

KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI, USA → SÃO PAULO, BRASIL

FROM KANSAS CITY TO SÃO PAULO

Building worker power across borders — the story of
Stand Up KC, the Heartland Center for Jobs and
Freedom, and the Missouri Workers Center.

GINA CHIALA

Legal Director, Missouri Workers Center

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WHO I AM

GINA CHIALA

Legal Director, Missouri Workers Center.

Founder and Executive Director of the **Heartland Center for Jobs and Freedom**, a non-profit legal center in Kansas City that enforces the rights of low-wage workers and tenants while supporting their movements for change.



THE CORE NARRATIVE

ONE MOVEMENT, THREE INSTITUTIONS



2013

STAND UP KC

A fast-food workers' strike movement in one city. Workers built the power — strikes, civil disobedience, public leadership.



2015

HEARTLAND CENTER FOR JOBS AND FREEDOM

A non-profit legal center. Law turned worker demands into enforceable rights — in court, at the EEOC, in city ordinances.



2021

MISSOURI WORKERS CENTER

A statewide, multi-industry workers' organization. Scale carried the model beyond one city and one industry.

JULY 2013

THE FIRST STRIKE

Fast-food workers in Kansas City walked off the job for the first time, demanding “**\$15 per hour and the right to form a union without retaliation.**”

It was part of the national **Fight for \$15**. In Kansas City it launched **Stand Up KC**, organizing under the banner “*Defeating Racism and Winning Good Jobs for All.*”

WORKER PARTICIPATION

Workers voted to strike, chose which stores would walk out, and spoke to the press in their own names and uniforms.



2013–2021

THE CAMPAIGN YEARS

More than **12 one-day strikes** and repeated civil disobedience actions. Worker leaders **Terrence Wise**, **Bridget Hughes** and **Richard Eiker** travelled internationally from the beginning — this movement was global before it was statewide. Heartland Center represented workers in their civil disobedience cases, developed leaders, and supported strikes.



2015 — Workers occupy the steps of Kansas City Hall and fast for a week for a higher minimum wage.



2015 — “I, Too, Am America”: a photography exhibit by 20 workers through the Langston Hughes Club, which won national acclaim.



2020 — During COVID-19, fast-food workers led strikes and car caravans demanding PPE and quarantine pay.

OCTOBER 2015

A FAST-FOOD WORKER INTRODUCES THE PRESIDENT

Stand Up KC leader **Terrence Wise** introduced **President Barack Obama** at the White House Summit on Worker Voice.

A worker from a Kansas City drive-thru window, standing on the national stage, speaking for himself.

WORKER PARTICIPATION

Worker leadership is not symbolic. Workers negotiate, testify, and represent the campaign publicly — staff prepare and support, but do not substitute.



Stand Up KC leader Terrence Wise introduces President Barack Obama, White House Summit on Worker Voice, October 2015.

THE THROUGHLINE

THE MINIMUM WAGE FIGHT — AND THE PREEMPTION WALL

2013

Workers strike demanding **\$15/hour** and a union.

2015

Workers occupy City Hall steps and fast for a week. Council passes a **\$13 wage 12–1**. The state legislature **preempts** it.

2017

A Kansas City ballot measure for **\$15 by 2020** passes with **68%** support. State lawmakers **preempt** it again.

2022

Workers form the **Local Control Steering Committee** to fight corporate preemption laws directly.

2024

Missouri voters approve **\$15 statewide** — going around the legislature entirely.



Workers testify and rally at the Missouri State Capitol against legislative attacks on the wage and sick-leave law.

2017 Heartland Opens its Doors



HEARTLAND CENTER FOR **JOBS & FREEDOM**

It is the mission of the Heartland Center for Jobs and Freedom to create opportunities for workers to learn and exercise their rights, realize their collective power, and develop the leadership skills necessary to advocate for a racially and economically just society.

SEPTEMBER 18, 2018

THE FIRST NATIONWIDE STRIKE AGAINST SEXUAL HARASSMENT

McDonald's workers walked off the job in **ten US cities** — including **Kansas City** and St. Louis — in the first nationwide strike in United States history against workplace sexual harassment. Workers also launched a legal campaign to have their legal grievances addressed in the courts.

Workers demanded - and won - meaningful procedures to protect them against widespread sexual harassment .

Supported by the Fight for \$15 campaign and the TIME'S UP Legal Defense Fund.



Kansas City fast-food worker and Stand Up KC leader Fran Marion.

#METOO MEETS THE LABOR MOVEMENT

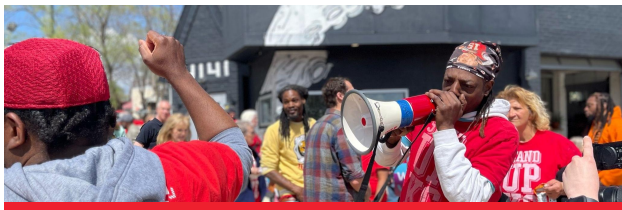
10 CITIES. ONE DAY.

