

ORGANIZE THE LAB

a campaign by

SCIENCE FOR
THE PEOPLE



Agenda

- **Introductions**
- **Topic 1: The conditions of research work**
- **Topic 2: Research as productive labour**
- **Break (10 min)**
- **Topic 3: Organizing for labour rights in Science workplaces**
- **Next steps**
- **Questions**

Introductions

- Facilitator introductions
- Attendee introductions (if you're comfortable sharing):
 - What is your general work setting (e.g., academia, clinical, CRO, etc.)?
 - What kind of role are you working in?

Who are we? An international organization of radical science workers and supporters driven by an understanding that science, as a practice and as a product, is deeply political.

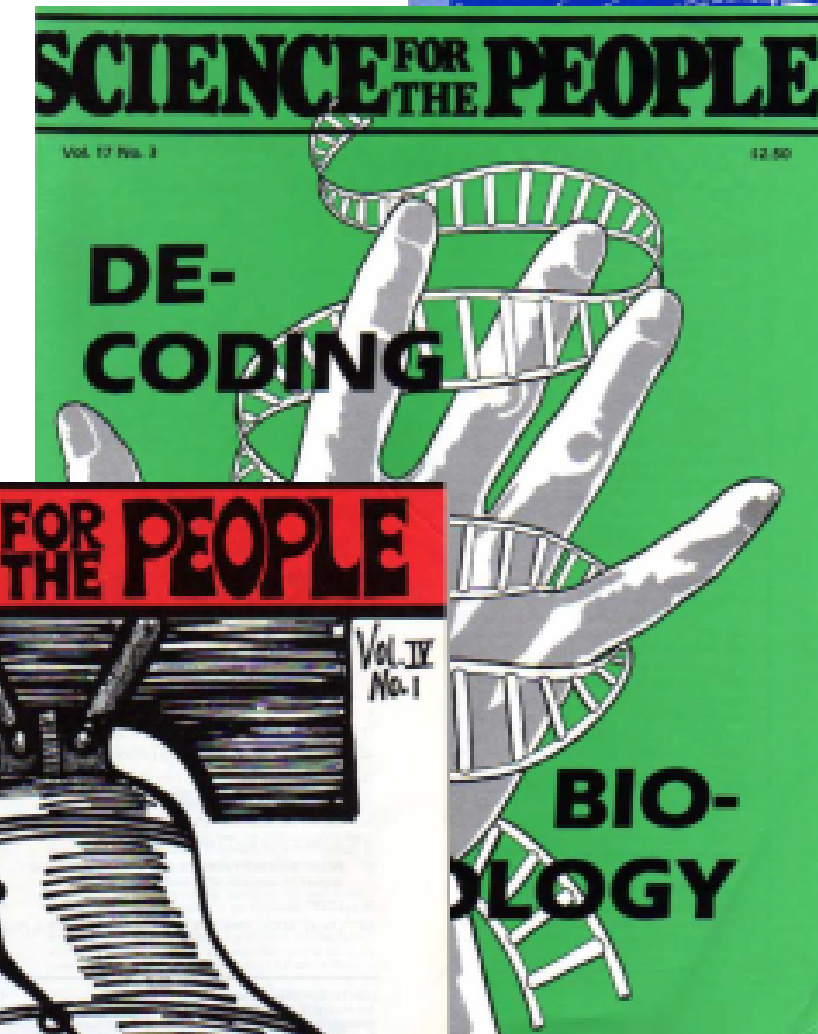


A Brief History of SftP

Science for the People originated in the US in the late 1960s as scientists organizing in opposition to the Vietnam War and the role of scientific institutions in supporting US imperialism.

