Spring 2019

Look Out, Not Up: Union Survival in the Wake of Janus vs. AFSCME

Cooper T. Slack
Bard College, cs5065@bard.edu

Recommended Citation

Look Out, Not Up:

Union Survival in the Wake of *Janus vs. AFSCME*

Senior Project Submitted to

The Division of Social Studies

of Bard College

by

Cooper Slack

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2019

Acknowledgements

I want to dedicate this project to a few of the countless people who helped me to bring it into being.

Firstly, to my mother, father, and brother, who have always encouraged me to be curious and to challenge my own ideas when they were not there to do so. Without their constant love and support, I would never have been able to stay grounded through this process.

To Duff Morton, my advisor, who constantly pushed my thinking to new levels without ever forgetting just to ask me how I was doing. You are brilliant and wonderfully articulate, but more importantly, you are unwaveringly kind and an amazing listener. I truly could not ask for a more inspiring mentor.

To my other anthropology professors, Yuka Suzuki, Laura Kunreuther, Michele Dominy, and Christopher Lindner. Thank you all for the generous support, wisdom, and constructive criticism that you imparted to me. This project would look very different if I had not taken classes with each of you.

To my professors in other departments, Christian Crouch, Maria Sonevytsky, Whitney Slaten, and Michael Sadowski. In different ways, you all contributed substantially to my development as a student. Thank you all for helping me to look more closely.

I want to specifically thank Ann Seaton, who decided to assign Michel Rolph Trouillot's essay, "Anthropology and the Savage Slot," during First Year Seminar. If she hadn't, I might never have been exposed to anthropology in the first place.

To Erica Lindsay, who has always helped me see the bigger picture.

To Steve Pinchbeck, who taught me my first lessons in union solidarity. I want to thank you and all Bard workers for keeping this school from quite literally falling to pieces.

To Finn Erin, and Lily, who helped me think through and revise this work. Your feedback was both generous and generative.

To Deldar, who has been my dear friend since the first anthropology class we took together. Your brilliance, support, humor, and honesty got me through this program, especially during these last few weeks of writing.

To Momtom and Dudeski, for providing a home away from home and many delicious meals. I am grateful beyond words for your persistent kindness, hospitality, and wisdom.

To Franklin, Preston, and Justin, for keeping our house from falling apart and supporting me when I needed it most.

To Mac, Eric, Maeve, and Bel. In different ways, you have all taught me about friendship and intimacy. I could not have written this without you all.

To my friends back home, Noah, Chris, Rachel, Sander, Evan, Ben, Mike, Scott, and Jesse. I still don't understand how we relate so immediately after all of this time.

Lastly and most importantly, I want to express my sincere thanks to all those who I worked with at the union. While I will not reveal any of your names here, I want you all to know how grateful I am that you agreed to participate in this research and more importantly, that you welcomed me into your lives with open arms. I hope that you enjoy reading this project and apologize in advance for any inaccuracies within the stories I tell. I accept full responsibility for such distortions but want you all to know that I wrote this project in solidarity with your tireless dedication to the union. Thinking of you all inspired me to write when I thought that I could go no further.

Table of Contents

Introduction: A Janus Faced Crisis

Less than a month into my fieldwork, I was invited to attend a meeting at the union office. I would later remember this meeting as the latter of two major turning points for this project, but at the time, I assumed that it would entail another relatively banal encounter with union staff in the context of their everyday work. As I drove down to the office, I mentally prepared myself to look and listen for subtext, unspoken habits, and latent power relations. I had no idea that when I arrived, I would encounter a crisis that did not need these kinds of attention to be made visible. For my interlocutors, it was all too real. Whether being discussed in private conversations or projected onto a wall for the whole staff to see, this crisis would maintain a hypervisible yet amorphous presence for the remainder of my fieldwork.

The first turning point of my fieldwork was in fact inextricably linked with the second. It had occurred less than a week earlier when the Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Janus vs. AFSCME* (The American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees) that public sector unions could not collect agency fees from their members who did not consent to participation in the union. In direct alignment with the rhetoric of "right to work" legislation that had long undermined unionization in a number of states, the court's decision overturned decades of precedent within federal law that unions could legally collect some form of compensation from all workers with whom they negotiate contracts. While agency fee payers typically represented a very small percentage of workers in public sector union workplaces, the primary anxiety for union leaders, staff members, and advocates in the wake of *Janus* was that when presented with the option to get union representation for free, increasing numbers of workers would opt out of paying union dues. While it did not necessarily prevent the collection of union

dues, *Janus* represented a potentially catastrophic path to financial instability and eventual dissolution for unions like Local 2020.

When I drove down to the union office for a union reps meeting five days after the decision, I expected that the meeting would center on efforts to plan a strategic response to *Janus*. I arrived at the office about fifteen minutes early and began talking to various reps who were mingling around their cubicles and introducing myself to those that I had not yet met. No one from the organizing staff was present. As 10:30 approached, we gradually filed into the smaller of two conference rooms and sat around its oblong table. Glancing around the room, I noticed two framed documents hanging on the walls opposite one another. The first was a charter from the AFL-CIO written in an arcane font, which recognized Local 2020 as a legitimate union. The second was another charter from the Service Employees International Union, written in a sleek, modern font and including its characteristic logo evoking motion and change. (Figure 1)

After a minute or two more of mingling, Sarah and Fred walked in and closed the door behind them. Sarah had been elected president of Local 2020 two months prior, and Fred was her chosen chief of staff and interim organizing director. Fred formally initiated the meeting by stating a plan to reconfigure the chapter assignments of each individual rep. If this plan came to fruition, their jobs would become more precisely specialized based on geographical convenience and the professions of their members. After this unusually brief discussion, he handed the meeting over to Sarah. She took a long pause before speaking, during which the tone of the meeting took a dramatic turn. She began straightforwardly: "So I got a call from the International." Such a call was a significant event by default. Situated at highest level of decision making within the SEIU, the International rarely made direct contact with the Local. Already I

(Figure I.1)

could hear that voicing this information was an emotionally intensive but critical task for her. For the remainder of the meeting, she fought to hold back her tears.

She went on to relay the specifics of that call, in which the International announced its plan to hold a jurisdictional hearing for Local 2020. As soon as she said "jurisdictional hearing," some reps leaned in towards her while others leaned back. Other than myself, everybody present felt those words viscerally; they marked that we were now in the midst of a crisis even more urgent than that presented by *Janus*. To an outsider they connoted obscure bureaucratic negotiations, and while this may well have been true at the Level of the International, for Local staff members they connoted instead a total upending of their working lives. For them, a "jurisdictional hearing" posed the near immediate threat of the Local's total dissolution. There was little uncertainty among all those present in the meeting that if the hearing happened, Local 2020 as a democratically organized institution would cease to exist, and its membership would be distributed among other SEIU Locals in the area. For all those present, the stakes of their collective response to this threat were enormous; most of them would lose their jobs if they did not take immediate, dramatic action.

Fully aware of these stakes, Sarah was firm in her stance: "I need to be transparent with you all….I'm gonna fight this." As difficult as this conversation was, it was vitally important that

she communicate this information to reps so that they all might begin coordinating a plan of response. She emphasized the fact that this decision was completely undemocratic, juxtaposing it with her own understanding of the union: "I always thought we were an organization that went from the bottom up." Fred would later touch on the undemocratic nature of this threat, stating forcefully and even angrily that "It has nothing to do with the members' interests." However, it was not necessarily clear at the time what our collective response might entail, in part because the International had not communicated anything to Sarah in writing. To her and all those present in this meeting, the threat of a "hearing" did not signify any particular rationale but instead emerged as a spectral, looming threat.