Low-wage women workers — not a union bureaucracy, not a law firm — designed and led the first strike of its kind in the country.

THE PARTNERSHIP MODEL

ORGANIZING + LEGAL STRATEGY

The McDonald's harassment campaign is an example of how **Stand Up KC** and the **Heartland Center** worked together: workers struck, and the Heartland Center **represented them as counsel** on the resulting EEOC charges. It is the model MWC still uses today.



STAND UP KC

DIRECT ACTION

- Workers took the strike vote themselves, store by store
- Women workers led the campaign and spoke publicly under their own names
- Demands written by workers, with the support of lawyers
- Public pressure made the company's conduct a national story



HEARTLAND CENTER

LEGAL STRATEGY

- **Heartland Center served as legal counsel** on the harassment charges brought out of the 2018 strike — including Kim Lawson's
- Title VII charges filed with the EEOC **by the Kansas City and St. Louis workers themselves**, with Heartland representing them
- Legal claims turned individual grievances into a corporate-wide accountability campaign
- Know-your-rights training so workers could recognise and document violations

THE LESSON

Neither half works alone.

A strike without a legal claim is news for one day.

A legal claim without a strike is a file in a drawer.

It is the pairing that moves an employer — and it is how the Missouri Workers Center still works today.

Tenants' Rights are Workers' Rights

Low-wage workers
face eviction and
deplorable housing
conditions



2021

THE MISSOURI WORKERS CENTER IS FOUNDED

At a **Stand Up KC** general membership meeting, workers voted **unanimously** to affiliate with a new statewide organization.

MWC brought new resources and strategic direction to the Kansas City campaign, and expanded organizing **across Missouri** and into **new industries** — above all e-commerce and warehouse logistics.



MISSOURI WORKERS CENTER · SÃO PAULO · AUGUST 2026



Missouri Workers Center members in the streets.

WITHIN SIX MONTHS OF FOUNDING · DECEMBER 2021

TENANTS' RIGHT TO COUNSEL

MWC partnered with the **Heartland Center** and local tenant organizations to win Kansas City's **Tenants' Right to Counsel** — a guarantee of free legal representation in eviction court, passed **11–1** by the City Council.

Stand Up KC organizing + Heartland legal strategy + MWC scale = policy.

"I was in the halls of the courts doing outreach to tenants and I spoke to a mother, she had her toddler with her. I explained to her that she now had a right to an attorney — and to witness the shift in her morale was amazing."

GINA CHIALA

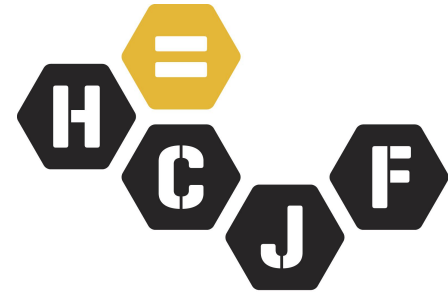


December 2021 — Tenants and workers at Kansas City Hall for the Right to Counsel vote.

HOUSING & TENANT POWER



Healthy Homes and Stable Homes
Housing Programs are Built



HEARTLAND CENTER FOR **JOBS & FREEDOM**



PORTLAND CENTER FOR JOBS &



ORGANIZING IN THE COURTS

The Heartland Action Committee

2021-2024

ORGANIZING AMAZON

After a deadly tornado destroyed an Amazon facility in Illinois, MWC organized Amazon workers around **safety** — and launched a regional organizing campaign.

The **STL8 Organizing Committee** formed at Amazon's St. Peters, Missouri warehouse — **3,500+ workers** — becoming the primary Amazon organizing effort in the state.

Since then: **\$12.5 million** in wage increases won for Amazon workers, and STL8 leaders carried the **Warehouse Worker Protection Act** to the United States Senate.



STL8 Organizing Committee members outside Amazon's St. Peters, Missouri warehouse.



An STL8 leader at the United States Senate introduction of the Warehouse Worker Protection Act.