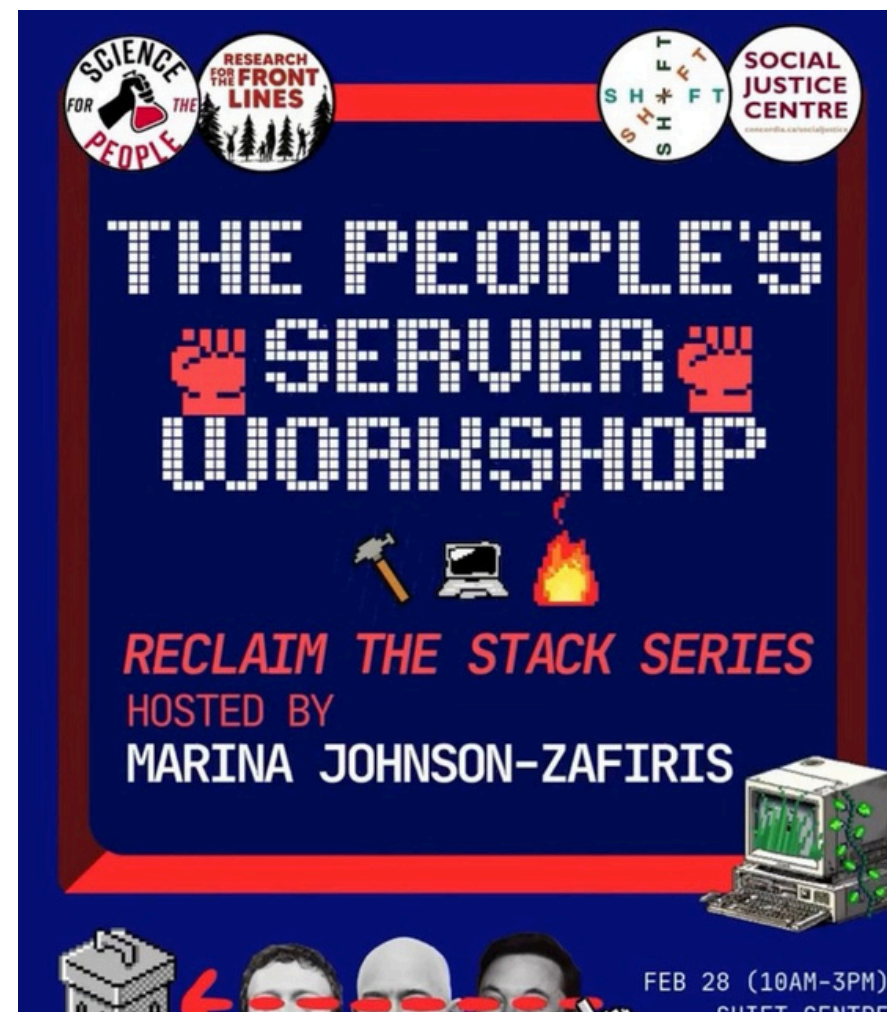
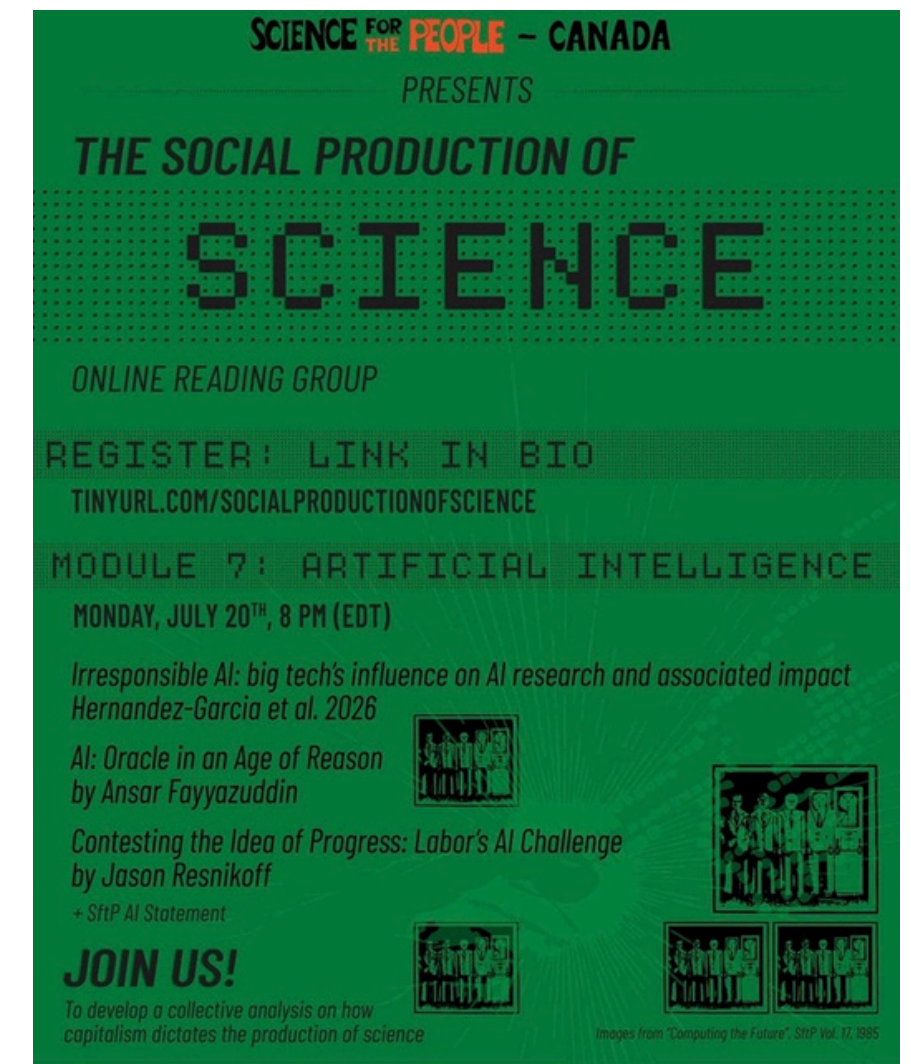
The original SftP organized and took action in many spheres:

- Antimilitarist disruptions of professional societies (APS, AAAS)
- Meaningful scientific exchange with Cuba, Viet Nam, China, Nicaragua, and other countries
- Published the SftP magazine