Still, the reps all understood implicitly that this threat did not emerge out of nowhere. For them, the jurisdictional hearing represented an attempt by the International to cut corners financially in expectation of the loss of agency fee payments. We can then best understand the chain of signs that Sarah extended in this meeting as originating not simply from the International but from the crisis of the *Janus* decision itself. As a relatively small union comprised mainly of chapters with less than fifty members, Local 2020 was a seemingly easy and reasonable target. The primary resolution of this meeting and of the remaining months of my time with the Local was to prove the International wrong, to show that we would not disappear without a fight. Despite Fred's acknowledgement that "We're not in a good spot...They'll carve us up," he identified one major advantage we did have: "They don't know who we are." While his use of "they" clearly referred to the International, I was not entirely sure what he meant by "we." Did "we" refer Local 2020 staff members and elected officials or to those groups in addition to the rank and file?

This confusion was heightened later in the meeting when one rep, Steve, asked a deceptively simple question. He began with a qualification: "This is a stupid question." Fred responded curtly, "Then don't ask it," but Sarah instead announced warmly that "there are no stupid questions." After a few chuckles had dispersed throughout the room, Steve asked: "When and how do we tell our members?" A brief, charged silence followed before Fred answered: "Not yet." He later elaborated that discretion was key in this moment because "everyone knows everyone." If staff members were not cautious in how they released this information to their members, they would risk losing it forever to the flows of rumor and gossip. Given that any and all union members could now opt out of paying union dues, the notion that Local 2020 might not have a future to pay for was particularly dangerous.

By attempting to control the flow of this information, Fred effectively cut off the chain of signs which communicated the Local's existential crisis at an institutional boundary separating Local 2020's professional staff from its rank and file members. Reps in particular became strategically situated as the bearers of relationship with those members and the gatekeepers of information that needed to be contained. Despite the understandable anxiety regarding the potential for an uninhibited flow of this information and the possible distortions and erosions that might have resulted, the relationships of rank and file members were simultaneously spoken of as the Local's primary weapon against both the *Janus* decision and the jurisdictional hearing. Understanding that the jurisdictional hearing was planned as a part of the International's strategic response to that decision, Local 2020 leaders and staff intended to resist that response by any means necessary.

Oddly enough, the best way for them to do so was to effectively and visibly resist the dangers of *Janus* as they surfaced among their membership. This plan centered less on the efforts

of staff members than on those of rank and file members themselves. As we discussed exactly how to proceed in the coming days and weeks, Anita asked Fred about how to talk to members who had quit the union, often referred to as "free riders." Fred's response was less a clear answer than a reframing of the question itself: "That message has to come from their coworkers." In part because of the looming possibility of lawsuits claiming that free riders were being discriminated against by the union, Fred's recommendation was for reps to delegate the pressuring of "free riders" onto other rank and file members. These other members would ideally form what he described as a "wall of shame," effectively peer pressuring potential free riders into continuing to pay dues. He went on to describe this plan by using military language: "We're going to counterattack, and that's going to be led by the 1's on the frontline." For Fred, "1's" referred to the most committed and reliable union members, those who would not only continue to pay dues but would actively try to convince their coworkers to do the same. Within this strategy, rank and file members' awareness of both fronts of this crisis was pivotal, but not all members were assumed to be on the side of the union. Awareness therefore had to be cultivated carefully and selectively.

Instead of allowing this information to percolate through individual, cascading acts of telling between reps and members and later between members themselves, Sarah and Fred decided to hold a formal meeting with the Local's executive board (the governing body of elected union members). In this meeting, they would communicate the crisis to the board and develop a plan for relaying this information to the membership as a whole. Sarah in particular emphasized the importance of holding this meeting, asserting that "It's a face to face conversation." Technologically mediated communication would not suffice to begin developing a strategic plan of response to the International. Somewhat paradoxically, technological

mediation would later become a central component of that plan as Local 2020 staff members, elected leaders, and rank and file members attempted to represent the Local to the International as a cogent social and bureaucratic organization.

Crisis and Futurity

This is a narrative about a union, which I will hereby refer to as Local 2020, and the people who spent their days navigating its complex network of bureaucratic, democratic, and governmental relations. This network frequently assumed a vertical form through the stratified relationships of power between rank and file members and staff, between certain staff members and others, and between the Local and the International. As both a researcher and an intern, I spent the bulk of my time with staff members. While my work involved a number of projects of reaching out to rank and file members and speculations about what was happening at the level of the International, my position always returned to this community of staff members.

This is a narrative about the ways in which these both union members' and staff members' subjectivities became transduced along the nodes of these stratified relations. It asks how and why those subjectivities were rendered at times visible or audible, and at other times invisible or inaudible to those situated above those nodes. However, to focus solely on these stratified relations would risk reifying the existence of hierarchy and erasing other forms of relationality, horizontal or otherwise. These other forms occupied a central role in the Local's successful resistance to the jurisdictional hearing, and I am optimistic that they may contribute to a potential futurity for American labor unions.

This attention to futurity was not an afterthought of this project, an abstraction I selected to project onto the union. It was ever present in the lives of my interlocutors as a source of

anxiety, of fatigue, and at times of hope. Often that hope implicated memory as a means of reincarnating the past into the present and directing it towards a future reincarnation of the age of radical unionism in the first half of the twentieth century. Conversely, memory also emerged in moments when Local 2020's gnarled and problematic history were invoked. The juxtapositions between the union at present, its past, and its potential future were utilized constantly and variously in order to articulate the Local. As a result, most of this narrative's constitutive elements revolve around temporality in some form or another, whether in the contrastive understandings of time that inflected the labor of different staff departments or in the latency that resulted from the transduction of members' subjectivities into a form legible to the International. Without this attention to time and its many registers, I suspect that this narrative would be conspicuously lacking in depth and continuity.

On a methodological register, temporality emerged as a fundamental constraint on my research. I spent just over two months with Local 2020, far less than the conventional standards of anthropological research. While the last three decades of reflexive criticism within the anthropological community have thoroughly deconstructed traditional notions of anthropological research as objectively representing timeless and bounded "cultures," temporal specificity is of particular relevance to this story. As a result, I want to make clear that this text is not intended to be a totalizing narrative of Local 2020. It is necessarily partial, a cross-section of the Local defined on the one hand by my own social and occupational positionality within the union and on the other by the temporal moment of my fieldwork. While the temporal dimension of this cross-section is admittedly narrow, the brief span of time that I did spend immersed in the union happened to be a decisive moment in the determination of the Local's futurity.

When I first met Fred to discuss the possibility of me joining the Local in the dual capacity of intern and anthropologist, I would not have guessed that he would become Local 2020's chief of staff by the time I officially began my work a few months later. In fact, he seemed skeptical of the possibility that he would possess any job with the Local at that time. In part because of his open and vocal engagement with the upcoming election between the incumbent, John Castiglione, and challenger, Sarah Gonzales, Fred's future with the local had become inextricably linked to that election's outcome. Put simply, if Sarah, whom he adamantly and visibly backed, was able to emerge the victor, his position within the Local staff would remain stable at the very least. If John won, he would likely have been laid off and if not, probably would have voluntarily left the Local. In either case, my only tie to Local 2020 would have been instantly severed. Thankfully for Fred, myself, and for this project, this did not happen.

