Using Social Networking To Discuss Work: NLRB Protection for Derogatory Employee Speech and Concerted Activity

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USING SOCIAL NETWORKING TO DISCUSS WORK: 
NLRB PROTECTION FOR DEROGATORY 
EMPLOYEE SPEECH AND CONCERTED ACTIVITY

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Today’s labor lawyers and judges struggle with how to apply 1930s laws to social networking cases. In particular, the “concerted activity” standard has been part of the National Labor Relations Act (“NLRA”) since 1935, but using it to assess online activity has led to inconsistent outcomes. The 800 million active users on Facebook, about one-fifth of whom reside in the United States, engage in more than just friendly banter and picture posting. Along with Twitter, which has 100 million active monthly visitors, and other similar sites, Facebook has become a forum where employees complain about work and respond to colleagues’ complaints. Yet most employees do not realize that the particular words they use in a late-night casual comment

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2. Compare Hispanics United of Buffalo, NLRB Administrative Law Judge Decision, Case No. 3-CA-27872 (Sept. 6, 2011) (finding protected activity when employee Facebook posts criticizing a colleague solicit feedback from fellow employees) with Wal-Mart, NLRB Adv. Mem., Case No. 17-CA-2503 (July 19, 2011) (finding no protection for an employee whose post complained about a manager but did not explicitly ask Facebook friends, many of whom were colleagues, whether or not they agreed with his position).
3. Facebook Fact Sheet, FACEBOOK NEWSROOM, http://newsroom.fb.com/content/default.aspx?NewsAreaId=22 (last visited Feb. 5, 2012). Facebook is a social networking service that allows users to share pictures, information, links, and messages through individually created profiles. It further allows users to join groups and networks, and to express their preferences through the “like” button and by writing comments in response to posts, links, and photos.
4. Id.
5. The fastest, simplest way to stay close to everything you care about, ABOUT TWITTER, http://twitter.com/about (last visited Feb. 5, 2012). Twitter allows users to write and read “tweets,” which are posts consisting of up to 140 characters. It facilitates online social networking and micro-blogging.
7. See Hispanics United of Buffalo, NLRB Administrative Law Judge Decision, Case No. 3-CA-27872 (Sept. 6, 2011) (finding protected activity when employee Facebook posts criticizing a colleague solicit feedback from fellow employees).
about an employer may determine whether or not their post results in a lawful firing, depending upon whether it is found to be “concerted.”

The NLRA gives workers the right to engage in concerted activity, which means that an employer cannot fire an employee solely because she discusses topics such as management or salary with fellow employees, even in a public forum. The concerted activity protection also applies when two or more employees act together to change the “terms and conditions” of the group’s employment, or when a single employee brings complaints on behalf of a group. Instances of this protected concerted activity are apt to occur on social media sites. However, upon accepting a job, an employee likely will not receive a packet notifying her of her right to engage in concerted activity. Indeed, the NLRA has been described as “the best-kept secret in labor law.”

In August 2011, the National Labor Relations Board (“NLRB” or “the Board”) mandated that employers post notices about the existence of the NLRA, but the potential efficacy of this mandate remains unclear, because the NLRB postponed the effective date of implementation to April 30, 2012.

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8. The types of posts on Facebook and Twitter that this note discusses involve users writing original content expressing their views on particular matters, people, or events. Depending on the privacy settings a user selects, the posts could be viewed by a subset of Facebook ‘friends’ or Twitter subscribers, or by all Facebook users or anyone who views a user’s Twitter profile.


11. Employee Rights, NAT’L LABOR RELATIONS BD., https://www.nlrb.gov/rights-we-protect/employee-rights (last visited Feb. 5, 2012). If the employee were to act alone in disparaging an employer, she may lose the act’s protection, depending on the extent of her criticism and whether other protections, such as free speech protections, applied in the particular scenario.

12. Id.


15. Id. at 267.

2012. In the meantime, the ninety-three percent of employees who are not affiliated with a union may not know about these rights or the parameters of what types of statements could get them fired with no legal recourse. Since voicing workplace gripes at union meetings is no longer an option for most people, employees may want to share their grievances online through social networking, but rightfully may worry about retaliation. Using social networking websites both shares the posts and maintains them, providing employers with a potentially incriminating record that is often unavailable with in-person conversations. Further, limited NLRB legal precedent leaves questions unanswered; determining whether a social media post involves concerted activity has become a challenge for the lawyers at the NLRB, which administers the NLRA and adjudicates unfair labor practice cases brought by its General Counsel.

17. Employee Rights Notice Posting, NAT’L LABOR RELATIONS BD., https://www.nlrb.gov/poster (last visited Feb. 5, 2012) (“[As of April 30, 2012] the notice should be posted in a conspicuous place, where other notifications of workplace rights and employer rules and policies are posted. Employers also should publish a link to the notice on an internal or external website if other personnel policies or workplace notices are posted there.”); Arthur T. Carter et al., Update: NLRB Delays Notice Posting Rule’s Effective Date, HAYNES & BOONE’S NEWSROOM (Dec. 28, 2011), http://www.haynesboone.com/nlrb_delays_noticePosting_rule (noting that this postponement is a response to litigation; various parties are challenging the notice requirements).


22. Telephone interview with Lafe Solomon, Acting General Counsel of the NLRB (Oct. 14, 2011); see General Counsel 2011 Memorandum, supra note 9; Memorandum from the Office of the General Counsel of the NLRB, Report of the Acting General Counsel Concerning Social Media Cases (Jan. 24, 2012) (showing that the NLRB’s Acting General Counsel continues to issue Memos devoted to the subject of social media).
Recent cases highlight the problems that emerge from an over-reliance on the traditional concerted activity standard. Under these cases, if an employee solicits feedback from colleagues who are her Facebook friends and asks them to join her in some sort of work conditions-related protest, she is much more likely to get to keep her job if it is proven that the termination was in retaliation to the feedback-soliciting post.\(^{23}\) If she does not explicitly talk about work conditions or directly ask for support, her case is weaker.\(^{24}\) And if an employee’s Facebook friends express their shared sentiment instead of just their sympathy in comments, the employee who posted will have a considerably better case for retaliatory firing.\(^{25}\) Apparently, minor variations in language used in a post can have profound consequences.

The casual nature of Facebook posting\(^{26}\) calls into question this approach. Sometimes, people who post simply sympathetic comments in response to a colleague’s post may agree that action should be taken and may be willing to help, but may not make that clear with their off-the-cuff online responses. Yet, under the current legal approach, an employee’s employment status can hinge on the particular words chosen for spontaneous Facebook posts and follow-up comments.\(^{27}\) Compounding the problem, when NLRB Field Examiners\(^{28}\) investigate cases involving Facebook posts, they

\(^{23}\) Compare Hispanics United of Buffalo, NLRB Administrative Law Judge Decision, Case No. 3-CA-27872 (Sept. 6, 2011) (finding protected activity when employee Facebook posts criticizing a colleague solicit feedback from fellow employees) with Wal-Mart, NLRB Adv. Mem., Case No. 17-CA-2503 (July 19, 2011) (finding no protection for an employee whose post complained about a manager but did not explicitly ask Facebook friends, many of whom were colleagues, whether or not they agreed with his position).

\(^{24}\) Compare Hispanics United of Buffalo, NLRB Administrative Law Judge Decision, Case No. 3-CA-27872 with Wal-Mart, NLRB Adv. Mem., Case No. 17-CA-2503.

\(^{25}\) Compare Hispanics United of Buffalo, NLRB Administrative Law Judge Decision, Case No. 3-CA-27872 with Wal-Mart, NLRB Adv. Mem., Case No. 17-CA-2503. The NLRA concerted activity standard requires that a group of more than one person holds a particular belief in order for an individual who expresses her views to get protection under the Act. For this reason, the details of online responses become central to determinations of wrongful firing.


\(^{27}\) Compare Hispanics United of Buffalo, NLRB Administrative Law Judge Decision, Case No. 3-CA-27872 with Wal-Mart, NLRB Adv. Mem., Case No. 17-CA-2503.

\(^{28}\) *Field Attorney and Field Examiner Positions, Office of the General Counsel, NAT’L LABOR RELATIONS BD.*, https://www.nlrb.gov/who-we-are/careers/job-descriptions-and-listings/field-attorney-and-field-examiner-positions-office (last visited Feb. 5, 2012) (explaining that “field examiners act on behalf of the General Counsel by investigating charges of unfair labor practices, recommending appropriate actions or remedies, conducting elections to determine union representation preferences, and acting as hearing officers in contested representation matters”).
sometimes miss the context and underlying intent of online comments.\textsuperscript{29} Context may be easier to determine in offline conversations, where people can respond to each other’s comments in real time and where the precise words used constitute just one part of the interaction; much is conveyed through in-person contact and people’s recollections of the tenor of a conversation.\textsuperscript{30} Failing to recognize the differences between online and offline communications has created discordant legal rulings.\textsuperscript{31}

In enforcing the NLRA and adjudicating cases involving unfair labor practices, lawyers, judges, and the Board at the NLRB have the power to shape social media policies related to employment situations.\textsuperscript{32} If no settlement is reached in a meritorious case, attorneys at the NLRB’s regional offices bring cases on behalf of employees viewed as unlawfully terminated.\textsuperscript{33} If the parties do not settle at the next stage, a case may go to an Administrative Law Judge, and then to several members of the Board on appeal.\textsuperscript{34} Finally, certain cases will enter the court system on further appeal to a circuit court and then possibly to the Supreme Court.\textsuperscript{35}

The NLRB’s Acting General Counsel has said that he endeavors to promote unified legal precedent in this area and has instructed that social

\textsuperscript{29} See, e.g., JT’s Porch Saloon & Eatery, NLRB Adv. Mem., Case No. 13-CA-46689 (Jul. 7, 2011); Wal-Mart, NLRB Adv. Mem., Case No. 17-CA-2503 (July 19, 2011). These cases will be discussed in Section III.C.3, supra, and it will be argued that the context of what led to the posts was overlooked, costing the employees protection under Section 7.

\textsuperscript{30} ARVID KAPPAS & NICOLE C. KRAMER, FACE-TO-FACE COMMUNICATION OVER THE INTERNET: EMOTIONS IN A WEB OF CULTURE, LANGUAGE, AND TECHNOLOGY 18 (2011) (noting that “many theorists claim that more communication cues are better—that the ability to convey nonverbal communication cues allows communicators to appreciate each other interpersonally and facilitates understanding their messages, or both”).

\textsuperscript{31} Compare Hispanics United of Buffalo, NLRB Administrative Law Judge Decision, Case No. 3-CA-27872 (Sept. 6, 2011) (finding protected activity when employee Facebook posts criticizing a colleague solicit feedback from fellow employees) with Wal-Mart, NLRB Adv. Mem., Case No. 17-CA-2503 (July 19, 2011) (finding no protection for an employee whose post complained about a manager but did not explicitly ask Facebook friends, many of whom were colleagues, whether or not they agreed with his position).

\textsuperscript{32} Paul Shukovsky, Employers Must Recognize Federal Labor Act As Source of Social Media Policies Litigation, 10 PRIVACY & SECURITY LAW REPORT 1629 (Nov. 14, 2011) (citing union attorney Barbara Camens, of Barr & Camens, as saying that the NLRA “is rapidly shaping up to be the biggest source . . . of litigation and legal risk with regard to social media policies”).


\textsuperscript{34} Id.

\textsuperscript{35} OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY, GUIDE TO BOARD PROCEDURES, TENTATIVE DRAFT, 55–56 (Dec. 10, 2010).
media cases be brought to his attention. His office writes Advice Memos that guide the attorneys in the regional offices as to whether to take a case and how to proceed. The General Counsel has issued—and plans to continue to issue—periodic reviews of these social media cases, which further elucidate his office’s views on the contours of the NLRA in the digital space. Even though social media cases present novel fact patterns due to the evolving nature of the platforms and social norms, for the most part, the General Counsel has applied existing labor law standards to social media cases, instead of modifying standards to take into account the way in which people use social media.