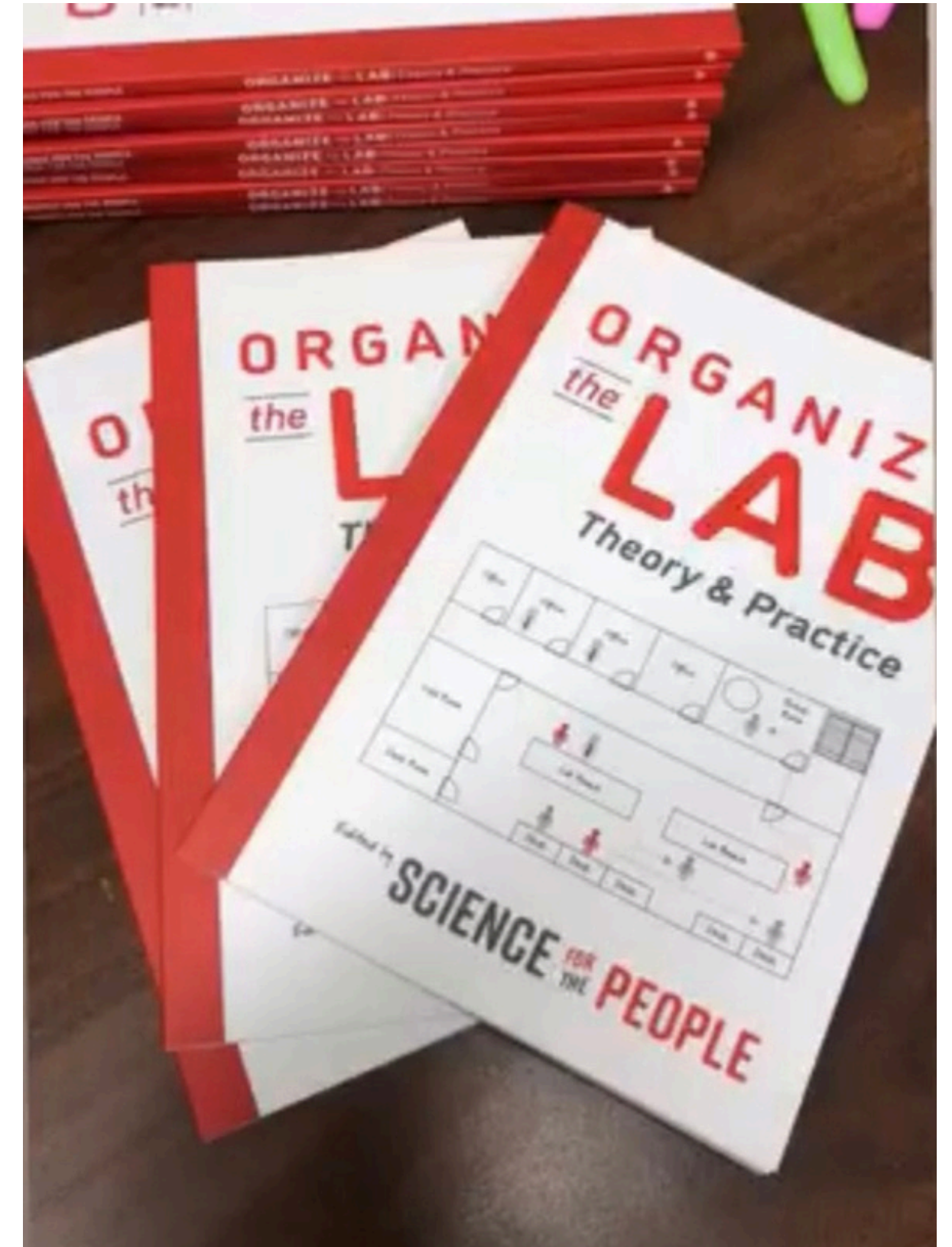
The Revitalization

- Dissolved in the 1980s
- Revitalized in 2018 in the US
- Now has chapters in Italy, France, and Spain
- Canada revitalized in 2021 in Montreal
- Cross-Canada chapters include Ottawa, Toronto, Vancouver
- Org activities include tech worker solidarity, supporting tenant organizing, reading groups, etc.

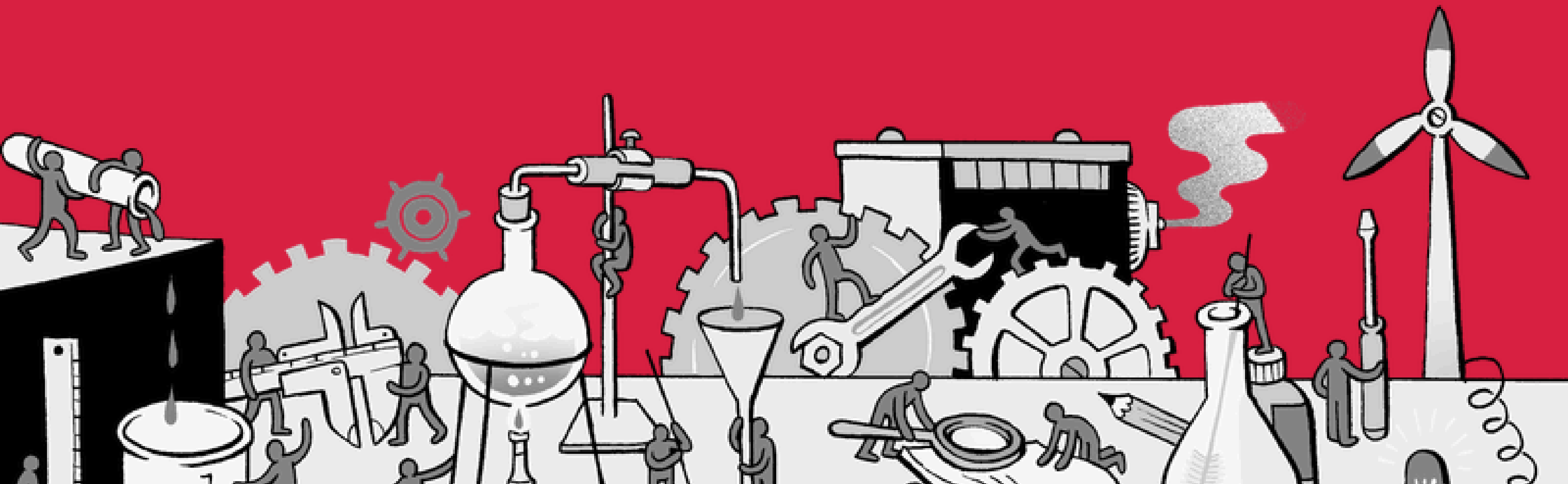


How did this campaign start?

- Current and former research workers outside academia recognized the need for a labour movement
 - By not being unionized and not being on the radar of leftist or labour movements, there is a need to spearhead this organizing
- “Organize the Lab” book
- Science for the People provides infrastructure to build a movement and to run organizing events