Instead, Sarah won the election on a progressive platform emphasizing an increased commitment to facilitating democratic participation for union members and an end to the overly businesslike mentality that John had espoused in his tenure as president. I never met John, but most staff members that I spoke to echoed this portrayal of him. One organizer went so far as to say that "There was no good quality about him….It was really difficult for anybody to, like, work effectively…. because the leadership was trash." Beyond this general sentiment relating to his undemocratic practices and lack of communication, many staff members expressed frustrations with his political and ideological positioning within the labor movement. Particularly for Local staff members who identified somewhere in the realm of leftist politics, the former president was discussed mainly as an obstacle to their efforts to help workers build their collective power.

Others objected to specific practical choices he made including the decision to move the Local 2020 office from a somewhat decrepit but endearing building in the city to a corporate office park located in a more suburban area. Most staff members were frustrated by the dramatic increase in their commute that this resulted in and the fact that the union office was now virtually inaccessible via public transportation. In part because I did not have consistent access to a car throughout the duration of my fieldwork, I was personally affected by this. Others echoed this sentiment but emphasized the equally important fact that the office was now less accessible to most union members themselves. When the subject of lackluster executive board meeting attendance came up in an all staff meeting, one rep responded: "It's just coming here. I don't think any of us like coming here, so why would the members?" Though this comment was met with various forms of affirmation indicating a widespread dissatisfaction with the office's location, there was no suggestion of a plan to change the location itself. The old office building had doubtlessly been reappropriated for a different purpose soon after the Local had vacated, and affordable real estate in the city proper had become extremely scarce. Despite the promises of change introduced by Sarah's election, John's legacy continued to haunt Local 2020 both in its physical locatedness in an environment of corporate sterility and in the multitude of social tensions among its staff members that his leadership had fostered and perpetuated. Ultimately, I would argue, this legacy played a role in the International's judgement that Local 2020 was not adequately serving and representing its membership.

Destabilizing the Local

Much of the anthropological literature on U.S. labor unions has positioned itself in tactical relation to those unions. While these texts do not necessarily abandon the task of

adopting a critical distance from them, they typically do so with the aim of presenting

possibilities for improvement, of increased democratization, or tactical efficacy (Durrenburger

and Reichart 2010, Griffith 2009, Coulter 2012). I too am interested in these possibilities and am

humbled to be writing in dialogue with these researchers, all of whom have spent far greater

amounts of time immersed in the social life of unions than I have. Their work has proved to be

generative for my research with Local 2020 in countless ways. That being said, this project

departs substantially from this literature in its theoretical approach. Unlike the authors referenced

above, I do not take for granted that unions exist as a social totality of import for their members

but attempt to examine the presentation of that totality as a project of ideological legitimation. To

be clear, I am not abandoning the task of union advocacy. However, due to the crisis that I found

myself in the midst of during my fieldwork, my perception of Local 2020 very quickly became

defined by instability and precarity. Within the span of a summer, I witnessed an organization

being ripped apart at its seams even as it tried desperately to stitch itself back together. While the

Local eventually emerged from this crisis alive and well (relatively speaking), I will never forget

the extent to which its futurity was made uncertain in that moment or what it felt like to even

briefly inhabit that uncertainty.

My hope is that my portrayal of these experiences of uncertainty might contribute

generatively to ongoing discussions, scholarly and otherwise, about the future of unions in

America (and potentially worldwide). Over the course of my fieldwork, I often encountered

people having difficulty envisioning this future. Even looking past the crisis within Local 2020,

many of the dedicated union staff members that I worked with spoke about the labor movement

as nearing extinction. Recognizing that I might come across as naive or even ignorant in saying

so, I am slightly more optimistic about this future. As I intend to make clear over the course of

this project, the fact that Local 2020 survived the threats posed both from the International and from the U.S. government offers some hope for the power of unions going forward. Before diving into this narrative, I wish to contextualize this moment of crisis more fully. To do so, I will once more drift back into the Local's history, this time to the moment of its initial organization.

A History of Silencing

Compared with the bulk of SEIU Locals, Local 2020 is remarkably young. Its establishment in the early 2000's was one component of the SEIU's broader New Strength Unity Plan (NSUP). NSUP was intended to unify the SEIU, comprised at the time of a multiplicitous network of relatively autonomous Locals, into an institution rendered cohesive by a more extensive International presence. While this strategy was not heavily criticized at the time, it gradually came to represent for many a top-down, undemocratic approach that undermined the sovereignty of individual Locals. Local 2020 quickly gained a reputation as a primary example which evidenced this critique. Whereas most efforts to reorganize Locals during this period involved consolidation of formerly independent Locals, this reorganization involved the seemingly arbitrary creation of a new public sector union, despite the fact that two other public sector unions already existed in its geographical vicinity. Its membership was therefore picked from those other Locals once the members of each voted in favor of the reorganization[1].

Among the members who expressed concerns about the reorganization, public sector university employees were particularly and vocally skeptical. In particular, they became

---

[1] It is worth noting here that 1.) many of those who voted for the reorganization would not be directly affected by its results and that 2.) the International placed significant pressure on union staff to advocate for the reorganization.

increasingly frustrated by the efforts of the interim president of Local 2020, who was not

democratically elected but instead placed in that position by the International. As president, she

frequently attempted to silence union members' vocal criticism of the reorganization, blaming

dissent on the efforts of leaders in other Locals rather than recognizing the widespread

dissatisfaction among the rank and file. Additionally, she cracked down repeatedly on staff

members who sympathized with the concerns of the rank and file, including their longstanding

rep, who eventually resigned. In the year immediately following the reorganization, members of

the state university chapters openly contested the authoritarian practices of their interim

president. They drafted a "declaration of no confidence" which culminated in the following

claim:

> "Miranda Wright has betrayed the trust of those who have spent many years building strong unions with an activist membership at the University of Massachusetts. We therefore declare "NO CONFIDENCE" in Miranda Wright as our appointed provisional president. We have no confidence in her willingness or ability to unite the membership around a set of core principles that all can support, in a manner that honors all members' rights to meaningful participation, in order to create the kind of democratic SEIU union local that our members expect and deserve."

As the plan to develop a constitution for the Local and to hold democratic elections was delayed

over and over, members of the university staff began to explore more extreme options, such as

decertification from the SEIU and the establishment of a new, independent union. Ultimately,

union members working at these state universities decided that their best option would be to

decertify from the SEIU and instead move to a teachers' union that had a solid track record of

organizing staff in institutions of higher education. Wary of being accused of poaching these

members, that teachers' union initially refused to take them on, but eventually the International

recognized that the situation had corroded to a point beyond salvaging and voluntarily consented

to the decertification. When the dust settled, Local 2020 had lost roughly a fifth of its

membership and had gained a reputation as a dysfunctional, undemocratic union. This reputation would prove extremely difficult to reinvent, despite the efforts of innumerable dedicated staff members, elected leaders, and rank and file members.

Since these first troubled years of its existence, much has changed at Local 2020. It now operates based on a constitution and is led by a democratically elected president, vice president, and secretary treasurer as well as an elected executive board drawn from across its chapters. Particularly after the election of Sarah Gonzales as president, staff and rank and file leaders were optimistic that Local 2020 would evolve into an increasingly democratic and aggressive union. However, immediately following the Janus decision this optimism was quashed by the International's threat of a jurisdictional hearing. That threat involved an undoing of the reorganization that occurred fifteen years earlier by dissolving Local 2020 back into some of the Locals that its membership had originally been absorbed from. Partially as a result of the extent to which latency elongates the transfer of information from the rank and file to the International, Local 2020's fraught origins continued to haunt the efforts of elected leaders, staff, and members to develop a powerful union.