This Note considers twelve recent cases before the NLRB involving social media in the workplace. These twelve cases were among the fourteen cases discussed in the General Counsel’s summer 2011 Social Media Memorandum (“the Memo”), which marked the first time the General Counsel devoted a review memo to social media cases. The cases shed light on what kinds of employee social media behavior receive protection and what kinds of social media policies pass muster with the General Counsel’s office. Because the Board has not drafted—and likely will not draft—social media-specific rules, these cases provide important insight into the

37. General Counsel Memos, NAT’L LABOR RELATIONS BD., https://www.nlrb.gov/publications/general-counsel-memos (last visited Feb. 5, 2012). The Advice Memoranda are addressed to NLRB Region Directors concerning a pending unfair labor practice charge in their specific Region and are binding upon the Region but not upon the NLRB or its ALJs.
38. General Counsel 2012 Memorandum, supra note 13.
39. See General Counsel 2012 Memorandum, supra note 13; General Counsel 2011 Memorandum, supra note 9; Robert Sprague, Facebook Meets the NLRB: Employee Online Communications and Unfair Labor Practices, 55 U. PENN. J. BUS. L. (forthcoming 2012), available at http://ssrn.com/abstract=1982717 (noting that “the fact that employees are using Facebook and other social media tools to discuss work does not alter the basic analysis of what does and does not constitute protected concerted activity”).
40. This Note does not consider a case about a union posting an interrogation video on YouTube or a case about whether or not to allow employees media access. These cases presented issues less relevant to the scope of the undertaken analysis.
41. General Counsel 2012 Memorandum, supra note 13.
42. See General Counsel 2011 Memorandum, supra note 9.
43. Telephone interview with Lafe Solomon, Acting General Counsel of the NLRB (Jan. 24, 2011) (”[N]either the General Counsel nor the Board issues advisory opinions. Only the Board can do rulemaking, but it does this infrequently. The two rules the Board has issued since the 1980s—rules around elections and notice postings—have led to controversy.”).
General Counsel’s nascent views on social media cases. They also highlight potential inconsistencies with the current approach used by the General Counsel and provide a basis for critique and recommendations.

Part I of this Note summarizes how the NLRB operates, providing a glimpse into its structure, history, and functions. Part II addresses the ways that social media has become relevant to employers and employees. It discusses the challenge of regulating a fast-changing online space that fosters diverse attitudes and usages. It describes the predicament in which employers find themselves—trying to protect their brand and organizational integrity while striving to comply with laws that empower employees to communicate collectively concerning terms and conditions of employment. Many employers also believe that social media provides powerful tools for employers to keep employees informed and in contact. Employees may even use social media to promote an employer’s goods or service. Meanwhile, employees hoping to keep their jobs in a bad economy may feel pressured to stay silent on issues that they may legally discuss, both offline and online. Without proper guidance from the NLRB General Counsel, employers and employees will continue to operate in an environment of uncertainty. Part III provides a framework for the case analysis and discusses the legal standards used to decide the Memo’s social media cases, analyzing how the General Counsel applies the standards to the Memo’s cases. Part IV offers recommendations about how to improve consistency among social media rulings.

44. See General Counsel 2011 Memorandum, supra note 9; Steven K. Ury, Working with Social Networks: The Intersection of Labor Law and Ethical Issues Raised by Social Networking 4–5, 5TH ANNUAL LABOR AND EMPLOYMENT LAW CONFERENCE (Nov. 2–5, 2011) (noting that “the last calendar year has seen proof of the importance of social networking in labor law as a flurry of decisions have come down from the General Counsel of the National Labor Relations Board”).

45. Press Release, Towers Watson, More Companies Worldwide Embracing New Media for Employee Communication, Towers Watson Study Finds (Nov. 17, 2011), available at http://www.towerswatson.com/press/5879 (finding that “a majority of companies worldwide say they are becoming more knowledgeable about the use of social media tools to connect with and keep their workforces informed”).

46. See Dean Takahashi, Hearsay Social raises $18M so your employees won’t embarrass you on social media, VENTURE BEAT (Jul. 28, 2011, 4:30 AM), http://venturebeat.com/2011/07/28/hearsay-social-raises-18m (quoting the founder of Hearsay Social as offering to help companies transform their employees into ‘digital brand representatives’).
I. ROLE OF THE NLRB AND THE NLRA

The NLRB—an independent federal agency that administers the NLRA\(^\text{47}\)—has exclusive jurisdiction as the first adjudicator of unfair labor practice charges alleging violations of Section 8 of the NLRA,\(^\text{48}\) which makes illegal what Section 7 protects.\(^\text{49}\) Section 7 states:

Employees shall have the right to self-organization, to form, join, or assist labor organizations, to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and to engage in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection, and shall also have the right to refrain from any or all such activities except to the extent that such right may be affected by an agreement requiring membership in a labor organization as a condition of employment as authorized in section 8(a)(3) [section 158(a)(3) of this title].\(^\text{50}\)

Currently, the test for concerted activity addresses whether activity is “engaged in with or on the authority of other employees, and not solely by and on behalf of the employee himself.”\(^\text{51}\) A district court hears an NLRA-related case only if attorneys bring it forward claiming a violation of a different law.\(^\text{52}\) The NLRB defers to Congress to amend the statute.\(^\text{53}\)

A. NLRB STRUCTURE

The NLRB deals with private sector employees, not government or federal employees.\(^\text{54}\) The NLRB does cover postal service employees, but not agriculture, airline, or railroad employees, which are covered by a separate


\(^\text{49}\) OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY, supra note 35, at 55–56.


\(^\text{52}\) Research Department Interview, supra note 48. For example, if a case involves an NLRA violation but the cause of action has mainly to do with some other violation, a lawyer may argue such a case in a district court.


Act.\textsuperscript{55} It conducts elections to determine whether employees are in favor of union representation, which is required before employees can form a union.\textsuperscript{56} It also considers bargaining disputes and illegal picketing,\textsuperscript{57} as well as cases involving an employee’s right to discuss wages and working conditions.\textsuperscript{58} The NLRB has jurisdiction over labor disputes under the NLRA, while other agencies and the courts have jurisdiction to hear labor-related issues under other federal and state laws.\textsuperscript{59}

The President nominates, and the Senate confirms, NLRB Board members.\textsuperscript{60} The Board is supposed to consist of five members, but in recent years, difficulty getting appointees approved has meant that the Board has operated with as few as two members.\textsuperscript{61} The presidentially appointed General Counsel, a prosecutor, supervises the NLRB’s field offices and cases and operates independently of the Board.\textsuperscript{62} The regional offices docket, investigate, settle, and prosecute unfair labor practice cases, receiving about

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\textsuperscript{55} Id. Correspondence with Barry Winograd, Lecturer, Berkeley Law (Mar. 6, 2012) (on file with author) (“[T]he Railway Labor Act (RLA) to cover railroad employees was passed in 1926 and amended and strengthened in 1934, and again amended in 1936 to cover airline employees as well. The statutes reflected the political power of railroad unions, reaching back to the 19th Century. When the NLRA was being considered in 1935 as part of the New Deal, agricultural employees were excluded, in part to satisfy Southern Democrats who were concerned that it would undermine their rural supporters, particularly small farmers.”).  

\textsuperscript{56} OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY, supra note 35 at 10.  

\textsuperscript{57} Is it legal to strike or picket an employer?, NAT’L LABOR RELATIONS BD., https://www.nlrb.gov/faq/questions/it-legal-strike-or-picket-employer (last visited Feb. 5, 2012).  


\textsuperscript{59} For example, the U.S. Department of Labor, not the NLRB, hears complaints that directly concern overtime, minimum wage, prevailing wage, pension, worker safety, and child labor. U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, http://www.dol.gov/whd (last visited Feb. 5, 2012). The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, not the NLRB, deals with cases about discrimination based on race, sex, age, disability, national origin, religion, and color, as well as sexual harassment cases. EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY COMMISSION, http://www.eeoc.gov (last visited Feb. 5, 2012). In California, the Division of Labor Standards and Enforcement, not the NLRB, hears cases about unpaid wages and vacation pay. DIVISION OF LABOR STANDARDS AND ENFORCEMENT, http://www.dir.ca.gov/dlse (last visited Feb. 5, 2012).  

\textsuperscript{60} Who We Are, NAT’L LABOR RELATIONS BD., https://www.nlrb.gov/who-we-are/board (last visited Feb. 5, 2012).  


\textsuperscript{62} The General Counsel, NAT’L LABOR RELATIONS BD., https://www.nlrb.gov/who-we-are/general-counsel (last visited Feb. 5, 2012).
20,000 to 30,000 charges per year. The Administrative Law Judges ("ALJs"), who have separate offices and function independently of the regional offices, hear cases that have not settled. Charges that employers failed to bargain or that they illegally punished employees for protected activity were the most common complaints brought before the NLRB in recent years. Each regional office is responsible for issuing complaints, following an investigation, and prosecuting the complaint before the ALJ.

B. NLRB PROCEDURES

Once an employee or a union files a charge alleging a violation of Section 8 of the NLRA, either an NLRB attorney or a Field Examiner is assigned to investigate the charge. In assigning NLRB personnel to specific cases, the attorneys in the regional office consider the experience of the NLRB lawyers and staff, the complexity of the case, and the existing workloads. NLRB personnel investigate charges—whether they come from employees, employers, or unions—by collecting evidence and sometimes taking affidavits. The Regional Director evaluates the findings or, in novel or significant cases, attorneys at the NLRB's Division of Advice in Washington D.C. do the evaluations. If the D.C. lawyers believe the case has merit, they then send the case back to the regional office to proceed.

Social media cases are among these rare cases that always go through the D.C. Division of Advice. In an attempt to achieve coherent decision making in an emerging area of the law, the Acting General Counsel has ordered that the regional office lawyers send recommendations on all of the social media cases to the Division of Advice, which makes a suggestion to the General Counsel.

63. Investigate Charges, supra note 33.
64. KRISTIN E. HICKMAN & RICHARD J. PIERCE, JR., FEDERAL ADMINISTRATIVE LAW CASES AND MATERIALS 293 (2010) ("ALJs are almost as independent of the agencies at which they preside as federal district judges are of the Executive and Legislative branches of government. ALJ salaries are determined by statute; agencies are prohibited from evaluating the performance of ALJs; agencies must use a random assignment method to assign cases to ALJs; and, agencies cannot fire or otherwise discipline an ALJ except for cause, as determined by another agency in a formal adjudication.").
65. Investigate Charges, supra note 33.
66. Id.
67. OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY, supra note 35 at 58.
68. Research Department Interview, supra note 48; Field Attorney and Field Examiner Positions, supra note 28.
69. Telephone interview with Joe Frankl, Regional Director, NLRB Region 20, San Francisco (Dec. 8, 2011).
70. Investigate Charges, supra note 33.
71. Id.
72. Id.
Counsel, who then decides whether or not to issue a complaint.\textsuperscript{73} The regional offices send reports and recommendations, but under current procedures, the Division of Advice decides whether social media cases have prosecutive merit before a complaint is issued.\textsuperscript{74}

As a general practice, the NLRB encourages parties to settle.\textsuperscript{75} In recent years, over ninety percent of meritorious cases investigated by the NLRB have settled via an NLRB settlement or a private agreement.\textsuperscript{76} Most commonly, regional office lawyers facilitate an Informal Board Settlement, which Regional Directors may be asked to approve.\textsuperscript{77} In an Informal Board Settlement, the General Counsel agrees not to issue a complaint in the case, so long as the respondent takes certain remedial actions to restore the status quo.\textsuperscript{78} In other cases, such as when the charged party has committed unfair labor practices repeatedly, the Board approves a Formal Board Settlement, which leads to the issuance of a Board Order and sometimes a court judgment.\textsuperscript{79} The NLRB closes settled cases only after the parties comply with the terms of the settlement.\textsuperscript{80}

When parties do not reach settlement, lawyers in the regional offices can issue a complaint, usually against an employer.\textsuperscript{81} In fiscal year 2010, the NLRB lawyers issued 1,243 complaints dealing with such issues as unlawful threats, interrogations, or disciplinary actions and refusals to provide information or to bargain.\textsuperscript{82} Some of these led to hearings before an NLRB ALJ, while others settled prior to reaching a judge.\textsuperscript{83} NLRB attorneys represent the General Counsel on behalf of charging parties in front of ALJs.\textsuperscript{84} The NLRB attorneys cannot ask for an assessment of penalties.\textsuperscript{85} Rather, under the NLRA, the attorneys can ask for make-whole remedies, including reinstatement and back pay, and other remedies such as requiring

\textsuperscript{73} Telephone interview with Lafe Solomon, Acting General Counsel of the NLRB (Oct. 14, 2011).
\textsuperscript{74} Correspondence with Joe Frankl, Regional Director, NLRB Region 20, San Francisco (Jan. 20, 2011).
\textsuperscript{76} Id.
\textsuperscript{77} Id.
\textsuperscript{78} Office of the Executive Secretary, supra note 35, at 58.
\textsuperscript{79} Facilitate Settlement, supra note 75.
\textsuperscript{80} Id.
\textsuperscript{81} Id.
\textsuperscript{82} NAT’L Investigate Charges, supra note 33.
\textsuperscript{83} Id.
\textsuperscript{84} Id. An individual charging party or a union charging party can have its own attorney participate.
\textsuperscript{85} Id.
notice postings. NLRB attorneys seeking damages must file civil and criminal contempt actions in the appellate courts.