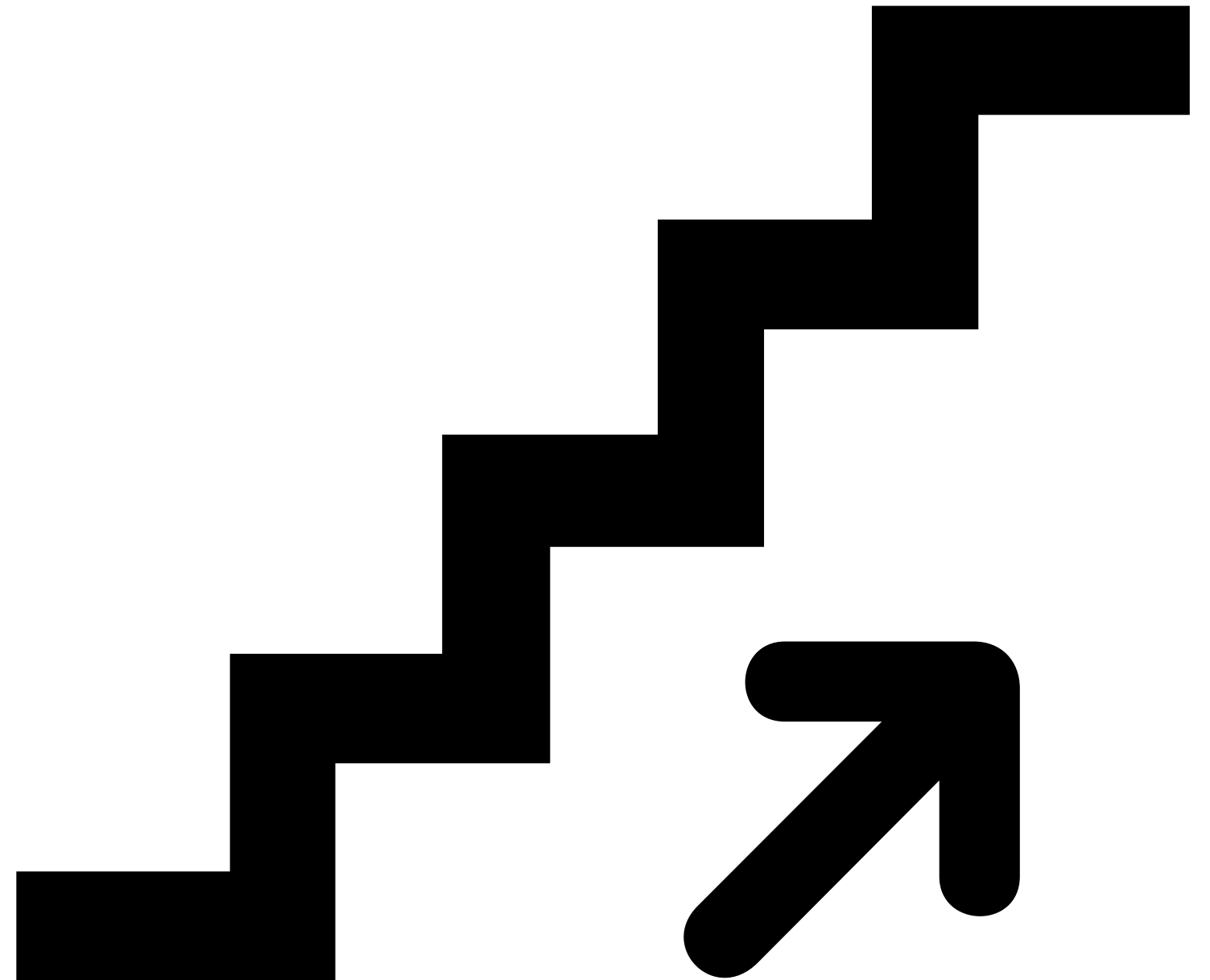


The conditions of research work



Class character of research workers

- Often come from a background where they are trying to achieve class mobility through STEM/academia
- Research work is often seen as a way to improve a CV and gain experience in order to **compensate** for lack of advantages common in higher classes
- In addition to class, there can be a **migration component**



How does this create vulnerability to exploitation?



- Research roles perceived as **temporary stepping stones**
 - Less likely to agitate for improved work conditions if you plan on leaving
 - A favourable impression by the PI is necessary to **advance out** of the position



- Many research workers are legitimately passionate about the field they work in/many have a personal stake
 - This **passion is taken advantage of** to make asserting work boundaries difficult



- Research workers are aware these roles, and the ability to use them to one's advantage to leverage career/class mobility, are **highly competitive**.
 - You are easily replaced



- **Immigration status** can be weaponized
 - Subtle and explicit threats of being sent home/visa not being renewed

What does exploitation look like in research?

1) Fluid/undefined role responsibilities

- The number of research projects workers are responsible for is not set
 - “Other duties as assigned”
- Doing the work of multiple people
- Over time can start taking on work more typical of a senior role
 - Even act as a project lead, responsible for every role from study design all the way to results write-up for publication

What does exploitation look like in research?

2) As non-unionized workers, there is no one to bring up grievances to if these role expectations are not enforced

- Labour laws not followed, PIs ignorant of labour law
- No way to know when working outside of a job description
- No one to “enforce” job definition except PI
- The only person to discuss grievances with is HR

What does exploitation look like in research?

3) Overwork and overtime are common:

- Frequent contact outside work hours/on holidays
- “In lieu time” for vacations where there is no coverage available to even take them
- Overtime is considered just “part of the job”

What does exploitation look like in research?

4) Research workers are held captive by the aspirations of their PI

- Capacity of the worker is irrelevant for when PI decides how many projects/how big a project
- Research staff are expected to do any task the PI requests, regardless of expertise to do so or the ability of the PI to train staff in the requested task.



What does exploitation look like in research?

5) Precarity of research positions

- Vast majority of roles are temporary contracts
- Can easily be “terminated without cause” citing budget considerations
- If a project is assessed as unlikely to be completed, or if research funds for conducting the research run out you can be terminated regardless of your conduct
- Immigrant research workers’ status in a country is dependent on work/student visa status
 - Each new contract requires a new visa application
- Stability within academia is increasingly disappearing which makes stability the “carrot on the stick” to keep you in line

What does exploitation look like in research?

6) Publication conventions

- Publications act as the currency of academia that unlock real material opportunities
- Up to generosity of the PI for whether you are included as a co-author in a publication i.e. whether you are in a very real sense “compensated” for your contribution
- If a contract is terminated before a project is complete, it can even further put you at risk of your work not being acknowledged

Acknowledgments

The authors owe special thanks to [redacted] who co-ordinated subject recruitment and all aspects of the [redacted] assessment protocol.



Fig. 1. A superficial nod of acknowledgement within a publication for an RA who created a dataset of almost 2000 patients with a 98% data completion rate

What does exploitation look like in research?

