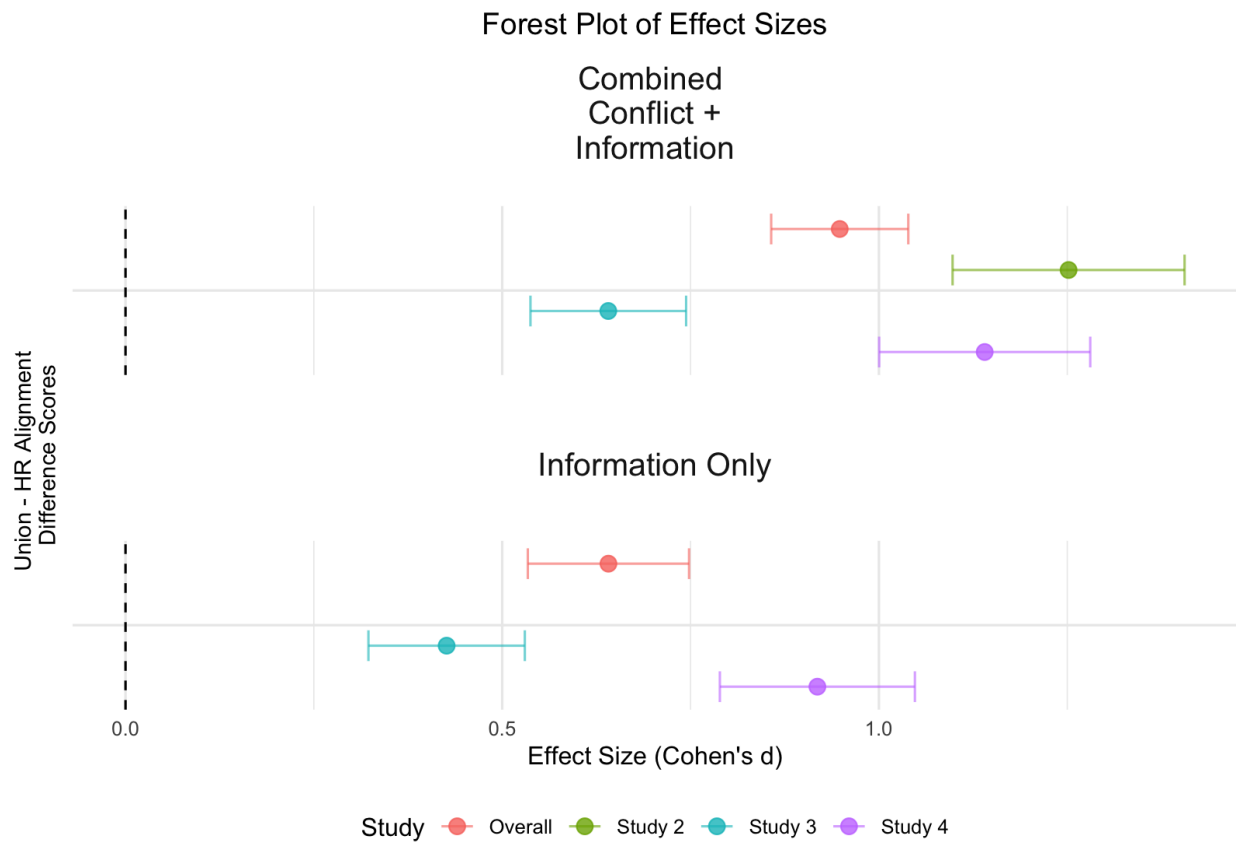
Figure 6. Union Attitudes Across Conditions in Study 3 and 4.

### Union Attitudes Across Conditions in Study 3 and 4



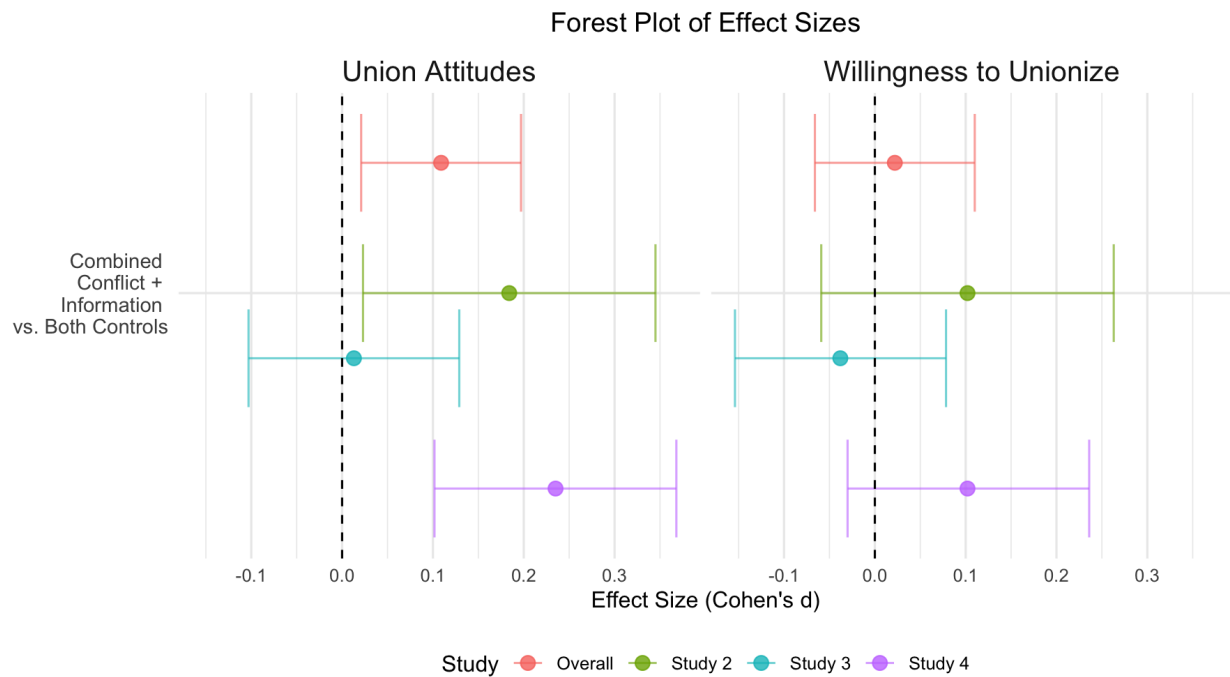
Note: Positive attitudes toward labor unions as a function of experimental condition assignment for Study 3 (top) and Study 4 (bottom). Individual colored dots represent unique worker responses whereas single black dots indicate means and bands represent 95% confidence intervals. Higher scores indicate more positive union attitudes.

Figure 7. Forest plot of meta-analyzed effects of within-condition differences in union and HR alignment ratings.



Note. Results from an internal meta-analysis of the effect exposure to both worker-organization conflict and information about labor unions, or only to information about labor unions on union and HR alignment difference scores. Overall and individual study estimates are labeled in the legend and plotted along the X axis. Means are represented by a dot and indicate the standard effect size (Cohen's D), bands indicate 95% confidence intervals surrounding the estimate.

Figure 8. Forest plot of meta-analyzed effects of between-condition differences.



Note. Results from an internal meta-analysis of the effect exposure to both worker-organization conflict and information about labor unions on union attitudes and willingness to unionize. Overall and individual study estimates are labeled in the legend and plotted along the X axis. Means are represented by a dot and indicate the standard effect size (Cohen's D), bands indicate 95% confidence intervals surrounding the estimate.