The NLRB currently has forty ALJs nationwide. Some were ALJs elsewhere first—for example, with the Social Security Administration—or previously served as labor and employment law attorneys. In order to maintain independence from the NLRB, ALJs are not subject to agency efficiency ratings, promotions, or demotions, and their salaries depend on the recommendations of an independent agency. If any party appeals an ALJ decision, which the NLRB calls “filing exceptions,” any three members of the Board can review the ALJ decision. The Board reviews the case record and issues several hundred decisions per year, which can reverse holdings and change precedent. Parties can appeal a Board decision to an appropriate circuit court.

After briefing and oral argument, circuit courts evaluate the factual and legal bases of a Board decision. If the court agrees with the Board or finds that the responding party had no legal basis to oppose the Board action, or failed to oppose, it enters a judicial decree that requires abiding by the Board Order. Nearly eighty percent of the approximately sixty-five NLRB cases decided by circuit courts in recent years have affirmed the Board’s ruling. Either the NLRB or the parties bringing a case can appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, but the U.S. Solicitor General must grant the NLRB permission before the NLRB can petition for certiorari.

86. Id.
89. E.g., id.
92. Office of the Executive Secretary, supra note 35, at 2, 24.
93. Who Are ALJs, and How Are They Appointed?, supra note 90.
94. Enforce Orders, supra note 87.
95. Id.
96. Id.
97. Id.
98. Id.
Employees or unions primarily file social media cases against an employer under Section 8(a)(1) and (a)(3) of the NLRA. Section 8(a)(1) makes it illegal for an employer to “interfere with, restrain, or coerce employees in the exercise of the rights guaranteed in Section 7.” Employees or employers can also bring unfair labor practice charges against unions. To assess whether an employer’s rules violate Section 8, the NLRB requires an inquiry into “whether the rules would reasonably tend to chill employees in the exercise of their Section 7 rights.” These rights, which protect concerted activity, extend to employees regardless of whether or not they are part of a union.

II. SOCIAL NETWORKING AND THE WORKPLACE

Beyond complying with the NLRA, allowing certain employee speech to transpire through social media may prove beneficial to society at large. Online social networking can facilitate collective action at a time of low employee cohesion due to declining unionization and high employee turnover. Particularly in non-unionized settings and large or otherwise fragmented workplaces, employees have little incentive to act together, since they may free ride off of others’ efforts. According to one scholar, “If the employees could effectively discuss their strategy and gain enough trust so that most of them participate, this collective-action problem could be...”

99. See General Counsel 2011 Memorandum, supra note 9 (presenting examples of cases where employees or unions have claimed that employers violated Sections 8(a)(1) and (a)(3)).
101. NAT’L LABOR RELATIONS BD., supra note 33.
105. See id.
107. MetLife 9th Annual Study of Employee Benefits Trends: A Blueprint for the New Benefits Economy, METLIFE 9 (Mar. 2011), available at http://www.metlife.com/assets/institutional/services/insights-and-tools/cbts/Employee-Benefits-Trends-Study.pdf (“While employers were focused on dealing with a difficult business climate, the recession has taken a toll on employees. The Study has reported a decline in employee loyalty year over year and that loyalty has now reached a three-year low. But what is disturbing is that employers seem unaware of this downward trend. Employer responses show that they assume employees feel as loyal today as they did three years ago.”).
108. See Jeffrey M. Hirsch, Communication Breakdown: Reviving the Role of Discourse in the Regulation of Employee Collective Action, 44 U.C. DAVIS L. REV. 1091, 1095 (discussing how not acting may nonetheless enable employees to reap rewards if a select group acts on behalf of the whole).
overcome. Without substantial discussions, however, group action is unlikely to occur.” Psychological research shows that communication can make groups more productive, improving the quality of group action. Indeed, the fact that the vast majority of non-social networking cases brought to the attention of the NLRB involve unions suggests that nonunionized employees often do not know the full extent of their rights and are therefore less productive as a group. Social media democratizes; it allows otherwise voiceless employees to engage with colleagues and the public to discuss workplace concerns.

A. CONTOURS OF EMPLOYERS’ RIGHTS TO REGULATE SOCIAL MEDIA USE

The prevalence of social media sometimes puts employers in an uncomfortable position. What their employees post on social networks could shape their business relationships with customers and other businesses and could affect sales, shareholder confidence, and employee morale. Further, employee posts could reveal trade secrets and expose both employees and employers to litigation. Employee posts may also violate privacy laws, including those that prevent disclosure of certain personal

109. Id. at 1097.
110. Id. at 1100 (“[T]he benefit of communication is not merely as a determinant in whether group action of any kind will exist; communication also influences the amount and quality of group action. In particular, studies have shown that as group members share more of certain types of information, the group becomes more productive.”).
111. Id. at 1147 (“[A]lthough no data exist on nonunion employees’ knowledge of their labor rights, it is safe to assume that most are completely unaware of their right to engage in collective action. A rudimentary analysis of the NLRB’s intake data supports the notion that the NLRA is little known outside of the union context. For instance, in Fiscal Year 2008, over 16,000 allegations of employer unfair labor practices were filed with the Board. Of these charges, only 2,781 (17%) did not make allegations that clearly involved a labor organization of some kind, and the actual number of nonunion cases is much smaller because many of these charges still had a union on the scene. Indeed, a search of NLRB decisions during the same period found only two out 389 (0.5%) unfair labor practice cases that did not identify a union. Although the exact number is unclear, these data show that a large majority of charges filed with the NLRB involve employees proximate to a union.”).
Employers must be vigilant when it comes to social media; if an employer does not take action against posts deemed to create a hostile work environment, for example, the employer could become liable for its inaction or for breaching a duty to prevent discriminatory content or defamation. Thus, employers confront great risk around employee social media use.

Meanwhile, studies have reported that employers increasingly express interest in encouraging employee loyalty through social media. One survey found two-thirds of company respondents more knowledgeable about using social media tools than a year earlier and about the same proportion of respondents interested in increasing their use of social media over the next twelve months. According to an employment consultant, “Companies that are reluctant to try social media may end up limiting their ability to attract, retain and motivate certain key groups of employees.”

Already, approximately sixty-five percent of Global Fortune 100 companies have a presence on Twitter, and fifty-four percent have a presence on Facebook. Additionally, seventy-four percent of chief marketing officers surveyed consider social media a top business priority.

Certain employee social networking activity can prove to be a boon to employers, so it may not be in an employer’s interest to overly restrict that kind of activity.

Some start-up companies have garnered considerable venture capital backing with services that help employers enhance their social networking


117. Further compounding the difficulty for employers in these instances, questions may arise around preemption and whether federal or state law applies to a particular employment dispute. The presence of a union may also raise preemption questions. See Henry H. Drummonds, Beyond the Employee Free Choice Act: Unleashing the States in Labor-Management Relations Policy, 19 CORNELL J.L. & PUB. POL’Y 83 (2009) (noting that “this judge-created preemption law stifles labor relations measures in the states, and leaves labor law smothered in federal orthodoxy”).


119. Id.

120. Id.

121. Id.

122. Supra note 46.

123. For example, employees posting about sales events or promoting a product may help a company, particularly if the employee has a large network of Facebook friends.
presence and train employees to assist with those efforts. One such company, Hearsay Social ("Hearsay"), has raised $21 million since 2009 and has helped major corporations increase the number of employees using social media for work purposes. "I tell [companies] you already have 30,000 employees on the internet and they're already representing you, unofficially," the Hearsay founder told VentureBeat. "The brand might be liable for anything that they say. You can change that risk into a number of digital brand representatives."

Receptivity to such companies suggests that employers are interested in having employees use social media to advance company goals, even if there are risks.

But despite their hopes for social media, employers are caught in the middle legally. While policing workplace misconduct to avoid liability, they must not infringe upon workers’ rights to make certain types of criticisms. Under the NLRA, overly restrictive rules that could be construed to ban protected NLRA Section 7 activity remain impermissible. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution prevents Congress from abridging free speech, and the Fourteenth Amendment applies the restriction to states. Though the First Amendment is inapplicable to private sector employment relationships, courts have interpreted the NLRA to recognize First Amendment-like rights and held that free speech rights apply on the Internet. Private employees in many jurisdictions get protection from state laws that create a civil right for citizens to exercise free speech. Discharged employees may also make viable claims that free speech is a fundamental right, thus enabling them to sue based on the tort of wrongful termination. Federal and state laws prohibiting discrimination and retaliation, as well as invasion of privacy and whistleblower laws, sometimes form the bases for claims by an employee challenging a

124. See, e.g., TAKAHASHI, supra note 46.
125. Id.
126. Id.
127. Id.
129. Id.
130. U.S. CONST. amend. I.
133. See, e.g., CAL. CONST. art. I, § 1.
termination based upon her social networking post. For these reasons, employers must seriously consider their social media policies—at least to avoid costly litigation and public relations problems.

B. RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF EMPLOYEES USING SOCIAL MEDIA

Employees who see social networking as personal, unregulated terrain need to understand that, under the General Counsel’s current framework for analysis, “mere gripes” about their places of work could cost them their jobs. The General Counsel analyzes these cases in reference to “concerted activity,” which means that the gripes need to emerge from, include, or incite group action in order to merit protection. The General Counsel’s office engages in a fact-based analysis, looking at the nature of a given conversation in order to ascertain whether or not there is concerted activity. If, for example, Facebook posts do not elicit supportive comments from fellow workers engaging in conversation and there is no clear evidence of coordinated activity that led up to the posting, the General Counsel is unlikely to find concerted activity. Unfortunately, the outcome of social media cases appears unpredictable, given the results in recent cases that turn on seemingly trivial factual differences.

Though employees have rights under the NLRA, they still must comply with rules surrounding workplace decorum and other restrictions. Employees, as agents, “must loyally execute the legitimate interests of the principal [or the employer],” and this duty increases in proportion to the employee’s level of responsibility. Some companies require employees to sign contracts pledging not to disclose confidential company information. Certain jurisdictions have statutes requiring as much, or include the obligation as part of the concept of duty. Further, employees have a

138. See General Counsel 2011 Memorandum, supra note 9.
140. See RESTATEMENT (SECOND) OF AGENCY § 387 (1958).
141. Id.
142. Paul & Chung, supra note at 116, at 142.
143. See CAL. LAB. CODE § 2853 (West 2008) (stating that paid employees shall perform the service for which they are hired “with ordinary care and diligence”); Id. § 2856 (stating
general duty not to disclose trade secrets or defame, disparage, harass, or intimidate other employees. Given these requirements, the NLRA goes only so far in permitting employees to post what they want.

Today, most employees without union representation are at-will employees, which means that employers can terminate these employees with or without a reason, within certain limitations and exceptions. The primary limitations to an employer’s ability to fire an at-will employee are laws prohibiting discrimination and retaliation based upon gender, race, and other similar protected classes under federal and state anti-discrimination laws. But an employer otherwise has a right to discharge an employee at any time if the firing does not violate a contract or employment-related statute.

California is one of three states—along with Arizona and Georgia—that has codified the employment-at-will doctrine, though all states and the District of Columbia, excluding Montana, have adopted the doctrine through judicial decisions. The courts in some states have recognized certain exceptions to the at-will doctrine. These exceptions stem from implied contract, public policy, promissory estoppels, the covenant of good faith and fair dealing, intentional infliction of emotional distress, and privacy. Still, employees have less recourse than they would if at-will employment were not so pervasive.

Employers and employees have various competing interests when it comes to social networking. Employers seek to protect their image, while

_**144. See Mark A. Rothstein & Lance Liebman, Rothstein & Liebman’s Employment Law Cases and Materials 1049 (4th ed. 1998).**_

_**145. See California Fair Employment and Housing Act, CAL. GOV’T CODE § 12940(j)(1), § 12940(j)(3) (West 2008).**_


_**148. Sprague, supra note 146.**_

_**149. Id. at 387 n. 26 (citing CAL. LAB. CODE § 2922 (West 2003) (“California’s statute provides, in part, that ‘[a]n employment, having no specified term, may be terminated at the will of either party on notice to the other.’ . . . ‘There has been an ongoing effort to codify the employment-at-will doctrine in a uniform act through the Model Employment Termination Act, produced by the National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws. To date, no state has adopted the model act.’”).**_

_**150. Id. at 361.**_

_**151. Id.**_

_**152. See Takahashi, supra note 46.**_
employees may feel that they should be able to express their views freely.\footnote{153} Some employers want employees to help promote their brand.\footnote{154} However, even employees willing to tout their employer’s wares online may worry about employers in any way monitoring their online activity, which they may have reason to keep separate from their workplace identity to avoid adverse workplace consequences.\footnote{155} At-will employment only makes employees more vulnerable,\footnote{156} and the NLRA, while providing protections, has limits due to other duties employees owe employers.\footnote{157}

III. APPROACH AND ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL MEDIA CASES BEFORE THE NLRB

The analysis throughout this Note stems from NLRB precedent and how that precedent has been applied in case-specific Advice Memos, ALJ decisions involving social media, and the year-end Acting General Counsel’s Memo.\footnote{158} For some of the cases considered, only the year-end Memo provided guidance; this happened if, at the time of writing, a case was still open or documents were not available. For other cases, the availability of ALJ reasoning and case-specific Memos guided discussion. None of the cases addressed in the year-end Memo was before the Board at the time of this Note’s writing.