Chapter Overview

Chapter one focuses on the two largest departments within Local 2020's staff: reps and organizers. I examine the division of labor between these two groups and specifically the contrastive methods by which they related to union members. Those methods involved two different ideologies at play within the U.S. union movement, one emphasizing relations with members in terms of "service," the other in terms of "organizing." Despite the fact that these ideologies are often seen to be in direct opposition with one another, I focus on the ways in

which both were simultaneously operative yet remained distinct during my time with Local 2020. In doing so, I foreground the extent to which the forms of "organizing" incentivized by the International did not account for the necessity and potential power of long term relationality between reps and members. I conclude this chapter by describing the points at which this division of labor was bridged by reps and organizers working collaboratively and arguing that these collaborative efforts may offer a means of bypassing a reductive dichotomy between service and organizing.

Chapter two widens the lens of this narrative in order to situate Local 2020 as a multifaceted and contentious social and bureaucratic organization. I argue that the Local can be understood most precisely as a hybrid organization operating at times like a corporation and at others like a state. I then proceed to widen this lens further to include the historical relations between unions and the U.S. government, particularly as they became concretized in the passage of the National Labor Relations Act. This analysis is necessary as a means of contextualizing the extended, bureaucratic practices that had come to define the relationships between unions like Local 2020 and the U.S. government. The remainder of this chapter dissects the contradictory position that Local 2020 occupied as both a democratic, state-like organization that distributedstate effects in its own right and as an organization that was simultaneously contained within U.S. state hegemony. Its conclusion takes a stance that establishing and reproducing the state power of unions might not be feasible through either their efforts to intervene in U.S. state practices or in their attempts to construct an abstract notion of union identity. Rather, I suggest optimistically that this state power might be cultivated instead in the spaces of concrete workplace relations where the U.S. government often does not intervene.

Chapter three builds off of this theoretical framework of the Local 2020 as a state-like organization by tracing the relationality between rank and file members, Local staff members, and the International. More specifically, I examine in depth the Local's response to the dual threats of *Janus* and a jurisdictional hearing. That response was centered on a campaign that entailed the collection of recommitment cards from members and the transduction of these members' subjectivities from those cards, to the Local's membership database, and finally into a contained software "tracker" that rendered those members legible to the International a social totality. I argue that this final stage of legibility involved a process of rendering certain staff and rank and file members invisible, of erasing the labour that they contributed to the campaign in order to pose the "tracker" as a transparent representation of the Local's membership. I close this chapter by exploring the partially inaudible ways in which staff members refused to become incorporated in these projects of legibility and transparency.

Chapter One: Organizing and Representing the Local

Situating the Local

Over the course of my fieldwork, Local 2020's futurity was threatened by a number of complex and intersecting forces. Chief among these were the long term threat of financial corrosion emanating from the U.S. government's anti-union ruling in the case of *Janus vs. AFSCME* as well as the more imminent threat of total dissolution being dictated from the International. However, even prior to the emergence of these threats, Local 2020's staff was in the midst of a kind of identity crisis surrounding questions of what the Local should be, how it should operate, and *who* should operate it. These questions almost invariably revolved around how to define and enact Local staff members' relationship to their members on the one hand and to the the International on the other. By and large, these core questions remain unresolved as of this writing.

This chapter is an attempt to address these tensions not so much from the perspective of the membership or the International as from Local 2020 staff members themselves. More specifically, it will focus on the complex division of labor between reps and organizers as a point of origin from which to construct an outward facing discourse across the vertical span of the SEIU's administrative hierarchy. In doing so, I hope to avoid (or at least mitigate) the danger of reifying that administration's formalized rationales and policies. Paying close attention to the extent to which those policies gain traction in the context of Local 2020's staff and their relations with SEIU members, I do not assume a synchronized relationship between policy and practice. As I intend to make clear, that traction was profoundly limited by a number of impeding agents at the Local which both navigated and subverted the International's ideological scaffolding.

Before going further, I wish to provide some basic contextual information about Local 2020. Affiliated with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Local 2020 is comprised of several thousand people in the Eastern U.S., the vast majority of whom work in the public sector. Compared with most other SEIU Locals, Local 2020 has a relatively small number of members diffused across a proportionally large number of chapters. As a result, the vast majority of its chapters are comprised of fewer than fifty members. Whereas most other SEIU locals are defined by a particular profession or industry, Local 2020 members work in an exceptional variety of occupational context. Many are employed by public schools as cafeteria workers, transportation workers, or custodians. Others work for hospitals, police departments, or public works departments. In geographical terms, Local 2020's membership spans hundreds of miles of "turf". However, that "turf" also happens to overlap with many other unions, several of which are also affiliated with the SEIU. As the numerous office spaces that are shared between these different Locals indicate, their relationship is characterized moreso by entanglement than any clearly legible boundary. To define Local 2020 in terms of its members' professions or its geographical isolation therefore becomes quite murky. Taken as a whole, the Local's membership is a miscellaneous assemblage of public sector workers. This is not to say that their membership within the Local is arbitrary or random but instead that in the absence of any clear, pre-existing categories that situate them as a collective, the Local itself becomes the concept around which a community becomes imagined. (Anderson 1983)

Situated in this way, the Local can best be understood as an ideological space through which various union actors navigate. While this conceptual framework is admittedly vague, this vagueness aptly reflects the multiple and often divergent ways through which these actors engage with the union. For both union members and staff members, the Local itself emerged as a

multivalent signifier, surfacing in a different light based on particular contexts of encounter. For many union members, their initial encounter with the union involved the presence of at least one organizer. However, after their first union contract became ratified, they hardly encountered organizers at all and instead developed relationships with their "rep", who were tasked with processing their formal grievances, negotiating their contracts, and overseeing their union elections. As I intend to make clear in this chapter, this transition did not simply involve a transportation between bureaucratically designated departments but in fact reflected much broader tensions within the Local and the U.S. union movement as a whole.

While I will devote the bulk of my attention in this chapter to reps and organizers, it is also worth noting that various union staff members work outside of both of these departments and that they often become the face of the union to members as well. For instance, members of the dues processing department worked tirelessly to facilitate the Local's financial stability and bureaucratic coherence, but they also answered calls from members regularly which were not always limited to dues processing issues. The Local's democratically elected president, vice president, and secretary treasurer worked to oversee the Local as a whole while also occupying a space of public accountability among union members. Additionally, passionate union members and chapter leaders often formed the first layer of encounter that workers had with the Local. These members were referred to by most Local 2020 staff and leaders as the primary sources of power for the union. To a greater degree than anyone employed by the union itself, these rank and file members were implicated in the reproduction of the Local as both a social category and a recognizable source of power within individual workplaces. Beyond this general understanding, however, there was limited consensus among Local staff regarding how to relate to rank and file members in practice.