7) Lack of career mobility/career trajectories unclear:

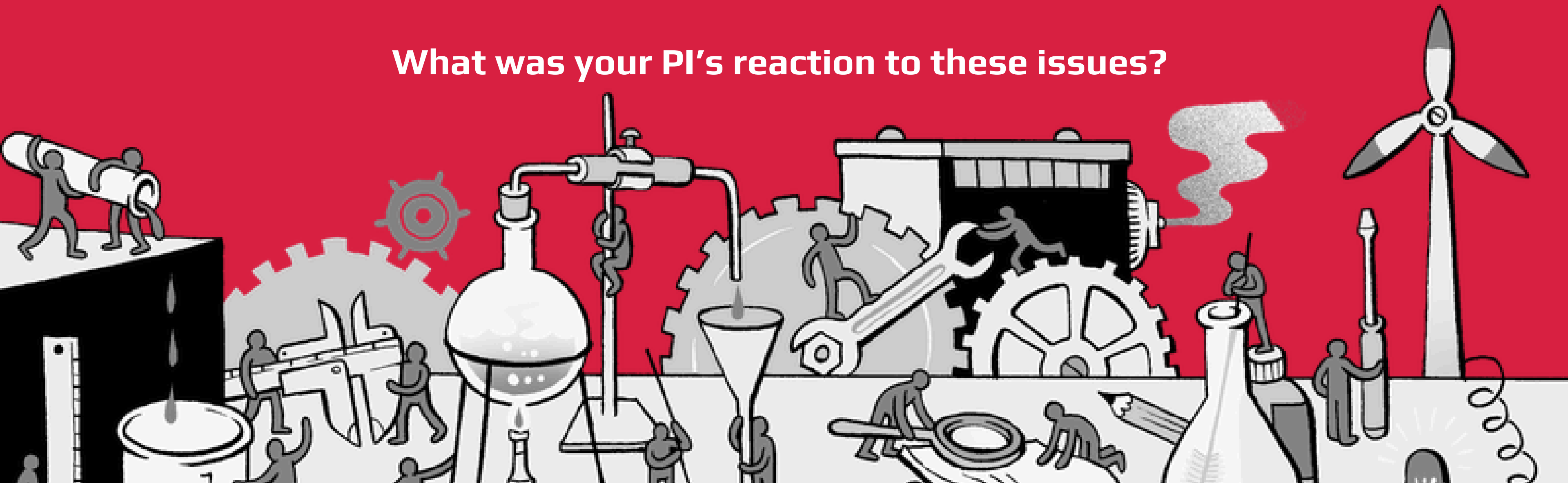
- Can reach the “ceiling” of career mobility quickly within a lab
- Difficult to advance out of these roles into more permanent, higher-paying, less precarious jobs:
 - Lack of clarity around skillset and experience necessary for senior research-related roles
 - i.e. working for an institution’s REB, research operations department, QI department, or as a clinical research associate/site monitor
 - It is in the PI’s best interest to have little staff turnover, since it can threaten the timeline of their projects.
- PIs do not invest in career development skills, and external certificates are increasingly expected (e.g., PMP certification, clinical research certificate from the Michener Institute)

Breakout discussion (10 minutes)

Which of these experiences has resonated with you? Is there anything absent that we didn't cover?

Have you ever tried to address any workplace issues with your PI?

What was your PI's reaction to these issues?



What does this exploitation lead to?

Poor material conditions and burn out

- Living paycheck to paycheck, working multiple jobs, lack of pension/health insurance
- Low workplace satisfaction, stress, chronic burn out, and demoralization
- Leave-of-absences
 - Causes financial/employment precarity
- Leave-of-absence not always possible for international research workers
 - Can put work permits in jeopardy

What does this exploitation lead to?

Moral injury

- Pressure for quantity of publications > quality of research.
 - Can be expected to produce research that is misleading, very low quality, or with falsified data/incorrect analyses
- PIs may obtain public grants based on research projects that “aim” to address structural healthcare issues
 - Often, despite positive results, the intervention never gets implemented
 - In reality, there was never an intention to implement the intervention → these public funds were used to create a product that was monetized

What does this exploitation lead to?

Safety Issues

- Enforcement of safety measures dependent on PI
- Safety issues with patients, toxic substances
- Mistakes which compromise worker safety (and participant safety)
- Can be very common to work alone in a lab (nights, weekends, etc.)



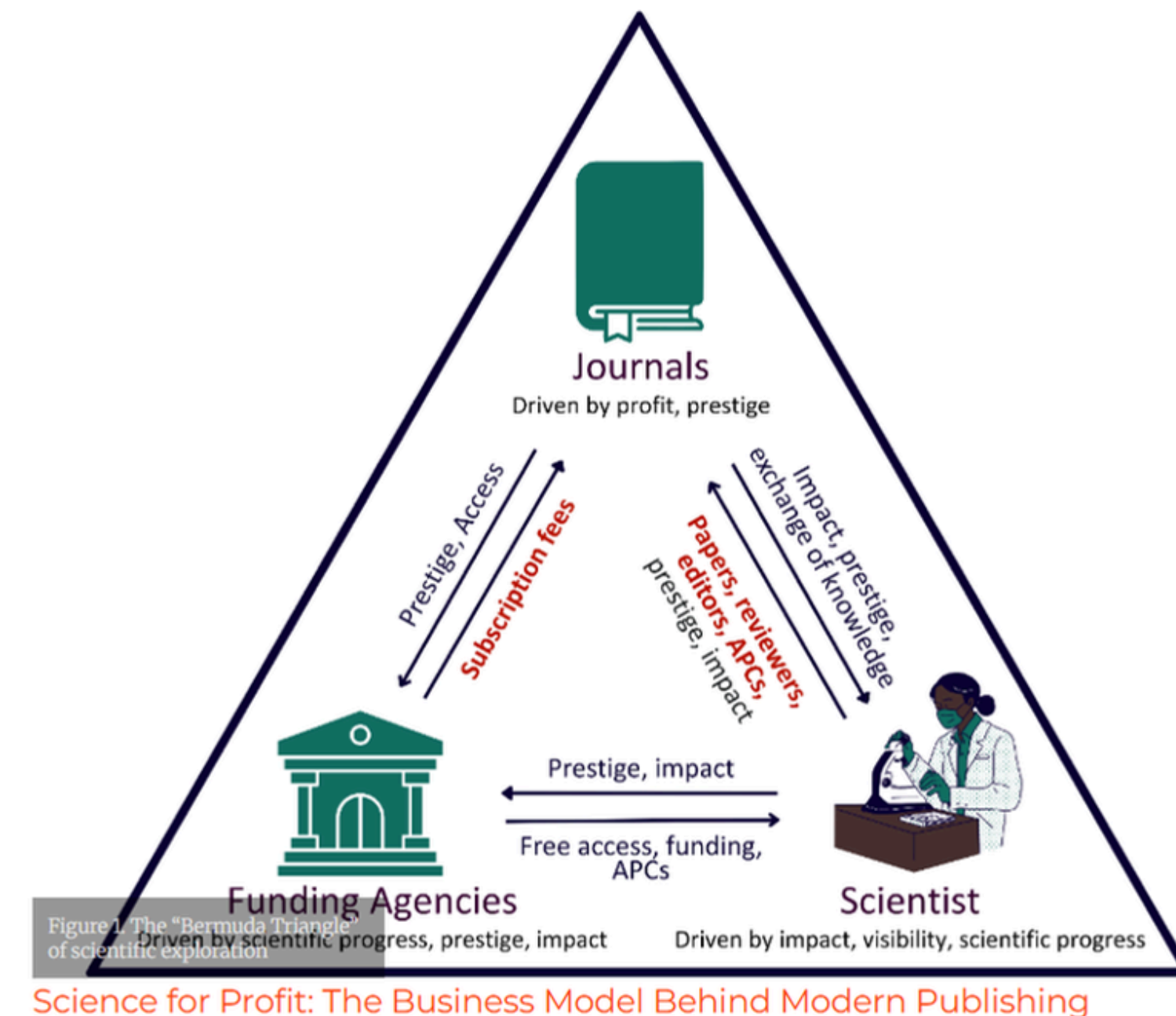
The daily dice with death.
The perils workers face
from nuclear technology