The cases considered implicate issues relating to employee privacy; when laws protect online posts, an employee’s right to privacy expands. This Note does not focus on privacy law, however. Instead, it considers employee social media use and NLRB decisions as a cyberlaw and labor law issue, which has consequences for various aspects of people’s virtual and actual lives. Moreover, although the rulings and analyses may prove relevant to more than

\footnote{154} See Takahashi, supra note 46 (citing statistics from Burston-Marsteller Communications). Receptivity to such companies suggests that employers are interested in having employees use social media to advance company goals, even if there are risks.
\footnote{155} See General Counsel 2011 Memorandum, supra note 9. Findings of unprotected activity suggest that employees must be wary of what they say online because employers may retaliate without violating the law.
\footnote{156} Sprague, supra note 146, at 359.
\footnote{157} See Restatement (Second) of Agency § 387 (1958).
\footnote{158} Due to backlogs and certain NLRB policies, documents related to cases are not always posted to the NLRB website for researchers to use. In some instances, the author of this Note was able to file Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to gain access to Advice Memos pertaining to particular cases. In other instances, particularly when a case remained open due to one party having filed exceptions or the settlement occurring fewer than six months prior, certain documents remained inaccessible.
social networking activities alone, this Note tailors its discussion to social networking.

A. APPROACH TO LEGAL PRINCIPLES AND PROPOSAL FOR MORE FLEXIBLE ANALYSIS

Although this Note argues that the legal standard used to decide social media cases needs to evolve, it does not suggest an expansion of current doctrine. Rather, it urges the General Counsel and ALJs to acknowledge the limitations of applying the traditional concerted activity standard in all social media cases, as concert is not necessarily expressed in the same way online as offline. Short of changing the approach taken by the NLRB attorneys, General Counsel, and ALJs, if and when a social media case gets to the Board, the Board should reject the limited approach.

Currently, the General Counsel looks to the facts of a case and will find concert “[w]hen the record evidence demonstrates group activities, whether ‘specifically authorized’ in a formal agency sense, or otherwise.” Accordingly, individual activities that are the “logical outgrowth of concerns expressed by the employees collectively” are characterized as concerted. Concerted activity further includes “circumstances where individual employees seek to initiate or to induce or to prepare for group action” and where individual employees bring “truly group complaints” to management’s attention. However, activity that does not anticipate group action, and therefore does not go beyond “mere griping,” is not concerted.

Because an individual employee’s actions may constitute protected concerted activity if the actions stem from conversations with other employees, this Note argues that the General Counsel should more systematically consider evidence of concert outside of the actual posts, even


160. See Five Star Transportation, 349 N.L.R.B. 42, 43–44, 59 (2007), enf’d, 522 F.3d 46 (1st Cir. 2008) (holding that drivers’ letters to school committee raising individual concerns over a change in bus contractors were logical outgrowth of concerns expressed at a group meeting).


162. See Mushroom Transp. v. NLRB, 330 F.2d 683, 685 (3d Cir. 1964) (noting that “[a]ctivity which consists of mere talk must, in order to be protected, be talk looking toward group action . . . and, if it looks forward to no action at all, it is more than likely to be mere ‘griping’”); Holling Press, 343 N.L.R.B. 301, 302 (2004) (noting that activity that involves only a speaker and a listener may be concerted “so long as what is being articulated goes beyond mere griping”).

163. See Karl Knauz Motors, NLRB Administrative Law Judge Decision, Case No. 13-CA-46452 (Sept. 28, 2011).
in the absence of clear, organized meetings or other obvious signals. As it stands now, the General Counsel’s application of the concerted activity standard seems to ignore the fact that people communicate on multiple platforms and through different media simultaneously and fluidly.\textsuperscript{164} The NLRB Memo cases appear at odds, because in some instances, the General Counsel focuses mostly on a Facebook post itself and pays minimal attention to other forms of communication pertaining to the same conversation.\textsuperscript{165}

This Note supports the use of the “opprobrious conduct” standard,\textsuperscript{166} which gives employers recourse when their employees make truly outlandish comments.\textsuperscript{167} That standard provides a mechanism for ensuring that the concerted activity standard will not permit outrageous speech.\textsuperscript{168} Thus, even if the General Counsel adopts a more flexible approach in line with what this Note suggests, the “opprobrious conduct” analysis will provide a check that limits protection on posts that go beyond reasonable, permissible speech.

B. CASES CONSIDERED IN THIS NOTE

The Table below lists the twelve cases considered in this Note, their status in the NLRB process, and the outcomes related to whether or not the posts constituted protected concerted activity and whether or not the social media policies were legal. The Acting General Counsel and NLRB attorneys have issued complaints, dismissed, settled, and in some instances, prosecuted these cases before an ALJ. This Note contends that the ALJ may have incorrectly decided two of the cases considered in the Memo—\textit{JT’s Porch Saloon & Eatery}\textsuperscript{169} and \textit{Wal-Mart}\textsuperscript{170}—because of the General Counsel’s

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{164} See General Counsel 2011 Memorandum, \textit{supra} note 9.
\item \textsuperscript{165} \textit{Compare} Hispanics United of Buffalo, NLRB Administrative Law Judge Decision, Case No. 3-CA-27872 (Sept. 6, 2011) (finding protected activity when employee Facebook posts criticizing a colleague solicit feedback from fellow employees) \textit{with} Wal-Mart, NLRB Adv. Mem., Case No. 17-CA-2503 (July 19, 2011) (finding no protection for an employee whose post complained about a manager but did not explicitly ask Facebook friends, many of whom were colleagues, whether or not they agreed with his position). This Note contends that in order to thoroughly analyze whether or not a social media post represents concerted activity, NLRB lawyers must look for evidence of concert before the post. This is done in some cases, such as in \textit{Hispanics United}, but not in others, such as \textit{Wal-Mart} and \textit{JT’s Porch Saloon & Eatery}.
\item \textsuperscript{166} Atl. Steel Co., 245 N.L.R.B. 814 (1979) (stating that “even an employee who is engaged in concerted protected activity can, by opprobrious conduct, lose the protection of the Act”); \textit{see} discussion \textit{infra} Section III.D.
\item \textsuperscript{167} Id.
\item \textsuperscript{168} \textit{Opprobrium} \textit{Definition}, DICTIONARY.COM, http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/opprobrium (last visited Feb. 5, 2012) (defining ‘opprobrium’ as “the disgrace or the reproach incurred by conduct considered outrageously shameful”).
\item \textsuperscript{169} JT’s Porch Saloon & Eatery, NLRB Adv. Mem., Case No. 13-CA-46689 (July 7, 2011).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
seeming unwillingness to adapt the concerted activity standard to the nuances of social media. This Note urges the General Counsel to engage in more dexterous analysis of social media cases.

### Table 1: Cases Considered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CASE NAME</th>
<th>STATUS</th>
<th>OUTCOME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Hispanics United</td>
<td>Open</td>
<td>Concerted activity under Meyers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. American Medical Response</td>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>Concerted activity under Meyers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Karl Kaunz Motors Inc.</td>
<td>Open</td>
<td>NOT protected concerted activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Triple Play Sports Bar</td>
<td>Open</td>
<td>Concerted activity under Meyers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Arizona Daily Star</td>
<td>Open</td>
<td>NOT protected concerted activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. JT’s Porch Saloon</td>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>NOTE questions outcome of this case</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Rural Metro</td>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>NOT protected concerted activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Martin House Inc.</td>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>NOT protected concerted activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Wal-Mart</td>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>NOT protected concerted activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Flagler Hospital</td>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>Overly broad social media policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Parks and Sons</td>
<td>Open</td>
<td>Overly broad social media policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Giant Eagle Inc.</td>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>Partially okay social media policy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### C. Concerted Activity for Mutual Aid or Protection

#### 1. History of the Concerted Activity Standard

A review of the concerted activity standard’s history sheds light on its current scope. The Norris-Laguardia Act of 1931, which included an early mention of “concert”\(^{171}\) without focusing on it, prevented the federal courts from enjoining labor disputes engaged in “singly or in concert.”\(^{172}\) The Board intended Section 7(a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 to allow laborers to associate in order to improve working conditions.\(^{173}\) But it was not until the passage of Section 7 of the NLRA in 1935 that concerted

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171. Norris-Laguardia Act, Ch. 90, § 2, 47 Stat. 70, 70 (1932).
172. Id.
activity became a protected right. According to one scholar’s analysis, however, until 1967, the circuit courts and the NLRB were “reluctant to find that concerted activity existed when an individual employee, acting alone to complain about working conditions, sought protection under Section 7 of the Act.” This changed when the Board for the first time gave protection to an employee acting alone in an effort to enforce a collective bargaining agreement. In *Interboro Contractors*, a steamfitter complained to management to furnish safe labor conditions, which the employer and the steamfitter agreed to as part of a collective bargaining agreement. On appeal, the Second Circuit upheld the Board’s decision to protect the employee. In the years that followed, NLRB rulings adhered to the *Interboro* decision, though circuits were split during that period.

In 1975, the NLRB further expanded the scope of protection by finding that activities unrelated to collective bargaining agreements could also warrant protection. In *Alleluia Cushion*, an employer discharged a single employee after the employee sent a letter to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (“OSHA”). The employee was dissatisfied with how the employer handled his complaint about workplace safety, and the letter the employee wrote led to an inspector’s visit. The Board ruled in the employee’s favor, without a showing that the employee had solicited support from colleagues. The Board found “an implied consent” from colleagues enough for concerted activity. In addition to acting for a group of employees’ interests, activity on behalf of the public—such as raising concerns related to safety—could trigger “mutual aid or protection.”

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177. *Id.*
181. *Id.* at 999.
182. *Id.*
183. *Id.* at 1007.
184. *Id.* at 1000.
Nine years later, in 1984, the Meyers cases overruled the Alleluia Cushion standard, which for a limited time had significantly broadened the scope of concerted activity protection. The Meyers cases guide the interpretation of social media cases today. The cases involved a truck driver who complained to his employer about safety problems involving the truck he drove for the company. When his employer failed to take action, and after he got into an accident because of malfunctioning brakes, the employee called the Public Service Commission to inspect the vehicle. The Commission then issued a citation and put the vehicle out of service. After the employer fired the employee, and NLRB attorneys took the case. The ALJ and the Board ruled in favor of the employer’s dismissal of the employee, finding it did not violate Section 8(a)(1) of the Act because the employee acted alone in refusing to drive the vehicle and in contacting the Commission.

The D.C. Circuit remanded Meyers I in order to give the Board the chance to reconsider in light of the 1984 Supreme Court decision in NLRB v. City Disposal Systems, which suggested that the NLRB had substantial authority to define the scope of Section 7 of the NLRA. The D.C. Circuit Court did not disclose whether it agreed or disagreed with the ruling in NLRB v. City Disposal Systems. On remand in Meyers II, the Board reaffirmed its rule from Meyers I, holding that concerted activity is “engaged in with or on the authority of other employees, and not solely by and on behalf of the employee himself.” Though today the NLRA makes the distinction between concerted activity for mutual aid or protection and individual gripes, questions remain about what actually does and should constitute concerted

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186. *Meyers I*, 268 N.L.R.B. 493 (1984); *Meyers II*, 281 N.L.R.B. 882 (1986) (reaffirming the rule from *Meyers I*, holding that concerted activity is “engaged in with or on the authority of other employees, and not solely by and on behalf of the employee himself”).
189. *Id.*
190. *Id.* at 505.
191. *Id.* at 506.
192. *Id.* at 493.
194. *Id.* at 830 (noting that the court has “not hesitated to defer to the Board’s interpretation of the Act in the context of issues substantially similar to that presented here”).
196. *Id.* at 885.
activity. The uncertainties affect employers and employees seeking predictability in an online context. Given that courts and NLRB Board members under several administrations have not pushed for a return to the Alleluia Cushion standard, this Note proposes a more feasible middle-ground that allows for consideration of social media norms.