These entrenched tensions within Local 2020's staff can be understood approximately in terms of longstanding debates within the labor movement of whether to adopt a so called "organizing" or a "service" model of unionism (McAlevey 2016). While the SEIU is typically understood to be one of the few unions putting serious emphasis on the "organizing" model, the tensions and resonances between the two were still very much at play in debates of Local 2020 staff members. Few if any staff members committed themselves wholly to either of these models, but the members of the external organizing department (commonly referred to simply as organizers) were much more closely linked with an organizing model than most internal organizers (reps) who often described their work and the Local as a whole explicitly in terms of providing "service" to the members. These differing approaches contributed significantly to the tension and distance between these departments, and this distance in turn inflected ability of staff members from each to relate to the Local's members. Here, it is useful to complicate this dichotomy with a third model, referred to by McAlevey as a "mobilizing model," which does not view the union in such strictly corporate terms but focuses on union union efforts during specific moments, i.e. contract negotiations, union elections, and above all else, political campaigns. Such a model focuses on strategic initiatives such as getting out the vote but fails to produce a robust culture of worker solidarity through long term organizing efforts (Fantasia 1988). In the case of Local 2020 and the SEIU more broadly, this notion of "mobilizing" is particularly useful for evaluating the extent to which rhetorical emphases on "organizing" represent long term, grassroots efforts.

Representing

As the very term of "rep" or "field rep" (condensed from representative) implies, their labor and the service model that it tends to be associated with assume each member to be a predetermined individual with a particular set of rationally determined interests. (Hirschman 1977) In practice, the job of being a rep differed sharply from the organizing aims of cultivating communities of workers who embodied their understanding of common interest through unionization. More often, being a rep entailed transducing the individuated interests of a particular, atomized worker into a bureaucratically legible "grievance". While reps approached their work through myriad tactical and ideological positionings, their labor was institutionally defined by this mediating relationship. Additionally, thinking of a union efforts in terms of "representing" hints at a subtle division between the union itself, comprised of staff members, and union members. Within this division, the union was located not within the membership itself but in the group of professionals who "represent" them (Abbott 1995). The union emerged when staff members, positioned as subjects, "represented" the members and their interests, framed in objective terms. Importantly, there was an implied third entity in this rhetorical framework: that of the employers to whom these acts of representing are aimed. In effect, they constituted the audience of union representation and completed the circuitry of the union's network by enabling the transduction of a member's "grievance" into a negotiated decision subject to arbitration by the state itself.

Taken as a whole, reps engaged with union members based on notions of "service", in which they were situated primarily as mediators between the members and their employers. One defining quality of Local 2020 as depicted by staff members was the emphasis and effort placed into the grievance process. Reps in particular spent an enormous proportion of their working lives listening to, processing, and fighting on behalf of workers' grievances. Additionally, Local

2020 had its own legal department that dealt with grievances if they reached the third step of arbitration. If Local 2020's internal organizing department operated in relation to a service model of unionism, then the grievance process was number one on the list of these services. This is not necessarily to say that they acted as agents of compromise; many of them framed their work as being fundamentally oppositional to those employers. However, within the Local's overall strategy, this opposition took the form primarily of defensive, as opposed to offensive tactics.

Josh, a rep with whom I worked closely over the course of my fieldwork, expressed a degree of ambivalence while elaborating this defensive strategy. As we both sipped iced teas on his sparsely furnished patio, he said to me, "I find myself doing a lot of defensive grievances and defensive work, meaning our employees are under attack,....So we're, uh, playing defense. That's the way I see it….We're not initiating, right, we're, we're responding. We're hoping for a good outcome, but the decision is in their hands, and I hate that feeling, ya know." His metaphorical usage of the language of sports and military tactics prevents a dynamic picture of labor struggle, one in which both sides are attributed agency, albeit in lopsided ways. By depicting labor disputes as being in the employers' "hands" against which union staff and "our employees" must respond, he gave reference to the entrenched, structural imbalance in the relations between employers and workers.

Later on, he discussed this imbalance more explicitly: "Occasionally I'll do offensive work, and then the system is set up where it stalls your attempts to take things on the offense. You file a grievance, that's step one. They delay the hearing. They have the hearing, they delay the response. Ya know, if they don't respond within a certain period of time, then you can file a step two grievance automatically, but now you're a secretary, and so you gotta monitor everything." Here, temporality emerged again as a dimension of a rep's work. More specifically,

Josh emphasized how defensive and offensive forms of labor involve contrasting temporal frameworks. When engaging in the "defensive" tactics of grievances and disciplinary hearings (together comprising a significant proportion of reps' work), they necessarily occupied the short term at the expense of long term strategic planning. Because those actions were often prompted at a moment's notice, reps often find themselves being called on to take on spontaneous damage control across their diffuse network of chapters. In Josh's words, this feeling that "you got a hundred other things coming at ya" inhibited his ability to take on more offensive tactics because "the last thing you're worried about is keeping an exact calendar of every single thing you've got going on. You try to, but it's, it's, it's impossible. It's like nailing jello to the wall." By now I could hear the frustration in his voice. As much as he would like to operate based on a long term plan by "keeping an exact calendar" and as much as that practice might have helped him to challenge a system that was specifically "set up where it stalls your attempts to take things on the offense," he inevitably and repeatedly felt himself being jolted back into a chaotic present.

With defensive conflicts emerging from all sides on a day by day basis, his efforts to develop a long-term offensive strategy were deferred to an indefintely postponed futurity. Importantly, his chapter members' employers faced no such double bind. As he put it, "there's no incentive for them….if we miss the timelines, we, under the contracts, we waive our right to go to the next step in the grievance process. If they don't comply with the time period, it says, "just assume you go to step two". Well that's nothing. Why shouldn't it be the same consequence?" For Josh then, the "timelines" and "time period(s)" of his work did not constitute a neutral ground on which he maneuvers against the efforts of employers. Rather, time became a janus-faced power that works in tandem with the interests of employers and which he, on the other side, was forced to "comply with" or forfeit his offensive entirely. Because of the sheer

number of chapters and union members that he was tasked with representing, he found himself being pulled in nearly innumerable directions, both temporally and spatially, cyclically binding him to the present so that he was unable to "comply" with these future oriented timelines.

This paradox between the long-term nature of reps' relationships with their chapter members and the frustratingly short-term form of their acts of representing those members creates profound relational tensions between them. In practice, these tensions were evidenced in the near constant frictions between members and their reps. As described by an organizer, one of the primary differences between his work and that of reps is that "they have to deal with a lot of people who are very needy and unappreciative, which sucks….I think that with external organizing you get a lot of people [saying] like "fuck off", but you don't have those people, asking you to do things for them, whereas the rep, the same people who are saying "fuck off" are the same people who are like…."do this do that." Unlike organizers, who received verbal expressions of animosity from employers, reps received them both from employers and from union members. Similar to the atomized structure of their work in relation to other union staff members, reps engaged with union members on a more individuated level than organizers or any other union officials.

If the work of organizers can be understood as a project of transforming the self-conscious identity of workers from that of the individual to that of the collective, the scattered labor of reps serves as a reminder that such a change in consciousness is almost always an ephemeral one. Seemingly inevitably, reps apportioned huge amounts of their work to the highly atomized concerns of individual union members. To be clear, reps still devoted huge amounts of time to contract negotiations, but beyond those perennial events, they were often simply too overworked by individuated grievances to address the ongoing concerns of those members as a

collective. In part because their acts of representing operated on the assumption that a member's interest could be taken as a given, these atomized and often competing forms of interest formed the jagged contours of reps' labor on a day to day basis.

Organizing

In contrast, The labor of organizers situates members' identities and interests as elastic and malleable through particular acts of conversation. In this rhetorical framing of "organizing", union staff members occupy the subject position and organize workers positioned as objects into a collectivized social body. Unlike acts of "representing", in which workers' identities are a fixed object that facilitates the real action of representing that identity to employers, this "organizing" model situates workers as the primary object of action. While there was still an implied third entity of the workers' employers and more generally, of any opposition that they must be organized against, this third entity is neither the primary goal of organizing nor a necessary condition of its grammatical coherence. Rather, the meaning and goal of organizing is to transform the workers' own understanding of their subjectivity.