— Marie-Anne Mengeot, journalist

Advisory contributor, Jean-Claude Zerbib, radiation protection engineer

The economy of knowledge production

- Austerity has led public institutions to depend on private donors/investors whose interests are supported by scientific research.
- Capital flow determines research agendas.
 - Marketable research prioritized over intellectual inquiry
- Publicly funded institutions+research get turned into corporate profits (30% of clinical trials)
 - Public grants--> universities and hospitals patent discoveries--> corporations make enormous profits from the resulting medicines and technologies
- Therefore, knowledge is the product.
 - Published paper, patented technology, novel dataset, or validated theory



Producing social and real capital for PIs

- Accolades, awards, prizes, and even medals for PIs based off groundbreaking research
- Body of research creates career mobility for PIs
- Social capital of publications translates to real capital for PIs-->the research workers do not get the same immediate benefits

King Charles III Coronation Medal
Médaille du couronnement du roi Charles III



Alison Fox-Robichaud
Nominated by/Établissement partenaire
McMaster University

Dr. Alison Fox-Robichaud, global sepsis leader and Sepsis Canada director, advances research, education, and care, earning international recognition, including a Global Sepsis Alliance award, for transforming sepsis outcomes.

La docteure Alison Fox-Robichaud, experte mondiale en septicémie et directrice de Sepsis Canada, fait progresser la recherche, l'enseignement, et les soins en la matière, ce qui lui a valu un rayonnement international ainsi qu'un prix de la Global Sepsis Alliance pour ses contributions importantes.



 Universities Canada.  Universités Canada.

“Dualisation is the strengthening of this divide between insiders in secure, stable employment and outsiders in fixed-term, precarious employment. Academic systems more or less everywhere rely at least to some extent on the existence of a supply of “outsiders” ready to forgo wages and employment security in exchange for the prospect of uncertain security, prestige, freedom and reasonably high salaries that tenured positions entail.”

From: “How Academia Resembles a Drug Gang” by Alexandre Alfonso

Wage disparities between research staff and PIs

Research Institution	RA/RC Salary	PI Salary
SickKids	RA: \$38,939-\$47,864 RC: \$52,041-\$78,701	\$125,000-\$225,000
Sunnybrook	RA: \$37,752-\$47,000 RC: ~\$56,499	~\$160,347
Unity Health	RA: \$45,00-\$54,000 RC: \$62,631-\$76,960	\$160,000-\$230,000
CAMH	RA: \$49,171-\$60,632 RC: \$80,000-\$91,600	~\$152,481
Princess Margaret	RA: \$53,747-\$67,184 RC: ~ \$71,000	\$103,458-\$153,458

Note: these are rough estimates sourced from limited reports on Indeed, Glassdoor, and the Ontario Sunshine List. These ranges may not reflect the upper range of senior staff in these roles. PI salaries often do exceed \$200k/year, and PIs typically have multiple income sources (clinician, etc.)

Profits from research and stolen wages of workers

- Clinical research sector generated **\$18.4 billion** in 2022, growing by 5.53% since 2018
- Total revenues for patented medications reached **\$34.2 billion** in 2022
- Clinical trial costs ~ \$15-40 million in Canada
 - Clinical research site will make ~\$2-8.5 million per trial
- Wages of research workers generally increase by 3%/year in private industry, and are capped at 1%/year in Ontario hospitals
 - Cost of living has increased by 3.2% annually

Breakout discussion (10 minutes)

How is research work as work mystified?

How are the labour relations mystified? Among co-workers and with your PI?



Research work as labour is often mystified

- Deindustrialization of workforce causes people to be **alienated** from **labour as work**
- The **profits from knowledge production** are not as clear as with other commodities
- Working in science = working for the **betterment of humanity**
 - Relatedly: it's not work, it's your "**passion**"
- Siloed nature makes it difficult to build solidarity
 - Can blur the lines between yourself and PI as worker and boss
 - Competitive work environments make it risky to discuss work conditions with co-workers

Research work IS work!