2. Cases Considering Concerted Activity

Nine of the twelve cases discussed in this Note turned on an analysis of whether or not the employees engaged in concerted activity. In the first six cases reviewed below, the General Counsel or ALJs found no concerted activity and therefore did not need to analyze whether or not bad faith existed. In the next three cases considered, the General Counsel or ALJs found concerted activity. After establishing concerted activity, the case’s evaluator must find no bad faith or opprobrious conduct in order for the employee to get protection. This Note therefore goes on to consider the analysis of Bad Faith and Opprobrious Conduct in Section III.D, infra. Ultimately, the decision-makers found that none of the employees’ activities included bad faith or opprobrious conduct in the three concerted activity cases.

197. See Corbett, supra note 14, at 268 (“[I]f broadly interpreted and vigorously enforced, Section 7 could obviate the need for some additional individual rights statutes. It could give employees a far-reaching protection that individual rights laws cannot.”).

198. See General Counsel 2011 Memorandum, supra note 9. The rulings in the General Counsel’s Memo do not seem consistent, as is argued in this Note, making it difficult to draw conclusions from NLRB case precedent.


202. Atl. Steel Co., 245 N.L.R.B. 814, 816 (1979) (stating at “even an employee who is engaged in concerted protected activity can, by opprobrious conduct, lose the protection of the Act”).
In the first case under review, *Karl Knauz Motors*, an ALJ held that the employer appropriately terminated its employee because his posts did not reflect concert. The employee had posted on Facebook critical comments and pictures related to a car wreck that took place at a nearby car dealership that the employer also owned. The car wreck involved another salesperson and a customer during a test drive. Under a photo of the accident, the salesman wrote: “This is your car: This is your car on drugs.” Another photo of the car submerged in a pond had the caption:

“This is what happens when a sales Person sitting in the front passenger seat (Former Sales Person, actually) allows a 13 year old boy to get behind the wheel of a 6000 lb. truck built and designed to pretty much drive over anything. The kid drives over his father’s foot and into the pond in all about 4 seconds and destroys a $50,000 truck. OOOPS!”

The complaint alleged that the employer fired the employee for different Facebook posts criticizing how his company had served cheap food to potential customers at a high-end car sales event, but the ALJ found that those particular postings did not spur the discharge. The employee removed those posts when asked to do so by management. The ALJ characterized the postings related to the sales event as concerted activity, because the salesman was expressing sentiments that coworkers had vocalized during a previous staff meeting, when employees complained that the cheap refreshments could affect sales. It remains to be seen whether the Board will agree with the ALJ.

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203. *Karl Knauz Motors*, NLRB Administrative Law Judge Decision, Case No. 13-CA-46452 (Sept. 28, 2011). This case is still open, currently pending a Board decision on the ALJ decision.

204. *Id.* at 12. At the time of the Acting General Counsel’s Social Media Memo in August, this case, filed May 20, 2011, had not been before the ALJ, and the General Counsel analyzed the issues based on the case-specific Advice Memo, which argued for protecting the employee’s Facebook postings related to the car wreck and a separate sales event. The ALJ disagreed with that advice. It remains to be seen whether the Board will agree with the ALJ.

205. *Id.* at 3.

206. *Id.* at 4.

207. *Id.*

208. *Id.*

209. *Id.* at 9.

210. *Id.* at 4.

211. *Id.* at 8. Under *Meyers II*, 281 N.L.R.B. 882, 887 (1986), concerted activities included individual activity when “individual employees seek to initiate or to induce or to prepare for group action, as well as individual employees bringing truly group complaints to the attention of management.” In *Owens-Corning Fiberglass Corp. v. NLRB*, 407 F.2d 1357, 1365 (4th Cir. 1969), the court stated that the “activity of a single employee in enlisting the
policy pertaining to social media to be overbroad and ordered that it make changes, in line with recommendations described in Section III.E, infra. Karl Knauz Motors highlights the importance of establishing concert. Because the car wreck postings, unlike the sales event postings, did not build on group sentiment or push for something specific that a group of employees would likely endorse, the ALJ found no reason to protect the posts under Section 7 of the NLRA.

Because of a similar finding in Arizona Daily Star, the General Counsel did not even suggest issuing a complaint; he found legal the employer's decision to fire its employee for tactless social media posts. First, a reporter employee posted on Twitter criticism of another news organization's television coverage. After the television station contacted the newspaper, the reporter apologized for his disparaging tweet, the term for a Twitter post. He then continued to tweet disrespectfully about homicides, even though the editors had told him in a formal meeting that he was prohibited from discussing the newspaper in any public forum. Over the course of several weeks, the employee tweeted:

*August 27—”You stay homicidal, Tucson. See Star Net for the bloody deets.”*
August 30—“What?!?!? No overnight homicide? WTF? You’re slacking Tucson.”

September 10—“Suggestion for new Tucson-area theme song: Droening [sic] pool’s ‘let the bodies hit the floor’.”

September 10—“I’d root for daily death if it always happened in close proximity to Gus Balon’s.”

September 10—“Hope everyone’s having a good Homicide Friday, as one Tucson police officer called it.”

The General Counsel did not find concert because the tweets did not relate to the terms and conditions of employment, and the employee did not attempt to involve other employees.220 Had he in his tweets, or prior to his tweets, asked colleagues whether they wanted to join him in making criticisms, and had the General Counsel found enough evidence of group sentiment, he may have had protection. To get coverage from the NLRA, he may have needed to more clearly criticize his employer, instead of making somewhat random observations and criticisms about his city. This case seems to have come out correctly in that Section 7 of the NLRA221 does not protect comments that harm an employer’s reputation and do not express a commonly felt workplace gripe.222

In Martin House, Inc., the NLRB’s Division of Advice in Washington opined that there was no protection for an employee who posted insensitively about the mental patients she oversaw.223 She made the posts while at work,224 so her employer had more leeway in setting limits on what she could express while on the job.225 The employee, a full-time recovery specialist working for Martin House, a nonprofit residential facility for

219. Id. at 3.
220. Id. at 6.
224. Id.
225. Id. at 2. This notion that employers can regulate work time more than leisure time is a principle of labor law. See, e.g., Republic Aviation Corp. v. NLRB, 324 U.S. 793, 803 (1945) (noting that “the Board has held that, while it was ‘within the province of an employer to promulgate and enforce a rule prohibiting union solicitation during working hours,’ it was ‘not within the province of an employer to promulgate and enforce a rule prohibiting union solicitation by an employee outside of working hours, although on company property,’ the latter restriction being deemed an unreasonable impediment to the exercise of the right to self-organization”).
homeless people, many of whom suffered from mental illness and substance abuse, wrote on her Facebook wall:

-Charging Party: Spooky is overnight, third floor, alone in a mental institution, btw I'm not a client, not yet anyway.

-Friend 1: Then who will you tell when you hear the voices?

-Charging Party: me, myself and I, one of us had to be right, either way we'll just pop meds until they go away! Ya baby!

-Charging Party: My dear client ms 1 is cracking up at my post, I don't know if shes laughing at me, with me or at her voices, not that it matters, good to laugh

-Friend 1: That's right but, if she gets out of hand, restrain her.

-Charging Party: I don't need to restrain anyone, we have a great rapport, im beginning to detect when people start to decompensate and she is the sweetest, most of our peeps are angels, just a couple got some issues, Im on guard don't worry bout a thing!

-Friend 2: I think you'd look cute in a straitjacket, heh heh heh.

The employee did not discuss her posts with colleagues, no colleagues responded, and no evidence existed of preparation for group action or a response to collective concerns. A Facebook friend of the employee, a former client of Martin House, reported the postings to Martin House. The termination letter cited a confidentiality breach and the fact that the posts were made at work, when the employee should have been working. Had the employee expressed legitimate complaints about her working environment, complaints that others shared, she may have had recourse. However, the details of the case led the NLRB Washington D.C. attorneys to correctly conclude that Section 7 did not provide protection.

The Division of Advice also recommended dismissal in Rural Metro for non-merit because an employee's posts did not ask for particular relief and did not clearly show concert. In this case, an employee medical transportation and fire protection dispatcher, whose husband was an Emergency Medical Technician, posted a comment on a senator's Facebook

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227. Id. at 3.
228. Id. at 2.
229. Id.
The senator had just announced that four Indiana fire departments had received grants. The employee’s post read:

My husband and I work for Rural Metro, me as a [redacted] and he as an [redacted]. Rural Metro has contracts w/ several fire departments to provide EMS. The reason they contract out to us? BECAUSE WE’RE THE CHEAPEST SERVICE IN TOWN! How do we manage that? BY PAYING OUR EMPLOYEES $2 LESS THAN THE NATIONAL AVERAGE! We both make less than $10 an hr. And he’s worked for them 3.5 yrs! . . . the fact that we’re employees of a cheap contract company instead of government employees hurts us. Maybe some of that grant money could be used toward hiring personnel to run the new equipment too. Unfortunately the state is going the other way and looking for more cheap companies to farm the jobs out to. Privatization hard at work . . .

And the 20 year old that died in township, he was a friend of mine’s family member. Rural Metro provides coverage for that area, but we only have 2 trucks for all of county and they’re stationed near Hospital nearly 15–20 minutes from township driving emergen[cy]. Furthermore one of our crews showed up on a scene of a cardiac arrest where the volunteer fire fighters/first responders didn’t even know how to perform CPR! I get that it only saves 1–2% of people, but we’ll never know in this case if it would have helped. It’s going to take a lot more grant money to fix all of the problems w/IN’s EMS.

Rural Metro discharged the employee based on the disparaging remarks she made about her employer, the fact that she shared confidential information, and her violation of the company’s Code of Ethics and Business Conduct policy. The Division of Advice found no possible concerted activity, claiming that the dispatcher did not talk about her posts with colleagues and that the post did not seek relief for employment circumstances.

Given that concerted activity includes “circumstances where individual employees seek to initiate or to induce or to prepare for group action” and where individual employees bring “truly group complaints” to management’s attention, it seems feasible that a judge could find concert based on this:

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231. Id.
232. Id.
233. Id. at 1–2.
234. Id. at 2.
235. Id. at 3.
employee’s post. In Rural Metro, as in JT’s Porch Saloon & Eatery, the Washington NLRB attorneys deemed the employee’s earlier related conversations—lamenting wages with colleagues—as separate from the post. This approach seems too limited; evidence of concert from earlier offline situations deserves more weight. Though the facts could cut either way, the NLRB agent may have failed to fully investigate the implications of the circumstances leading up to the post in Rural Metro.

The outcomes in the first three cases—Karl Knauz Motors, Arizona Daily Star, and Martin House—seem reasonable; however, the employee in Rural Metro may have deserved a chance to make her case. The next two cases under consideration more seriously call into question the NLRB’s current usage of the concerted activity standard.

3. Limitations of the Concerted Activity Standard

The narrowly applied concerted activity standard led to unfair outcomes in JT’s Porch Saloon & Eatery and Wal-Mart. In looking for proof of concerted activity, the NLRB attorneys and the General Counsel relied too much on actual online responses from Facebook friends, which were either lacking or phrased in a way that did not explicitly show concert. Most Facebook posts are by their nature directed toward a community. Unless an individual sets her privacy settings to be unusually restrictive, the individual who posts is “speaking” to a group of people. Whether or not colleagues reply to Facebook threads may depend mostly on the time of the

242. Compare Hispanics United of Buffalo, NLRB Administrative Law Judge Decision, Case No. 3-CA-27872 (Sept. 6, 2011) (finding protected activity when employee Facebook posts criticizing a colleague solicited feedback from fellow employees) with Wal-Mart, NLRB Adv. Mem., Case No. 17-CA-2503 (July 19, 2011) (finding no protection for an employee whose post complained about a manager but did not explicitly ask Facebook friends, many of whom were colleagues, whether or not they agreed with his position) and JT’s Porch Saloon & Eatery, NLRB Adv. Mem., Case No. 13-CA-46689 (July 7, 2011) (finding no protection for an employee whose previous, related offline conversation were deemed separate from his Facebook postings).
243. How to Post and Share, FACEBOOK HELP CENTER, https://www.facebook.com/help/sharing (explaining how to share status updates to make statements, in various forms, visible to Facebook friends or a designated community).
posting or other matters that seem too dependent on contingency for them to reasonably drive the outcome of the case. It is the intent of the “speaker” that should matter. For these reasons and others, social media posts merit a unique, tailored analysis.