Given this emphasis placed on transforming the consciousness of their members towards an understanding of their collective power in the workplace, their work juxtaposed that of reps, who tended to focus more on providing services to members. Rachel was partially critical of this notion of service and specifically the way in which it tended to attribute little agency to union members in relation to their employers. After meeting her at her apartment to talk about the Local, she began to elaborate the ways in which her work was differentiated from that of reps. She critiqued tactics of representing by referring to a labor movement motto, "Look out, not Up." She then went on to describe and gesture towards how union processes like grievances entailed

union members looking upwards, not outwards: "It forces people to look up at like the experts, the lawyers, the rep who have the skills that like I as a worker don't have when….as a leftist that's not what I wanna be telling people every day. I wanna be telling people that they have the answers and they, they know what should be done, because they do." Emphasizing these acts of telling members to look up as being necessarily repeated "every day," she indicated a temporal distinction between the work of representing and that of organizing. Whereas organizing involved singular moments of transforming workers' consciousness, representing entailed an ongoing process of transforming workers' interests into bureaucratic action.

This argument could potentially be read more broadly as a critique of the professionalization of the modern union movement, but she did not frame it quite in this way. She did not argue that grievances and legal disputes should have been ignored entirely but simply that they comprised a disproportionate amount of reps' labor time. Instead, she advocated for a different conception of what it means to be a professional working for a union, one which foregrounded the long term empowerment of union members rather than simply providing services to them. Still, even though Rachel insisted that "They're the experts of,.....at work, and we don't need fucking lawyers to….help workers. We need *workers* to stand up for themselves", her own dedication to her profession as an organizer might be read as testament to the fact that workers standing up for and by themselves may not have been sufficient to develop a working class movement. Moreover, her shift from discussing workers as the "experts of" work to "at" work indicates a potential scalar distinction between the role of workers and that of organizers in the labor movement. Workers were necessarily grounded "at" their workplace and therefore had access to an invaluable form of experiential knowledge. However, they did not necessarily possess knowledge "of" work more broadly, of the nature of class struggle on a systemic level.

Paradoxically, unions operating based on this model might be thought of as successful to the extent that they foster a collective mentality among their members that is capable of rendering the professionalized union bureaucracy obsolete. Interestingly, one consequence of this (at least in theory) is that the job security of union staff members would be dramatically lessened. In fact, the union as a whole might be understood less as a permanent body of specific workers and the staff members that represent them than a constantly shifting organizing mechanism aimed at the empowerment of workers via the development of their class consciousness (Fantasia 1988). Conversely, a grievance based model structures the social relations within a union around a scalar relationship in which various levels of atomized professionals comprise an apparatus capable of enacting change on a microscopic level. Because of the clear and permanent function attributed to each union professional within this model, their job security would in theory remain relatively stable, leaving aside for now the potential harm that this model may result in for union density and job security in the long run. In practice, this tension surfaced in the fact that organizing positions at Local 2020 were generally more short term than those of reps and that reps typically gained authority and job security within the Local as they gained years of experience in the same position.

In addition to the clear differences in how these conceptions of unionism attributed agency to workers and staff members respectively, they also yielded vastly different temporal understandings of how to further the labor movement. Despite the processes of bureaucratic mediation involved in a grievance focused model, it was structured at Local 2020 around a long-term, near permanent relationality and responsibility between union staff members and workers. In contrast, an organizing centered model collapsed this relationality into singular moments of "telling people that they have the answers" after which workers actualized their revolutionary

potential independent of bureaucratic efforts by union staff members. Since the tenure of John Sweeney as president of the SEIU in the 90's, this rhetoric of "organizing" has occupied a central position in the International's strategy. However, within Local 2020, this model did not succeed in replacing the existing roles of "reps" with that of "internal organizers" but rather placed increased emphasis on the work of "external organizers" as a distinct social group. As a result, the social divisions between reps and organizers within Local 2020 can be traced in part to the decisions being passed down from the International. Without any mechanisms for collecting feedback on how those decisions were being introduced at the Local level, officials working at the International possessed extremely limited means of perceiving the ritualized tensions being continually reproduced by staff members at the level of the Local.

This disjuncture between policy and practice will be examined in depth in the following chapters, but for now it should be noted that it resulted in a profoundly fractured temporality in union staff members' work day to day. On the one hand, organizers were tasked with the spontaneous engagement with so-called "hot" groups of workers. Their tactics revolved around the fact that these workers would not be "hot" for long; drafting and ratifying the first union contract was instrumental in transacting that momentary unrest into a permanent induction into the union. On the other hand, reps engaged with members for the indefinite future after this initial ratification, and their engagement with members' concerns was temporally stretched in a proportional manner (Lewis 2016). While reps generally speaking took this work very seriously and were extremely dedicated to their chapters, the structural limitations of their work were such that this task could only be engaged with through long term struggles with employers, struggles built around compromise and attrition.

However, this particular notion of an "organizer" is by no means universal and requires contextualization within the multiplicity of historical meanings that the term signifies (Figlio 1976). In addition to this framing of organizers as attempting to condense a group of workers into a body with shared interests, their labour also involved efforts to reorient the thought process of each individual worker towards a particular strategic and ideological viewpoint. As Rachel pointed out, such a viewpoint was too often that of union administrators trying to preserve union density as an end in itself rather than that of concerns emerging from the rank and file. She described this process as "a wave within the union movement that we need to focus on organizing, but it's not a rank and file orientation. It's not a leftist orientation. It's just a "we need to organize so we don't die."" She saw the policies of unions like the SEIU as a mutation of an organizing model in which the collective concerns and goals of workers were deemphasized in favor of "the model of like asking *you*….will *you* step up and wear a button tomorrow?" Deliberately emphasizing the use of a singular second-person form of address in this conversational template, she shed light on how this model reified an essential tenet of Western capitalism: that of a rational, individuated subject with a set of objective interests (Hirschman 1977). While this tenet has likely been ingrained to the point of naturalization among a range of American publics, unions occupy a unique position capable of challenging it. To the extent that they construct their tactics around collective rather than individual interests, unions can actively subvert and denaturalize this notion of capitalist subjectivity.

However, as Rachel made clear, a policy using the terminology of "organizing" does not necessarily accomplish or even attempt this, in part because of the narrow temporal framework in which it might operate. The conversation reenacted above pertained simply to "tomorrow" and did not acknowledge any past relationship between the worker and their union. Moreover, it did

not speak to what happens after tomorrow, to the necessity of long term, robust strategies of collective action. Returning to McAlevey's framework, this superficial, compressed version of "organizing" more accurately typifies the "mobilizing model" that she situates somewhere in between those of "service" and of "organizing" (McAlevey 2016). Coalescing around perennial events like elections (both of the union and of the U.S. government), these attempts at "mobilizing" often seek to point members towards conflicts external to their working lives. Carlos, a member of the Local's dues processing staff, observed that unions sometimes tend to "go way into politics and forget the little guy, the one who, who's actually paying their dues, and they're like, "hey we need help over here with this," and I feel like that's going *away*, and they're more concerned about politics instead of actually what we're here to do, which is represent our members." By using a spatial metaphor of "politics" as that which is gone "into", existing "over here" and "away" from the workplace itself, he illustrated how this mobilizing framework actually diverted workers' energies away from their micro-political workplace struggles towards a macro-politics of the state and federal governments.