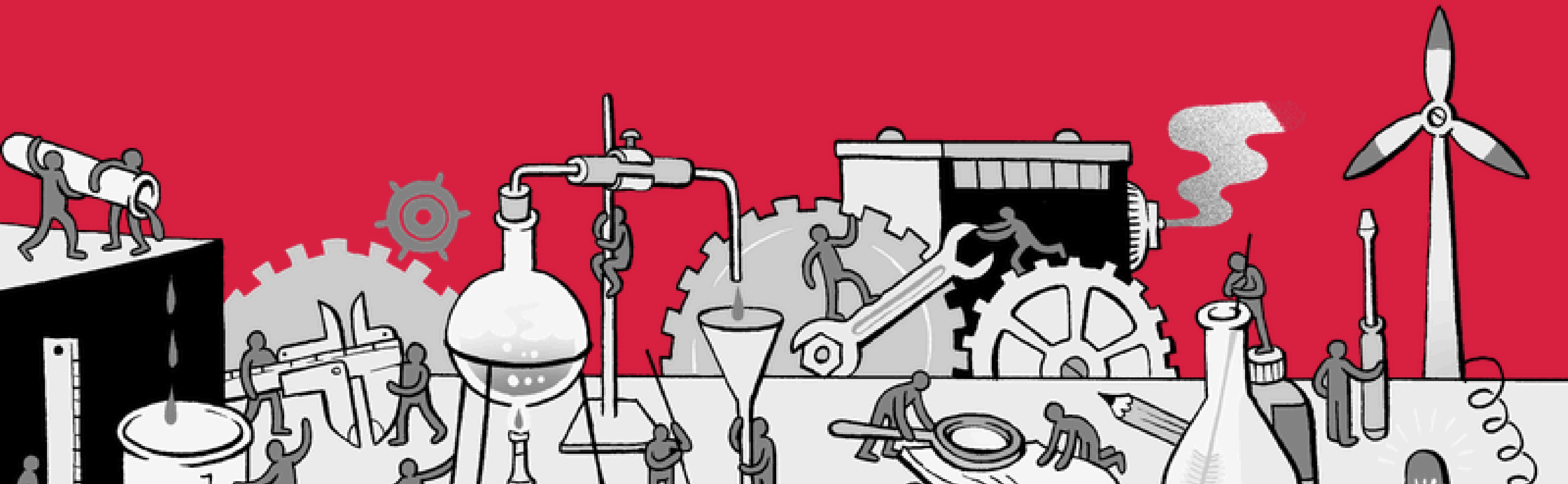
- Alienation:
 - You are **producing** knowledge—> the knowledge is a **product**, which you are **alienated** from because you **do not own it** even though you **produce** it
 - You are also alienated from it because you have **no influence** over it
 - Research workers are not able to propose **new** research projects or influence the **direction** of research
 - We are not able to suggest **improvements or modifications** to a research design to optimize it
 - We're meant to mechanically go through a series of tasks which collect data, if you're lucky you get to even analyze it.

Research work IS work!

- Reminders:
 - You are being paid a wage for your work which means you are a **worker!**
 - Your PI is your **boss!**
 - **Therefore: You are entitled to being protected by labour laws and the conditions of your work being beholden to labour standards**

BREAK
(10 MINUTES)

Organizing for Labour rights in Science Workplaces



Unionized Research Workers in Academia



McGill
UNIVERSITY

- **Association of McGill University Research Employees (AMURE), PSAC Local 17601**
 - represents postdocs, casual research assistants, research assistants and research associates



Queen's
UNIVERSITY

- **PSAC Local 901**
 - Unit 1: represents graduate teaching assistants, graduate teaching fellows, **graduate research assistants** and JD and MD teaching assistants
 - Unit 2: represents **postdoctoral fellows**



Carleton
UNIVERSITY

- **CUPE Local 4600**
 - represents all teaching, service, and **internally-funded research assistants**, and contract instructors



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

- **USW Local 1998**
 - Represents administrative and technical staff, including workers in research environments such as **lab technicians** and **research officers**
- **CUPE 3902**
 - Unit 5: represents **postdoctoral researchers** (since 2013)

Recent / Ongoing Campaigns



Student-led movement seeking to unionize graduate researchers; launched in 2024

Under CUPE 4163 (University of Victoria Educational Workers' Union)

choosecupebc.ca/uvic



Filed application (Apr 2023) to unionize graduate RAs with CUPE 2278

UBC maintained that they are students, not workers, and therefore should not be able to form a union - decision delayed at LRB

choosecupebc.ca/ubc



Applied to BC Labour Relations Board to have Graduate Student Research Assistants at SFU recognized as employees and included in union

In November 2025, recognition was granted

researchiswork.tssu.ca

WE HAVE A CONTRACT!

[Click to read the highlights](#)

UW Research Coordinators and Research Consultants – UAW

We have formed a union at UW! We are full-time, professional staff who are critical to UW's research mission.

“Individuals have much less power to make changes or ensure they are treated fairly when they are on their own up against a large institution.”

Unionized Research Workers Outside of Academia



Health Sciences Association of Alberta: represents paramedical technical, professional and general support employees in the public and private health-care sectors of Alberta includes research staff



AMAPCEO: represents professionals working in the public interest in Ontario (includes research and data analysts)



OPSEU Local 500: serves members at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, which includes research staff

Unionized Research Workers Outside of Academia



Unionized Research Workers Outside of Academia



Research Centre of the Douglas Mental Health University Institute (Douglas RC) - PSAC-Quebec

- Formed in 2018, represents approximately 300 research associates, research assistants, technicians, research coordinators, animal care attendants and administrative staff

Unionized Research Workers Outside of Academia



Centre hospitalier universitaire (CHU) Sainte-Justine - PSAC-Quebec

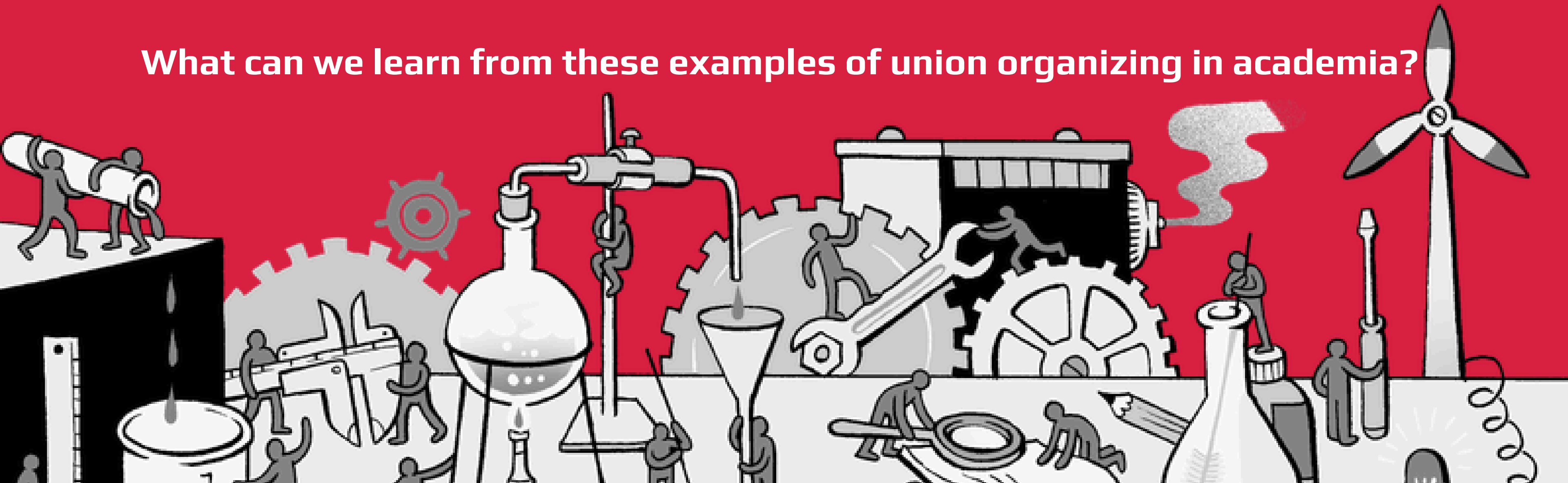
- Formed in 2013, represents approximately 300 employees