In JT’s Porch Saloon & Eatery, the Division of Advice dismissed an employee’s charge that his firing violated Section 7 of the NLRA. The employee’s Facebook post complained about the restaurant and bar’s unwritten policy wherein waitresses kept all of a table’s tips, despite the serving help they received from bartenders. He also complained that his employer had not given him a raise in five years and called the restaurant’s customers “rednecks,” writing that he hoped they would choke on glass when they drove home drunk. None of his colleagues responded to his post. When the employee had earlier complained about the tipping policy offline, a fellow bartender agreed that it “sucked,” but they did not raise the issue with management. In other cases, including Karl Knauz Motors, the NLRB considered offline conversations in a sales meeting as proof of concert for those particular online posts.

So why did this offline conversation not help the employee here? The Advice Memo suggested that the employee’s previous offline conversation, during which he discussed the issue he later posted about with a colleague,

244. For example, whether or not someone responds to a Facebook post could have to do with whether or not she happened to check status updates close to the time her colleague posted, such that the update would appear in her feed. Alternatively, a decision to post could depend on whether a user logs in using a computer or a smartphone; some people find that it takes too long to type responses on smart phones and thus refrain from commenting on posts they would respond to were they at a computer. Additionally, whether or not someone responds could depend on her fear of legal or reputational repercussions. Were the colleagues engaging in an offline, private conversation, it is possible that a colleague would express support and even agree to complain to a manager, whereas that same colleague may worry that a public Facebook post endorsing a colleague’s post leaves her too exposed. Perhaps for some of the reasons discussed, the General Counsel has, in some instances, considered offline conversations relevant to an analysis of concert. When finding protection for posts related to an employee’s complaints about a work sales event, it mattered more that the individual intended to express a group lament than how Facebook friends happened to respond. See Karl Knauz Motors, NLRB Administrative Law Judge Decision, Case No. 13-CA-46452, 8 (Sept. 28, 2011).


246. Id.

247. Id. at 1–2.

248. Id. at 3.

249. Id. at 1.

was separate from his Facebook posts. This seems at odds with the approach in *Karl Knauz Motors*, where the ALJ considered the sales event posts protected because of earlier offline conversations. Here, the bartender’s post directly criticized the terms and conditions of his employment, and the employee had earlier commiserated about his complaints with a colleague offline.

Whereas the lack of concert seemed clear for the car wreck posts in *Karl Knauz Motors*, the random, offensive tweets in *Arizona Daily Star*, and the insensitive posts in *Martin House*, the outcome of *Wal-Mart*, like that of *JT’s Porch Saloon & Eatery*, seems less reasonable. The Division of Advice in *Wal-Mart* suggested dismissal of the case because it found that an employee’s posts represented a mere “gripe” and were not intended to induce group action. The *Wal-Mart* employee wrote: “Wuck Falmart! I swear if this tyranny doesn’t end in this store they are about to get a wakeup call because lots are about to quit!” Responses ensued:

[Employee 1]: bahaha like! :)

[Employee 2]: What the hell happens after four that gets u so wound up??? Lol

[Charging Party]: You have no clue [Employee 1] . . . [Assistant Manager] is being a super mega puta! Its retarded I get chewed out cuz we got people putting stuff in the wrong spot and then the customer wanting it for that price . . . that’s false advertisement if you don’t sell it for that price . . . I’m talking to [Store Manager] about this shit cuz if it don’t change Wal-Mart can kiss my royal white ass!

After a meeting with the Store Manager, who received a printout of the posts, the employee removed the thread. Most of the employee’s Facebook friends were colleagues, but this did not help because of the way he phrased his post and the words his friends used to respond. The employee claimed that two other coworkers posted comments of support; one of those

254. *Id.* at 1.
255. *Id.* at 1–2.
256. *Id.* at 2.
257. *Id.* at 1.
coworkers said that she made a “hang in there” sort of remark. Given that
the post in this case specifically addressed working conditions and that the
employee got support from Facebook friends who were colleagues, his
disciplining does not seem fair when compared with the other cases. This
Note contends that the case should have at least proceeded to an ALJ for a
more comprehensive review.

In some instances, the concerted activity standard gives employees more
protection than employees might imagine the concerted activity standard
would have. But in other cases, interpreting it rigidly in social networking
cases prevents it from providing protection in a uniform way, because trivial
factors could remove certain activity from the realm of protection. The
NLRB’s approach of using the existing concerted activity standard for social
media cases, without taking into account how social media is used, leads to
some problematic outcomes.

D. BAD FAITH AND OPPROBRIOUS CONDUCT

1. The Standard for Bad Faith and Opprobrious Conduct

Even where concerted activity exists, when the Board finds activity to be
in bad faith and opprobrious because of its nature or purpose, the activity
may not warrant protection under Section 7 of the NLRA. Opprobrium is
defined as “the disgrace or the reproach incurred by conduct considered
courageously shameful.” However, perhaps because the United States has
from the start been committed to supporting expression of diverse
viewpoints, the Board has not considered all offensive speech opprobrious.
In one case, the Board found that calling a supervisor a “liar
and a bitch” and a “fucking son of a bitch” was not so opprobrious as to
cost the employee the protection of the Act. In another case, when an
employee called a supervisor an “egotistical fuck,” the employee did not lose
Section 7 protection. Meanwhile, the Board has held that communication

258. Id. at 2.
259. Id. at 2.
261. U.S. CONST. amend. I (“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment
of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of
the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government
for a redress of grievances”).
262. See General Counsel 2011 Memorandum, supra note 9.
“so disloyal, reckless or maliciously untrue” can lose the Act’s protection and justify terminating an employee for cause. Case law suggests that findings of opprobrious conduct depend more on the nature, content, and veracity of the communication than on whether or not employees use epithets.

NLRB attorneys and judges use a test for opprobrious conduct that comes from the Supreme Court ruling in *Jefferson Broadcasting*. In that case, the Supreme Court remanded to a court of appeals with instructions to reinstate the Board’s decision that the employees’ activity did not merit Section 7 protection. The case involved striking television technicians. Their peaceful picketing turned into a series of “vitriolic attacks on the quality of the company’s television broadcasts” and then technicians distributed thousands of handbills at local businesses impugning the television station. The technicians distributed on the picket line, on the public square several blocks from the company’s premises, on buses, and in barber shops and restaurants. They mailed handbills to local business people. The handbills read:

Is Charlotte A Second-Class City?

You might think so from the kind of Television programs being presented by the Jefferson Standard Broadcasting Co. over WBTV. Have you seen one of their television programs lately? Did you know that all the programs presented over WBTV are on film and may be from one day to five years old. There are no local programs presented by WBTV. You cannot receive the local baseball games, football games or other local events because WBTV does not have the proper equipment to make these pickups. Cities like New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Washington receive such programs nightly. Why doesn’t the Jefferson Standard Broadcasting Company purchase the needed equipment to bring you the same type of programs enjoyed by other leading American cities? Could it be

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266. *Id.*; *see* *Stanford Hotel*, 344 N.L.R.B. 558, 564 (2005); *Alcoa*, 352 N.L.R.B. 1222, 1226 (2008).


268. *Id.* at 477–78.

269. *Id.* at 464.

270. *Id.* at 468–71.

271. *Id.* at 468.

272. *Id.*
that they consider Charlotte a second-class community and only entitled to the pictures now being presented to them.273

Jefferson Standard fired the ten technicians who sponsored or distributed the handbills.274

The Court in Jefferson clarified the link between opprobrious conduct and disloyalty.275 If concerted activity is significantly disloyal, and therefore opprobrious, it loses protection.276 The technicians’ decision not to refer to the collective action activity in its handbills could have misled the handbill’s recipients and seemed to make the Court less willing to protect the activity based on concert.277 Indeed, the Court noted that the attack related itself to no labor practice of the company. It made no reference to wages, hours or working conditions. The policies attacked were those of finance and public relations for which management, not technicians, must be responsible. The attack asked for no public sympathy or support. It was a continuing attack, initiated while off duty, upon the very interests which the attackers were being paid to conserve and develop.278

The Jefferson Court employed a now commonly used test for determining when conduct by an employee reaches this threshold of disloyal opprobrium.279 It requires that the Board look at whether communication is (1) related to an ongoing labor dispute and (2) not so disloyal, reckless, or maliciously untrue to make it lose the Act’s protection.280 In Jefferson, the Court looked for additional evidence of disloyalty.281 It noted that the technicians distributed the handbills at a “critical time” in the company’s business and that the handbills reflected a “sharp, public, disparaging attack upon the quality of the company’s product and its business policies, in a manner reasonably calculated to harm the company’s reputation and reduce its income.”282 A finding of opprobrium requires consideration of context because disloyalty depends on the specifics surrounding the activity.

273. Id.
274. Id.
275. Id. at 472.
276. Id.
277. Id. at 468.
278. Id. at 476.
279. Id. at 477–78.
280. Id.
281. See id.
282. Id. at 464.
Building upon the Jefferson standard, a quarter century later the Board articulated more factors to consider before finding opprobrium. In Atlantic Steel, the Board agreed with an arbiter’s initial finding that an employer lawfully discharged a foreman for inappropriate conduct, which included poor work performance and cursing. Upholding precedent, the Board decided that even concerted activity loses protection if it is deemed opprobrious. Adjudicators must balance the following factors: (1) the place of the discussion; (2) the subject matter of the discussion; (3) the nature of the employee’s outburst; and (4) whether the outburst was, in any way, provoked by an employer’s unfair labor practice. The Acting General Counsel’s Social Media Memo includes various mentions of the Atlantic Steel test, showing its continued importance in NLRB decision-making.

2. Cases Considering Opprobrious Conduct

In the three Memo cases in which the Division of Advice found concerted activity, it had to consider whether the social networking activity lost protection due to opprobrium. In all three of these cases, the NLRB attorneys found that the conduct did not lose protection and that the employers inappropriately punished the employees. None of the three cases showed sufficient disloyalty on the part of employees in proportions close to Jefferson disloyalty. Further, in all of the cases, the subject matter affected the terms and conditions of employment. In addition, employer practices, or practices by employees for whom the employer was responsible, provoked the posts—an Atlantic Steel factor that cuts in favor of a discharged employee.

In American Medical Response of Connecticut, a terminated employee accepted a settlement agreement that had the employer agreeing to change its rules so that it did not overly restrict employee conversations about working conditions. The employee of the emergency medical services provider

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284. Id. at 814.
287. Id.
288. See General Counsel 2011 Memorandum, supra note 9.
290. See id.
291. NLRB complaint based upon Facebook posts as ‘concerted activity’ is settled prior to hearing, EMPLOYMENT LAW MATTERS (Feb 8, 2011), http://www.employmentlawmatters.net/2011/
belonged to a union and had served the company for eleven years as a paramedic. She demanded union representation before filling out an incident report ordered by her boss; he had received a client complaint about her handling of a medical situation. When the boss denied her request for union representation, she referred to him on Facebook as a “17” (AMR code for psychiatric patient), “dick,” and “scumbag.” Despite her harsh language, however, the case’s Advice Memo stated that the opprobrium standard does not necessarily forbid distasteful speech.

The Advice Memo, which came out before the settlement, found that the employee engaged in protected activity that did not reach opprobrious proportions. It found that the employer violated Section 8(a)(1) of the Act by denying the employee a union representative and by threatening to discipline her for invoking her rights. The employer violated Section 8(a)(1) and (3) of the Act by firing her for engaging in such activity and violated Section 8(a)(1) of the Act by maintaining a blogging and Internet posting and standards-of-conduct policies that could chill Section 7 protected activity.

The NLRB attorneys used the Atlantic Steel factors to show that the employer erred in firing the employee. Under factor (1) of Atlantic Steel, the place of the posting gave her more protection because the employee posted outside the workplace and the posts did not interrupt the work of other employees. Under factor (2), subject matter, the posts dealt with supervisory action, which constitutes protected subject matter. As to factor (3), the nature of the outburst, no verbal or physical threats accompanied the name-calling, and the Board protects more egregious name-calling than was present here. Factor (4), whether the employer provoked the outburst,
favored the employee, who responded directly to an employer’s inappropriate threat. 302

American Medical Response of Connecticut proved significant because it spawned considerable press attention in marking the first case in which the General Counsel claimed that an employee’s Facebook posts should be protected. 303 A November 2010 New York Times article generated buzz about the case 304 and may have contributed to the considerable increase in the number of charges filed by employees fired for similar actions, as employees became aware that legal protections for social media posts existed. 305

Using similar reasoning as the NLRB attorneys used in American Medical Response of Connecticut, an ALJ, in Hispanics United of Buffalo, held that a nonprofit organization inappropriately discharged five employees for complaining on Facebook about working conditions. 306 The General Counsel’s year-end Memo called it a “textbook example of concerted activity” and found no opprobrium. 307 Anticipating a meeting with management, an employee named Mariana Cole-Rivera posted on her Facebook page about a coworker’s criticisms of Cole-Rivera’s work. 308 Other employees responded, defending Cole-Rivera and themselves against what they described as unfair criticism from their colleague. 309 Below is the contested Facebook thread:

Mariana Cole-Rivera: Lydia Cruz, a coworker feels that we don’t help our clients enough at HUB I about had it! My fellow coworkers how do u feel?
Damicela Rodriguez: What the f... Try doing my job I have 5 programs

Ludimar Rodriguez: What the Hell, we don’t have a life as is, What else can we do???