In some ways, Rachel's work as an organizer involved an attempt to put this critique into practice. Despite her own opinions regarding local, state, and national politics, she took great care not to allow these opinions to inflect her relations with workers she was attempting to organizing, in part because many of those workers held radically opposed opinions. Sitting in her apartment with her cat purring obtrusively on my lap, I did my best to listen to Rachel articulate this strategy by referencing a claim made by a friend of hers working as an organizer for another union: "Honestly, the fact that they voted for Trump, I don't care. We're organizing locally around their workplace issues. What does that have to do with Trump?" Importantly, while right wing organizing efforts may have succeeded in reforming and redeploying an imagined

community (Anderson 1983) of the white working class as a marginalized group, they did little to address that community's marginalization in the workplace. As Rachel pointed out, union organizers could therefore occupy the small scale organizing vacuums of individual workplaces so long as they approached recognizably political topics in a tactful manner. In theory, efforts to establish robust workplace solidarity on a localized level could percolate upwards over time. Circumventing mainstream political discourse altogether, grassroots organizing efforts therefore offered the potentiality of a movement capable of leveraging power against corporate interests and the U.S. government itself.

While this conception of organizing was aimed towards the actualization of workers' latent political and economic agency in a vaguely defined long term, it assumed (to an extent) that this process would be catalyzed from an extrinsic social force. As such, it resonated with the Marxist notions both of a division of labor between the proletariat and the revolutionary intelligentsia and of the broad transformation of consciousness that this division could generate. The saying, "Look out, not up" itself remained an imperative command despite its emancipatory connotation. Rachel may have been adamant in her belief that workers "know what should be done", but she implicitly maintained that they often needed to be told so, and that this act of "telling" was in fact the primary goal of organizing. More specifically, Rob described one of the most important forms of "telling" that leftist organizers could do as "getting people to see that they're not atomized, that they're connected to the other people in the college, or the workplace in general, and how they all work together to make everything happen...getting them to see that collective power is definitely part like of our day to day work." Here, he treated atomization as fundamentally a mythic force in the lives of workers, as a specifically American form of ideological masking constructed in order to obscure the fact of workers' "collective power."

For Rob then, organizing entailed a transformation of workers' consciousness in line with Marx's claim that "the real intellectual wealth of the individual depends entirely on the wealth of his real connections." (Marx 1846, pp. 163). The power of organizing in this form was not predicated on assumptions of workers' individual interests (although that term can often be used in organizing conversations) but rather in the assumed social fact of their collective identity as workers. In theory then, once workers' collective consciousness had become actualized, "All-round dependence….will be transformed by this communist revolution into the control and conscious mastery of these powers, which, born of the action of men on one another, have till now overawed and governed men as powers completely alien to them." (Marx 1846, pp. 164) While Rob situated "these powers" as the inherent condition of workers' experiences of capitalism and as their "real intellectual wealth", they were not readily accessible to workers themselves. This organizing model therefore maintained a partial division between manual and intellectual labor. While it asserted the existence and importance of workers' intellectual wealth in the context of their "real connections", it necessarily required the existence of an extrinsic social actor who performed of the labor of abstraction, of transforming "real connections" into a total theory of workers' collective subjectivity.

Tensions and Resonances

Despite the prevalence of discussions of service and organizing acts as representing entirely different approaches to unionization (McAlevey 2016), my experience in the context of Local 2020 was that the two had a more generative relationship to one another despite their contrastive relationship. There, the "service" and the "organizing" models were simultaneously enacted on a day to basis and were in fact mutually constituted via the division of labor between

internal and external organizers. This division was manifested professionally in the separation of external and internal organizing meetings but also socially, in their less formalized habits of interacting and communicating. Generally speaking, organizers collaborated with one another on projects more frequently and worked to develop an ideologically unified tactical approach to organizing. In practice, this unification took the form of frequent meetings and near constant communication with one another. Particularly when a new group of workers were trying to organize through Local 2020, all of the organizers coordinated their efforts towards the same goal. Additionally, every one of them resided within the urban center that the union office was located just outside of, and some even carpooled to work together. In terms of age, they were on average much younger than reps, almost all of whom were over forty, and dressed more casually. Whereas reps often (though not always) presented themselves through their clothing and speech in a lawyerly manner, organizers dressed and spoke in order to deploy an affect of approachability. These subtle organizing tactics served to

Rob was vocally critical of this temporal division of labor, pointing out that "a more effective model….that we actually did at Emerson is that….the organizers stayed on, and I kind of like spearheaded the contract campaign, which was like the direct actions and mobilization that affected what was happening at the table. So I think....even after the contract is ratified, you have to implement the contract." For Rob then, there was no clear division between the direct actions coordinated by organizers like himself and the contract negotiations led by a particular rep. One could not be effective without the other. In his view, they emerged mutually constitutive processes that occurred simultaneously in this particular union campaign. However, by referencing this specific example, he implied that the vast majority of union campaigns involve a more distinct separation between the work of reps and organizers.

Rachel was quick to point out to me that "Servicing and not organizing is just not gonna work in today's world." However, she also critiqued my own thinking of service and organizing as a binary opposition. When I framed them in a dichotomous way, she responded that "In some ways the dichotomy is false….It's a thing people say a lot that isn't quite helpful…." She then referenced a particular conversation she had with her former boss at the American Federation of Teachers in which she was told upfront: "I don't care about the contract". Taken to its extreme, then, an organizing model's emphasis on bringing new groups of workers into the union could become short-sighted and detached. Particularly when imposed through the chain of command of a large, hierarchically organized union, organizing concepts risked being abstracted from the lived experiences of workers. Once again, this especially short-term form of "organizing" can be more aptly described as a form of temporally limited "mobilizing."

In light of this, the services that reps provided to union members might be interpreted not as a betrayal of organizing tactics but rather as a necessary corrective against those tactics' detachment from members' interests. In part because of the division of labor between reps and organizers and that ways in which that division was demarcated temporally, organizing principles tended to be substituted to a service based model after workers won their initial union contract. If the service model ran the risk of diluting workers' revolutionary potential into slow-moving, legally sanctioned avenues of change, the organizing model ran an inverse risk of condensing all revolutionary potential into the fleeting moment in which workers won their union membership without establishing a long term strategic plan of action. To use Rachel's words, "It's an orientation that is good in some ways but really fucking bad in other ways because it's really alienating to the members…." Many of my conversations with members involved them admitting that they felt jaded by their experiences with Local 2020 after their

initial organizing efforts. While the precise reasonings for these feelings varied enormously depending on members' experiences within the union, several of them specifically mentioned feeling as though they were not being heard by their reps. To be clear, I am not claiming that reps are to blame for it. As a department, they are woefully overworked and as Josh emphasized, they could only do so much for each individual member. Nor am I claiming that organizers should be reprimanded for repeatedly abandoning the workers that they established relations with. I want to foreground instead the extent to which the limitations of their work resulted from a socially reproduced rupture between the labor of each department.