Breakout discussion (10 minutes)

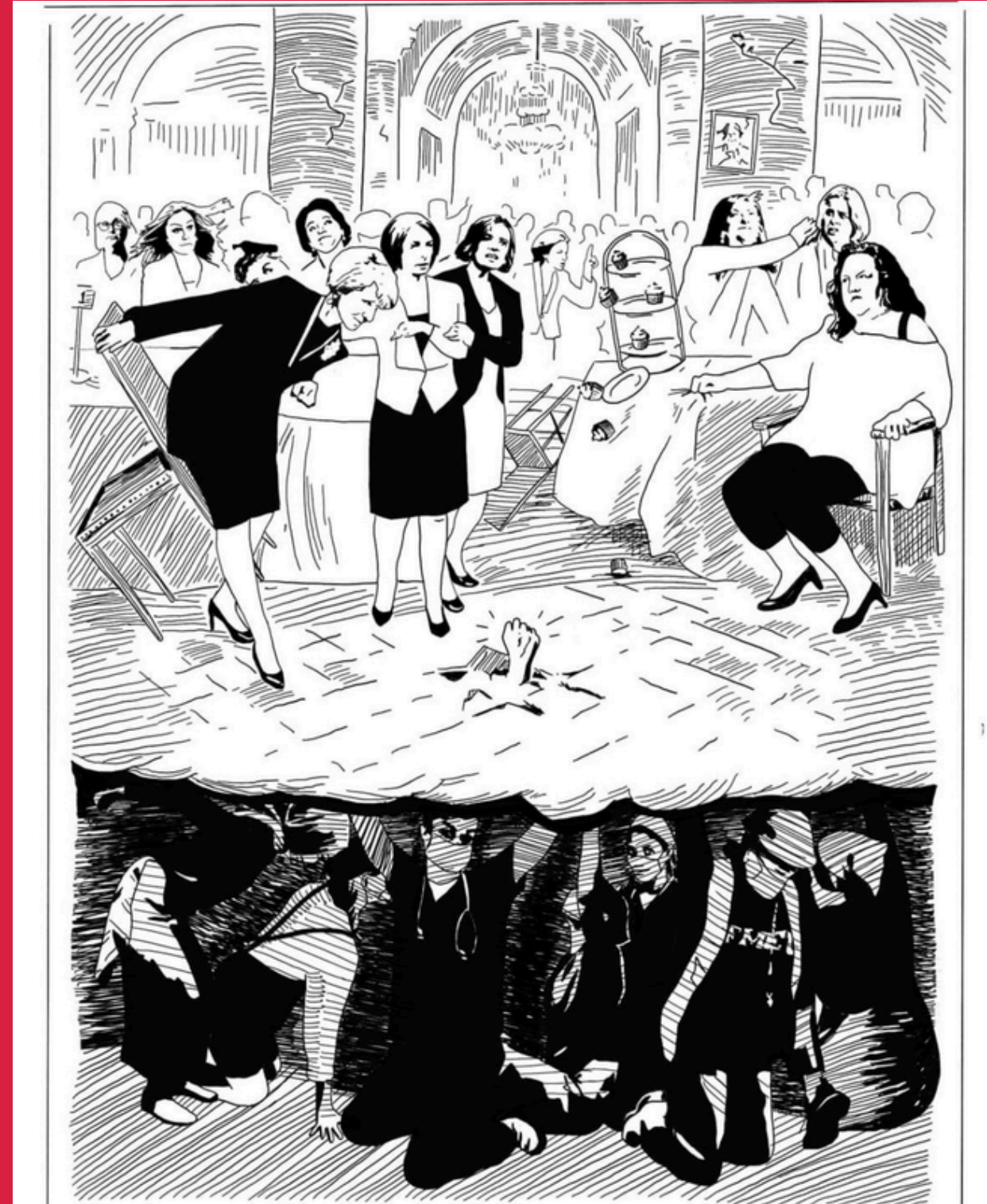
How are you building (or how can you build) power among your coworkers in your workplace?

If there is no union, why do you think that is?

What can we learn from these examples of union organizing in academia?



**The issues discussed today can be fixed with structural changes,
achieved with an organized movement.**



Together, as we've seen others do, we can fight and win.

What are our next steps?

What are our next steps?

1. Continue to provide education to help workers in science learn about the “why” and “how” of organizing in our workplaces
2. Build a network of workers in science who are mobilized to fight for labour rights in their workplaces - learn from one another, foster connection, and build power
3. Gather and share resources and support to science workers in all stages of their organizing

What are YOUR next steps?

- Write down one main issue that you think your workplace needs more organizing around
- Find one other person you can talk about this issue in your workplace. Can you bring them to the next meeting?



Resources:

- **August 15th -16th: “How to Organize Your Workplace” by Leo Panitch School for Socialist Education**
- **Monthly “Worker’s Alliance” Meetings: August date TBD**
- **November 10th-19th: “Power Up- Level 1 Training” by Organize4Power. Join the SftP contingent!**

Want to continue this work?
Talk to us or sign up at the table!