Yaritza (M Ntal) Campos: Tell her to come do [my] fucking job n c if I don’t do enough, this is just dum

Carlos Ortiz de Jesus: I think we should give our paychecks to our clients so they can “pay” the rent, also we can take them to their Dr’s appts, and served as translators (oh! We do that). Also we can clean their houses, we can go to DSS for them and we can run all their errands and they can spend their day in their house watching tv, and also we can go to do their grocery shop and organized the food in their house pantries . . . (insert sarcasm here now)

Mariana Cole-Rivera again: Lol. I know! I think it is difficult for someone that its not at HUB 24-7 to really grasp and understand what we do. . . I will give her that. Clients will complain especially when they ask for services we don’t provide, like washer, dryers stove and refrigerators, I’m proud to work at HUB and you are all my family and I see what you do and yes, some things may fall thru the cracks, but we are all human :) love ya guys

Nannette Dorrios, a member of the Board of Directors: Who is Lydia Cruz?

Yaritza Campos again: Luv ya too boo

Mariana Cole-Rivera: She’s from the dv program works at the FJC [Family Justice Center] at hub once a week.

Jessica Rivera, the Secretary to HUD Director Iglesias: Is it not overwhelming enough over there?

Lydia Cruz-Moore: Marianna stop with ur lies about me. I’ll b at HUB Tuesday..

Cole-Rivera: Lies? Ok. In any case Lydia, Magalie [Lomax, HUB’S Business Manager] is inviting us over to her house today after 6:00 pm and wanted to invite you but does not have your number i’ll inbox you her phone number if you wish.

Carlos Ortiz: Bueno el martes llevo el pop corn [Good, Tuesday, I’ll bring the popcorn].

310. Id.
Management, which the opinion suggests may have been keen on finding an excuse to reduce staff, termed the behavior online harassment against the other employee and used it to justify the firing of all five Facebook posters.311

Ultimately, the employees got their jobs back because the judge found concerted activity under the Meyers cases and no opprobrium.312 According to the General Counsel’s Memo, the activity was deemed concerted because:

The discussion was initiated by the one coworker in an appeal to her coworkers for assistance. Through Facebook, she surveyed her coworkers on the issue of job performance to prepare for an anticipated meeting with the Executive Director, planned at the suggestion of another employee. The resulting conversation among coworkers about job performance and staffing level issues was therefore concerted activity.313

The ALJ concluded that a single employee can be considered to be engaging in concerted activity if she is enlisting support from colleagues for mutual aid and protection with the goal of initiating or inducing group action.314 Had the employee in Wal-Mart315 used language that more explicitly suggested this motive, he may have received protection. The ALJ found for the employees despite finding that the employees were not necessarily trying to change their working conditions.316 Though attempts to change working conditions are more likely to be protected activity, other activity can also be protected, especially if it clearly calls for colleagues’ participation.317

Upon finding concert and no violation of the employer’s zero tolerance or discrimination policy, the ALJ applied the Atlantic Steel factors to show that the employees did not lose protection based on opprobrious conduct.318 With regard to factor (1), place, the Facebook posts were not made at work and were not made during working hours.319 As to (2), the subject matter, the Facebook posts had to do with a coworker’s criticisms of employee job

311. Id. at 10.
312. Id. at 7, 9, 10.
313. General Counsel 2011 Memorandum, supra note 9, at 4.
314. Hispanics United of Buffalo, NLRB Administrative Law Judge Decision, Case No. 3-CA-27872, 7 (Sept. 6, 2011); see NLRB v. Mushroom Transportation Co., 330 F.2d 683, 685 (3d Cir. 1964) (noting that “the object of inducing group action need not be express”); Whittaker Corp., 289 N.L.R.B. 933 (1988).
316. Hispanics United of Buffalo, NLRB Administrative Law Judge Decision, Case No. 3-CA-27872, 8 (Sept. 6, 2011);
317. Id.
318. Id. at 9.
319. Id.
performance, which the employees had a protected right to discuss.\(^{320}\) As to factor (3), there were no “outbursts” against the nonprofit and several posts did not even mention Cruz-Moore, the coworker who criticized Cole-Rivera’s work; none of the employees criticized the employer in their posts.\(^{321}\) With regard to factor (4), the ALJ found irrelevant the fact that the employer did not provoke the Facebook comments.\(^{322}\) Hispanics United of Buffalo provides an example against which to measure JT’s Porch Saloon & Eatery and Wal-Mart and highlights inconsistencies as to how the General Counsel analyzes social media posts.

In Triple Play Sports Bar & Grille, an ALJ found protected concerted activity with no opprobrious conduct.\(^{323}\) After several of the employer’s former and current employees discovered that they owed additional state income taxes related to the employer’s earnings, the employer arranged a staff meeting with the accountant and payroll company to discuss concerns.\(^{324}\) A former employee subsequently posted on her Facebook page a comment expressing dissatisfaction with the fact that she owed more money.\(^{325}\) Her wall post and the responses it generated read as follows:

LaFrance (former employee): Maybe someone should do the owners of Triple Play a favor and buy it from them. They can’t even do the tax paperwork correctly!!! Now I OWE money . . . Wtf!!!!!

Ken DeSantis (customer): You owe them money . . . that’s fucked up.

Danielle Marie Parent (employee): I FUCKING OWE MONEY TOO!

LaFrance: The state. Not Triple Play. I would never give that place a penny of my money. Ralph fucked up the paperwork . . . as per usual.

De Santis: Yeah I really don’t go to that place anymore.

\(^{320}\) Id.
\(^{321}\) Id.
\(^{322}\) Id.
\(^{323}\) Triple Play Sports Bar & Grille, NLRB Administrative Law Judge Decision, Case No. 34-CA-12915, 22 (Jan. 3, 2012). Currently pending whether Board will grant review. At the time of the General Counsel’s year-end Memo, the ALJ had not issued a decision. No case-specific Advice Memo was available at the time of this Note’s writing.
\(^{324}\) Id. at 3.
\(^{325}\) Id.
LaFrance: It’s all Ralph’s fault. He didn’t do the paperwork right. I’m calling the labor board to look into it because he still owes me about 2000 in paychecks.

LaFrance: We shouldn’t have to pay it. It’s every employee there that it’s happening to.

DeSantis: You better get that money . . . that’s bullshit if that’s the case I’m sure he did it to other people too.

Parent: Let me know what the board says because I owe $323 and I’ve never owed.

LaFrance: I’m already getting my 2000 after writing to the labor board and them [sic] investigating but now I find out he fucked up my taxes and I owe the state a bunch. Grrr.

Parent: I mentioned it to him and he said that we should want to owe.

LaFrance: Hahahaha he’s such a shady little man. He probably pocketed it all from all our paychecks. I’ve never owed a penny in my life till I worked for him. That [sic] goodness I got outta there.

Sanzone: I owe too. Such an asshole.

Parent: Yeah me neither, I told him we will be discussing it at the meeting.

Sarah Baumbach (employee): I have never had to owe money at any jobs . . . I hope I won’t have to at TP . . . probably will have to seeing as everyone else does!

LaFrance: Well discuss good because I won’t be there to hear it. And let me know what his excuse is.

Jonathan Feeley (customer): And they’re way too expensive.326

According to the ALJ, the comments were protected under Section 7, in part because the discussion was part of a “sequences of events” that included face-to-face conversations lamenting the tax problems.327

In finding that the employer violated Section 8, the ALJ cited precedent stating that concerted activity “encompasses those circumstances where individual employees seek to initiate or to induce or to prepare for group action.”328 Applying Atlantic Steel, the ALJ found that the employees’
concerted activity did not lose protection for opprobrium.\textsuperscript{329} The place of the comments, under factor (1), did not interfere with the workplace because the employees commented outside the workplace during nonworking time so did not disrupt the work environment.\textsuperscript{330} The subject, under factor (2), had to do with a core concern that Section 7 protected.\textsuperscript{331} Under factor (3), the outbursts did not include offensive language worthy of removing protection and did not include “threats, insubordination, or physically intimidating conduct.”\textsuperscript{332} The ALJ found that it did not matter that comments were not provoked, under factor (4), by unlawful tax practices on the part of the employer.\textsuperscript{333} The employer alleged defamation, but that failed because the comments were not made with a “malicious motive.”\textsuperscript{334} Had the comments been less clearly supportive of the original post, it is possible that this case could have come out like JT’s Porch Saloon & Eatery\textsuperscript{335} and Wal-Mart.\textsuperscript{336} Fortunately for the employees, however, they used language that made concert clear.

In American Medical Response of Connecticut,\textsuperscript{337} Hispanics United of Buffalo,\textsuperscript{338} and Triple Play Sports Bar & Grille,\textsuperscript{339} applying the Atlantic Steel test to the facts of each case enabled the employees to get the protections that concerted activity provided.\textsuperscript{340} As the Jefferson standard shows, opprobrious conduct includes evidence of malice and disloyalty, but the NLRB attorneys did not find such behavior in the three concerted activity cases considered in the Social Media Memo.\textsuperscript{341} Thus, the employees in those cases prevailed.\textsuperscript{342}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{330} Id. at 10.
\textsuperscript{331} Id. at 10–11.
\textsuperscript{332} Id. at 11.
\textsuperscript{333} Id. at 14.
\textsuperscript{334} Id. at 11.
\textsuperscript{335} JT’s Porch Saloon & Eatery, NLRB Adv. Mem., Case No. 13-CA-46689 (July 7, 2011).
\textsuperscript{336} Wal-Mart, NLRB Adv. Mem, Case No. 17-CA-25030 (July 19, 2011).
\textsuperscript{338} Hispanics United of Buffalo, NLRB Administrative Law Judge Decision, Case No. 3-CA-27872 (Sept. 6, 2011).
\textsuperscript{339} Triple Play Sports Bar and Grille, NLRB Administrative Law Judge Decision, Case No. 34-CA-12915 (Jan. 3, 2012).
\textsuperscript{340} See General Counsel 2011 Memorandum, supra note 9.
\textsuperscript{341} See id.
\textsuperscript{342} See id.
\end{flushleft}
E. LEGALITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA POLICIES

If Field Examiners, the Division of Advice attorneys, the General Counsel, the ALJ, and the Board would acknowledge the unique ways in which people engage with social networking, both employers and employees would benefit from more predictable rulings that could also enable employers to write better social media policies. These policies should go beyond merely quoting the NLRA and should have examples that employees can understand, such that they can reasonably interpret the limitations described. The policies should spell out, for example, that people can be critical and talk to fellow employees about confidential information and wages offline and online. Employers have some flexibility as to what they want to permit, but they must not forbid activities that are protected by the NLRA.

1. The Standards for Evaluating Employers’ Social Media Policies

In determining the outcome of cases involving social media, the General Counsel strives to ensure that employers do not have inappropriately restrictive policies. In addition to looking at the Lafayette Park standard, which asks whether an employer’s “rules would reasonably tend to chill employees in the exercise of their Section 7 rights,”344 the General Counsel uses Lutheran Heritage.345 The standard that emerged from that case states that a rule is unlawful if it explicitly restricts Section 7 activities, or if it is shown that (1) employees would reasonably construe the language to prohibit Section 7 activity; (2) the rule was promulgated in response to union activity; or (3) the rule has been applied to restrict the exercise of Section 7 rights.346 The Lafayette Park and Lutheran Heritage standards together give employees additional protection.

2. Cases Considering Social Media Policies

Three of the cases analyzed in the General Counsel’s Social Media Memo focus on the legality of an employer’s social media policy. In all three, the General Counsel found overly broad policies. In Flagler Hospital, the NLRB attorneys advocated protecting an employee’s Facebook criticisms of a fellow nurse and finding the hospital’s social media policy too broad.347 Prior to the

343. Lafe Solomon Interview, supra note 73.
346. Id. at 647.
posting, several nurses had complained to the manager about their colleague’s frequent absences. The post, written several days after the nurse had again called in sick, discussed the nurse’s “history” of absences, which “totally disrupted” and “really screwed” the operating room. The policy, which the Memo found violated Section 8(a)(1) by potentially chilling Section 7 protected activity, included the following provisions:

4. No ‘tweet,’ blog or social networking page or site may in any way violate, compromise, or disregard the privacy or confidentiality rights or privileges of any Hospital patient; the confidentiality or protections granted or provided to personal health information or other protected information or data; or rights and reasonable expectations as to privacy or confidentiality of any person or entity.