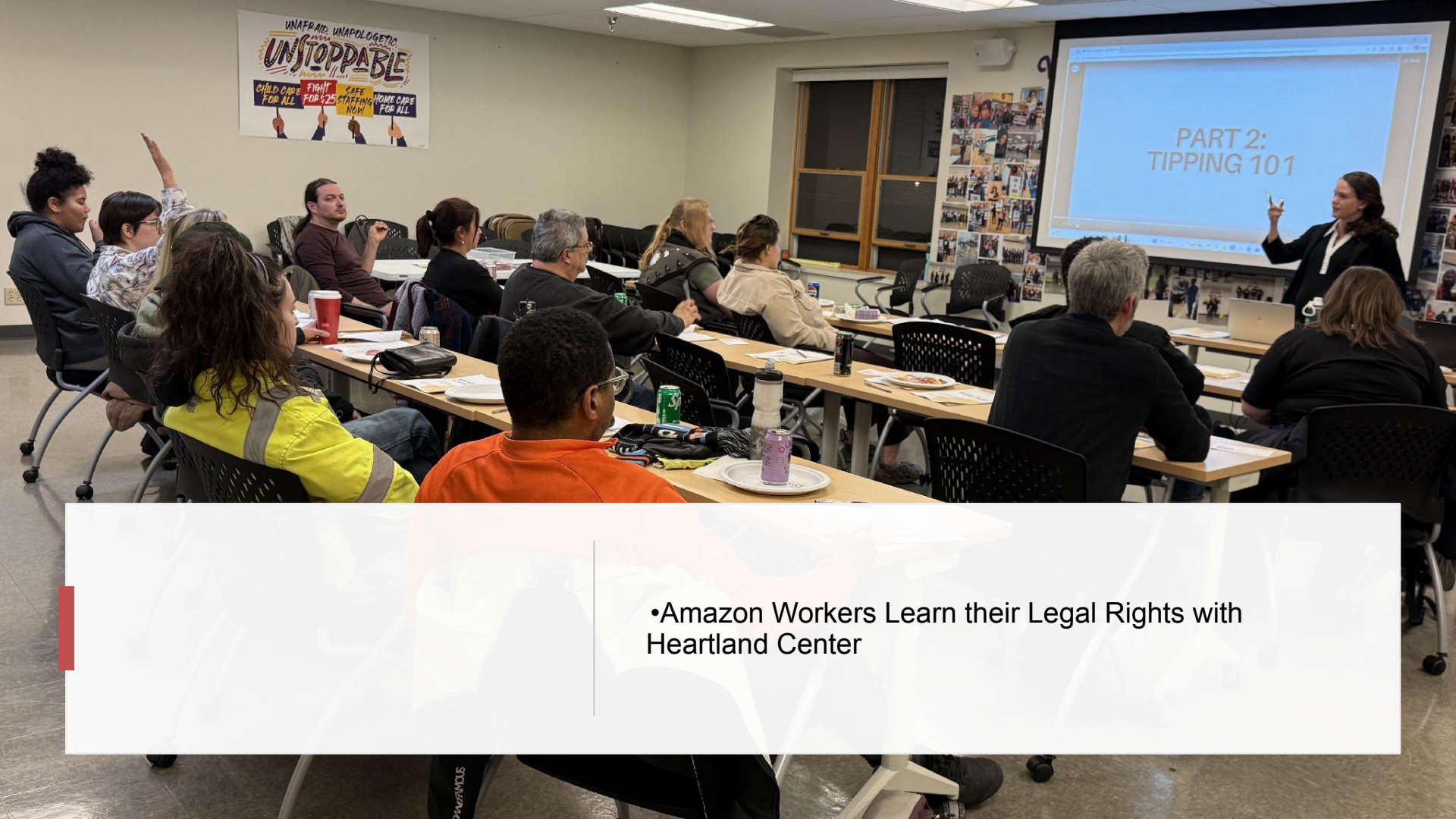
Black Friday 2022 — STL8 workers strike at Amazon in coordination with workers internationally.

BLACK FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 2022

THE FIRST US AMAZON STRIKE — WITH THE WORLD

STL8 workers participated in the **first Amazon strike in the United States**, timed and coordinated **with Amazon workers and allies internationally**.

A global employer requires a global response. Amazon does not experience a strike in Missouri as a Missouri problem — it experiences a strike everywhere at once.



•Amazon Workers Learn their Legal Rights with Heartland Center

2022–2024

THE ROYALS STADIUM FIGHT

MWC, Stand Up KC, the Heartland Center, Jobs with Justice, and stadium workers' union **SEIU Local 1** formed the **Good Jobs and Affordable Housing for All Coalition**, demanding a **Community Benefits Agreement** from the Kansas City Royals in exchange for public subsidy of a new stadium.

The demands: hiring from ZIP codes with high unemployment; job and union security for existing stadium workers; a fair process to unionize unrepresented workers without employer interference; a living wage across the stadium and entertainment district; and affordable housing commitments.

When the Royals gutted the housing provisions and refused a wage floor and union protections, MWC and the Heartland Center **walked away from the negotiating table**. In 2024, voters rejected the stadium sales tax **58–42** — blocking roughly \$2

WORKER PARTICIPATION

Stadium workers set the terms of the agreement they were willing to accept — and were willing to leave the table when those terms were broken.



Workers fill the Kansas City Council chamber in the stadium fight — “Nothing about us without us.”