5. Any communication or post which constitutes embarrassment, harassment or defamation of the Hospital or of any Hospital employee, officer, board member, representative or staff member, including members of the medical staff, is strictly prohibited.

6. Any conduct, behavior or form of expression which, under the law, is or may be impermissible if expressed in another form or forum is likewise impermissible if expressed through any social networking media, blog or social networking site or page. This includes any statements which lack or are reckless as to truthfulness or which might cause damage to or does damage the reputation or goodwill of the Hospital, its staff or employees in the community or otherwise.

The NLRB attorneys found the policy unlawful under the second part of the *Lutheran Heritage* test—which prohibits promulgating a rule in response to union activity. The policy did not contain guidance as to what the employer meant by “private” and could lead employees to believe that they could not discuss wages or other legally permissible topics.

Further, the General Counsel explicitly criticized the inclusion in the Flagler Hospital policy of a deceptive “savings clause” in Rule 6, which used the phrase “under the law” to avoid liability. Citing *McDonnell Douglas Corp.*, 

348. *Id.* at 2.
349. *Id.*
350. *Id.* at 1.
351. *Id.* at 1–2.
352. *Id.* at 3.
355. *Id.* at 5.
the General Counsel explained the rationale for criticizing such clauses: “[I]t can reasonably be foreseen that employees would not know what conduct is protected by the National Labor Relations Act and, rather than take the trouble to get reliable information on the subject, would elect to refrain from engaging in conduct that is in fact protected by the Act.”356 The NLRB does not look highly upon savings clauses intended to prevent employees from questioning unlawful policies.357

Similarly, in Parks & Sons of Sun City, the General Counsel viewed the employer’s social media policy as overly broad.358 The policy forbade employees from discussing company business online and from posting content that they would not show their supervisors or that could be deemed inappropriate.359 It went so far as to prohibit employees from using the company name or other identifying information on personal profile pages.360 Here, too, the NLRB relied on the Lutheran Heritage factors in finding that the policy could reasonably be construed to prohibit Section 7 protected behavior, such as discussing wages or other terms and conditions of employment and that the employer provided no rationale for prohibiting listing the company name on a persona’s social networking profile page.361 Some sort of rationale related to confidentiality and safety seems reasonable, but absent that, employees should have a right to display their employer’s name.

In Giant Eagle Inc., the regional office attorneys found two parts of a supermarket chain’s social media policy too broad.362 The Advice Memo accepted the first of three parts under review but not the remaining parts.363 The sections at issue included:

3. No Team Member is required to participate in any social media or social networking site (unless required as a part of the job), and no Team Member should ever be pressured to ‘friend,’ ‘connect,’

356. Id. (citing McDonnell Douglas Corp., 240 N.L.R.B. 794, 802 (1979)).
358. General Counsel 2011 Memorandum, supra note 9, at 20-1. The General Counsel’s Memo does not include the name of the case, but through conversations with NLRB staff, the author was able to find the name of the case: Parks & Sons of Sun City, Inc., Case No. 28-CA-23350 (filed Jan. 28, 2011), no documents available due to open status of case and the protocol/decision of NLRB personnel.
359. Id. at 21.
360. Id.
361. Id.
363. Id.
or otherwise communicate with another Team Member via a social media outlet.

5. Team Members may not reference (including through use of photographs), cite, or reveal personal information regarding fellow Team Members, company clients, partners, or customers without their express consent.

6. Use of Company logos, photographs of any Company store, brand, or product, or use of any other intellectual property is not permitted without written proper authorization from the Company.

The General Counsel agreed that the rule against pressuring was sufficiently narrowly tailored in its attempts to prevent harassment. However, the rule against revealing personal information could squelch discussion of wages, and the rule against using company logos or photographs could unlawfully prohibit posting pictures of peaceful union organizing or other work protests.

This Note commends the NLRB attorneys and the General Counsel for pushing employers to draft more specific social media policies. Going forward, the more precise the General Counsel can be about what does not pass muster and why, the more likely employers will have the ability to comply. The General Counsel has more steps to take in order to communicate the limits of protection with greater clarity. The Lafayette Park standard, prohibiting policies with a tendency to “chill employees in the exercise of their Section 7 rights,” provides a useful floor for scrutiny. The Lutheran Heritage standard, which adds steps to the inquiry, looking at the origin of the policy and its actual application, can further guide employers. The Board should encourage employers to draft model guidelines for employees. Since these can help employers avoid lawsuits, employers have an interest in directing resources and consideration towards such efforts.

364. Id. at 2.
365. Id. at 3.
366. Id. at 3–4.
IV. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING SOCIAL MEDIA CASES

Whether through future rulemaking or through new approaches to social media cases, NLRB attorneys, the General Counsel, ALJs, and the Board should adopt an approach that is flexible enough to adequately address social media cases instead of operating under the false assumption that online activity mirrors offline activity. Further, the General Counsel should provide guidelines and a range of sample social media policies—targeted at various types of businesses—to assist employers. The General Counsel should directly address the issue of whether Facebook friends’ responses, and the subtleties in diction of a particular post, should actually be the basis for determining protection.

Because employees often do not know that they have rights under the NLRA, the NLRB’s recent decision to require employers to post NLRA rights marks a step in the right direction. Next, the NLRB must confront the challenge of seeing this policy through and making sure the notice actually reaches employees. Employers could avoid costs associated with complaints and litigation by crafting specific social media policies that are not too limiting, and the NLRB should make templates readily available. As rules become further delineated, employees will be more likely to comply and also to accept discharges when the law permits them. But policies alone are generally not sufficient. Workplace training would likely help.

To avoid misleading employees, some scholars suggest that employers should add the following language to their policies: “Nothing in this policy should be interpreted to prevent, interfere with, or otherwise restrain an individual’s legitimate exercise of his or her Section 7 activities under the National Labor Relations Act.”


370. Employee Rights Notice Posting, supra note 17 (“[T]he notice should be posted in a conspicuous place, where other notifications of workplace rights and employer rules and policies are posted. Employers also should publish a link to the notice on an internal or external website if other personnel policies or workplace notices are posted there.”); Press Release, American Rights at Work, Statement on Rule to Improve Awareness of NLRA Workplace Rights (Aug. 25, 2011), available at http://www.americanrightsatwork.org/press-center/2011-press-releases/statement-on-rule-to-improve-awareness-of-nlra-workplace-rights-20110825-1036-416.html (mentioning that American Rights at Work Executive Director Kimberly Freeman Brown issued a statement including the following endorsement: “This rule is a step in the right direction toward giving more men and women a fair vote in the workplace to help rebalance our economy, and rebuild the middle class”).

employer from possible claims that its policy is overbroad. But as the General Counsel articulated in *Flagler Hospital*, a savings clause alone cannot shield an employer from liability. Further, the law should do more than encourage litigation avoidance. That clause should be accompanied by a clear explanation of the NLRA, with examples of its common applications, tailored to the particular workplace. That will make it much more useful to employees.

Of the cases considered in this Note, *JT’s Porch Saloon  Eatery* and *Wal-Mart* are the most troubling because employee posts that appear just as concerted as protected posts in other cases did not receive protection—mostly because of the NLRB’s unwillingness to consider the realities of social networking. In *JT’s Porch Saloon  Eatery*, the employee had discussed his discontent with terms and conditions of work prior to posting his Facebook grievance. If he had more colleagues as Facebook friends, it is possible that somebody would have responded and agreed with him. And had he been more explicit about asking others to join him, he may have fared better. Considering reasoning employed in the other cases, it is likely that NLRB attorneys or an ALJ could have found concert in this situation. It seems unjust that this sort of contingency is the *sine qua non* of whether or not behavior is deemed protected.

Clarifying what types of posts will give the employee protection could enable employees to act more strategically. For example, in the offline world, the Board overruled an ALJ decision in a case in which nurses called a hotline to complain about the high temperature of a nursing home and how it affected patients. The Board ruled that because the nurses only mentioned the well-being of patients in their phone call—not their own well-being—this did not constitute a complaint about the terms and conditions of employment and therefore did not merit Section 7 protection. Had the nurses instead stated that they were worried about their patients’ health and their own health, it is likely that they would have been able to keep their jobs. This example illustrates how, with more information, employees could tailor their gripes in a way that would give them legal recourse.

375.  *Id.* at 645.
376.  *See id.*
On the flip side, in the social media context, there may be a downside to giving employees too much information. Perhaps one could imagine that if an employee knows that her Facebook post will be permissible if it encourages group action, she will carefully craft a gripe that disparages the employer considerably, without going so far as to be considered opprobrious. If she adds a line asking for her colleagues to support her in complaining about a manager, whom she has harshly criticized, she may find that she is protected. The employee in Wal-Mart, had he known more about the NLRA, probably could have done this and kept his job. But do we as a society want to encourage these sorts of workarounds? Would this dilute the concerted activity standard, rendering it easily manipulated?

In Wal-Mart, a case in which the employee did have Facebook friend colleagues responding to his post, the nature of the responses—specifically, the wording used—informed the outcome of the case. Given how casually people engage on Facebook, this result also seems arbitrary. Had a colleague written something in a different way, showing just a touch more “concert,” Section 7 of the NLRA may have protected this employee’s postings. Fact patterns matter and should determine how law gets applied, online and offline. But the slight variations in facts in the above cases should not lead to such different outcomes. Because the NLRB attorneys had to comply with the strict Meyers standard and did not take into account the unique characteristics of Facebook, these holdings inappropriately punished employees. In an age of at-will employment and decreasing unionization, when an employee loses her job, she may find herself unable to find another one quickly.

Accordingly, the General Counsel should rethink the NLRB’s approach to social networking cases in order to create fairness and standardization. A just society demands at least that much.

378. Id. at 3 (“[T]he Charging Party’s Facebook postings were an expression of an individual gripe. They contain no language suggesting the Charging Party sought to initiate or induce coworkers to engage in group action; rather they express only his frustration regarding his individual dispute with the Assistant Manager over mispriced or misplaced sale items. Moreover, none of the coworkers’ Facebook responses indicate that they otherwise interpreted the Charging Party’s postings.”).
379. The standard analysis employed by the NLRB now does not seem to take into account norms surrounding social media. One of the few scholars to look at the recent social media cases before the NLRB concluded that social networking does not change the analysis at all. Sprague, supra note 39 (noting that “the fact that employees are using Facebook and other social media tools to discuss work does not alter the basic analysis of what does and does not constitute protected concerted activity”).
V. CONCLUSION

Many employees are not aware that the NLRA gives them important rights that extend to social networking posts.\(^\text{380}\) It allows them to complain, so long as their complaints are of a certain nature and do not violate other laws.\(^\text{381}\) Knowing the details of these rights can help employees keep their jobs. Ideally, employees would think before they post, but the nature of social networking and the casual way in which many people utilize it suggest that future cases will continue to push the limits of protected online activity. If we accept that younger generations, who are growing up with pervasive technology, are particularly accustomed to digitally sharing many aspects of their lives,\(^\text{382}\) then it seems appropriate for the General Counsel and the Board to develop standards that can provide guidance for current and future generations. Employees should push their employers to craft social media policies and should make sure to consult these policies. Employees should also consult their NLRA rights so that when they casually post, they have a sense, at least in the back of their minds, as to what sort of behavior is protected against an employer’s retaliation.

The Board, in turn, should push for successful implementation of the newly mandated notification system\(^\text{383}\) through which employers must inform employees of their NLRA rights. Meanwhile, the General Counsel should allow NLRB attorneys more leeway in interpreting when online speech is protected on social networks. Precedent based on standards of concerted activity and opprobrious behavior serve in some cases, but in others, the attorneys should display more agility in considering the context of social networking posts. If the aim is to offer timely guidance and rulings, the

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382. See John Palfrey, Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives 1–2 (2010) (“You see [Digital Natives] everywhere. . . . They were all born after 1980, when social digital technologies, such as Usenet and bulletin board systems, came online. They all have access to networked digital technologies. . . . Major aspects of their lives—social interactions, friendships, civic activities—are mediated by digital technologies. And they’ve never known any other way of life.”).

383. Employee Rights Notice Posting, supra note 17 (noting that the date the notice requirement goes into effect was postponed to April 30, 2012).
General Counsel must develop a more technologically cognizant approach to social networking cases.