2023 — GJAH packs the Jackson County legislature.



2024 — Voters reject the stadium sales tax.

2024–2025

IRIS RIDESHARE DRIVERS

IRIS is Kansas City's publicly subsidised rideshare and micro-transit service, operated under contract by the taxi company **zTrip**.

Drivers are classified as independent contractors, have their paychecks gouged with fees, and receive no overtime, despite working over 60 hours per week.

Drivers went public with their union drive in 2024. They also filed a **federal lawsuit**, represented by Heartland Center, seeking back pay and an end to the fees that keep them trapped in debt.



July 2025 — IRIS drivers rally with the Missouri Workers Center: “Drivers Union Now.”

NOVEMBER 2024

FULL CIRCLE: \$15 AND SICK LEAVE

After more than a decade of organizing, **Missouri voters approved** a statewide ballot measure raising the minimum wage to **\$15 per hour** with up to **seven days of paid sick leave**.

It raised wages for **more than 500,000 workers**.

WORKER PARTICIPATION

Workers collected **32,349 petition signatures** to put the measure on the ballot, then canvassed for it. The demand first shouted on a Kansas City picket line in July 2013 became state law in November 2024 — carried the whole way by the same people.



November 2024 — Missouri approves a \$15 minimum wage and paid sick leave.



Workers rally to defend the sick-leave law the legislature later moved to repeal.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

01 Weak, slow remedies.

An illegally fired organizer gets backpay years later, minus interim earnings — no punitive damages. Employers price it in as a cost of doing business.

02 Winning an election isn't winning a contract.

US law requires “good faith bargaining,” not an actual agreement. Many unions win a vote and never get a first contract.

03 The rules change with every election.

The National Labor Relations Board is politically appointed; precedent swings roughly every four to eight years with each administration.

04 State law can override local wins.

Missouri's 2017 “right-to-work” law — repealed by voters **67–33** in 2018 — and repeated state preemption of city minimum-wage votes: higher government nullifying what workers won locally.



Stand Up KC's own strike posters, exhibited in Kansas City in 2026 — “Vote \$15” and “On Strike” in the same room.

TODAY

WHAT THE MISSOURI WORKERS CENTER DOES

DIRECT ORGANIZING

Training workers in the labour and community organizing techniques developed through the Fight for \$15.

COALITION BUILDING

Regional coalition tables that support worker campaigns, plus statewide issue-specific coalitions.

NARRATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Shifting public discourse about work and the economy; training workers in storytelling and media.

STRATEGIC CAMPAIGNS

Power mapping, policy analysis, organizing support and communications for comprehensive campaigns.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Voter education, registration and mobilization — the engine behind our ballot-measure victories.

WHERE WE ORGANIZE

Fast food & restaurants

E-commerce & warehouse logistics

Rideshare & public transit

Stadium & service work

Tenants & housing

RECENT RESULTS

\$15 minimum wage and paid sick leave statewide • \$12.5M in Amazon wage increases • a \$2 billion stadium tax defeated at the ballot • free counsel for tenants facing eviction.



May Day 2026, Kansas City — MWC members march with allied unions.



STL8 members produced and starred in the Workers Opera.

THE TAKEAWAY

HOW WORKERS DRIVE POLICY

Every policy win in this presentation followed the same five steps — and in every one of them, the worker is the actor, not the beneficiary.

1

WORKERS NAME THE PROBLEM

The demand comes from the shop floor — \$15 an hour, a harassment procedure that works, an end to lease

2

WORKERS ACT

A strike vote taken store by store. Civil disobedience. A public campaign with workers' names and faces on it.

3

LAW MAKES IT ENFORCEABLE

EEOC charges, lawsuits, ordinances — filed by workers, drafted with the lawyers they direct.

4

WORKERS CARRY THE CAMPAIGN

Testimony in council chambers and the US Senate. Petition signatures. Door-knocking for the ballot measure.

5

WORKERS ENFORCE THE WIN

Know-your-rights training, courthouse outreach, monitoring — because a right nobody uses is not a right.

OUR RULE

Staff do not speak for workers. Staff make it possible for workers to speak — and lawyers make what workers win enforceable.



MWC members on the Capitol steps in Jefferson City.

COOPERAÇÃO INTERNACIONAL

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Our members have always looked outward. Stand Up KC leaders travelled internationally from the campaign's first years. STL8 struck alongside workers around the world on Black Friday 2022.

Our employers are global — McDonald's, Amazon, the same firms operating in São Paulo and in Missouri. Our response has to be global too.

WHAT WE PROPOSE

- Exchange of worker leaders between Missouri and São Paulo
- Coordinated action dates against those employers
- Shared research on employers we have in common
- Mutual support in each other's campaigns and legal fights

OBRIGADA. THANK YOU.



MISSOURI
WORKERS
CENTER