Collaboration and Synchronicity

Largely because of the more atomized form of their day to day work and their geographic diffusion across the entire state, reps collaborated with each other less frequently and were less consistent in their approaches to union work than organizers. Once the organizers had helped bring workers to the point of voting on their first union contract, they passed the torch to a rep who would work on all future contracts as well as process any grievances that those new members wanted processed. Contrary to organizers, who had little interest in maintaining a friendly relationship with workers' bosses, reps often found it necessary to do so in order to fulfill their responsibilities to members in the long term. This distinction became readily apparent to Rachel, after Sarah introduced an initiative as union president that partially collapsed this division of labor between reps and organizers. Concerned that the voices of union members in two of Local 2020's largest chapters were not being heard, she paired Rachel with the reps assigned to each chapter. Together they attempted to restructure the organization of union office positions by electing a steward for each floor and shift of the hospital at which they worked.

In the thick of these efforts, Rachel became aware that her training as an organizer had not prepared her for this long-term commitment to a particular workplace. During an informal interview, she recounted one of the first moments of this form of collaboration with a rep named Randy: "I remember one of the first times we went to the home, um, the Chelsea home, together, uh, I was like I'm going today, you wanna come? And he was like, yeah sure, I'll come, cuz it was like his third day on the job. And he was like, "So who did you like tell that we were coming?" And I was like, "I didn't tell anyone. I'm just going to show up." And he was like, "Well what does it say in the contract?'" And I was like, "Oh I think it says blah blah blah, but I'm not really sure."....He was like, "I don't know if we should go there. Maybe you can but not me." And I was like, "What?....Isn't the first rule of organizing to not play by the boss's rules?" Here, several key differences between the tactics of reps and organizers emerge. For one, Randy's questions to Rachel indicate that he is concerned both with communicating his presence to management and with adhering to the contract stipulations of what union staff are permitted to do in the workplace. Whereas an organizer might have interpreted the contract language as "the boss's rules", reps understood the contract to be a primary site of their fight for union members against management. In trying to set a precedent of compliance to the contract, Randy was not simply acquiescing to the will of management. Instead, he was attempting to legitimize the contract's status as a legally binding document. However, by telling Rachel that "maybe you can but not me", he acknowledged that this compliance to the contract may not have been necessary in the same way for organizers as it is for reps. Even in their collaborative efforts then, the labor of reps and organizers became divided in a generative way. Organizing became defined by *not* obeying the contract that was such a vital component of the work of representing.

Rachel then went on to reenact Randy's statement later on that "I'm gonna have to have a long term relationship with the management, and you as an organizer going in can like…. afford to have….a tension in you relationship, but me as a field rep….it's much better to like think a little bit more and to….try to have that….positive, if possible, relationship with management and to like follow the contract." This understanding that being a rep requires one to "think a little bit more" implies that such cautious thinking is not entailed by organizing work, where passion is ostensibly of greater importance. Additionally, Randy's emphasis on trying to establish a "positive, if possible, relationship with management" indicates an understanding of management that diverges significantly from that of organizing. Whereas organizers see management, by default, in oppositional terms, reps like Randy entertain the possibility that they may actually form a collaborative relationship with management. While such collaboration might be read negatively as a betrayal of the interests of workers, it could be read inversely as a rare event in which particular actors on the side of management come to ally themselves with workers more so than with other managers. This potentiality might be naive on a practical level, and Randy himself implies that it is not always "possible." Still, it is worth considering that situating management as a monolithic, oppositional entity may actually prove detrimental to the efforts of workers and their union staff members.

Particularly within the long-term temporal framework in which reps generally operate, the somewhat chaotic approach that organizing entails would prove destructive. Rachel highlighted this point, saying that "I think that's an important lesson that a lot of organizers, if they haven't done internal organizing, wouldn't, wouldn't get….When I was trained to be an organizer, I was just trained to like, barge into a place….fuck shit up, and like, it doesn't matter….Actually, it does matter." By referring to her collaborative work with reps as "internal

organizing", she adopted an official SEIU term that was rarely used on a day to day basis. By using it to describe her own work, which was drastically different from most Local 2020 reps, she hinted at the gap between SEIU policy and the division of labor among union staff members at the Local. While she was not necessarily discounting the value of the organizing drive to "fuck shit up" as a whole, she acknowledged that such actions on their own were unsustainable. For her, the efficacy of collaborations between herself and reps resulted from a mutual awareness of the advantages inherent in each of their roles. Purposefully dividing their labor in how they attempted to connect to members, they maintained the strategic positioning of both the combative tactics of organizing and bureaucratically legible techniques of representing.

Chapter Two: Union Identity

Protest, Flow, and Obstruction

It was Monday, the first day of my internship, and I found myself participating in a protest at the statehouse. Like the other two hundred or so protestors who I marched with, I was repeating a chant: "What do we want? A living wage. If we don't get it, tear it down!" By this time we were roughly half way between the state house, where our demonstration began, and the city's financial district, the planned stage of its dramatic conclusion. Along this pathway we cycled through a few different chants, but the crowd was so long that those at the front and back were not always repeating the same phrase. After yelling "tear it down!", I heard an echo coming from far ahead: "The people, united, will never be defeated!" Despite the somewhat intoxicating feeling that these acts of chanting invoked in me, I couldn't help wondering whether our oscillating, collective speech was intelligible to someone even a block away. Some protestors wore high visibility vests, maintaining a fluid boundary between our movements and the streets we were walking alongside. Just beyond them there were police riding bicycles, coasting effortlessly in circles around us. I occasionally noticed a police car parked at a distance, its lights' flashing repeatedly. One officer was leaning against it as if he was savoring a well-deserved break.

An hour earlier, we were crowded around a podium and its imagined stage: the white marble staircase that led up to the state house's facade. Looking around, I became somewhat uncomfortably aware of my lack of familiarity with the other protestors. When I arrived with my coworkers, all of whom were organizers, they instantly began to percolate through the crowd and connect to their friends, only some of whom worked for unions. I did my best to blend in while

trying to notice and categorize the various unions and community action groups that were present. Many people represented a particular organization in the form of a t shirt or a banner, but others did not bear such a clear indicator of the path that led them here. This particular iteration of the "Poor People's Campaign" was part of a much broader "national call for moral revival," a call which addressed an undifferentiated American "public". Despite the anonymous nature of this "public," the logistical process of its organization relied largely on pre existing and intersecting alliances between organized labor and community activist groups. Various labor unions, including Local 2020, occupied a central role in this largely symbolic process of generating an alternative "public." That public emerged through the various distinct groups and individuals that coalesced around a particular site of performance. Moreover, the demonstrations' intended audience and aims were as multiplicitous as the group of people who had come to participate. In part, it was directed towards the practical ends of building leverage against the state government and corporations and of incorporating a broader public of citizen actors than those whose professions intersected with activism. At the same time, the demonstration situated itself at the overlap of performative tactics of visibility and audibility as well as more concretetized tactics of physical obstruction.

As the crowd began to reach a critical mass, we turned our attention to the semicircular staircase and began to distance ourselves slightly, establishing a concentric semicircle facing the podium and the statehouse looming behind it. Despite this separation between stage and audience, there was a palpable energy of collective discontent that magnetized the relationship between them. For the time being, we were performing democracy in juxtaposition with state power, concretized and symbolized in the state house itself. A well dressed, African-American Reverend approached the podium and initiated a series of speeches addressing a broad network

of concerns, all of which were linked by shared experiences of economic oppression and political alienation. He began with a sober acknowledgement that this demonstration the campaign more broadly were a revival of the Poor People's Campaign lead by Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. While the former campaign persisted briefly after King's death in April of that year, its dissipation a few months later was caused in large part by his assassination (as well as that of Robert Kennedy, one of its only sympathizers in a position of power). By picking up where King left off, the Reverend framed this demonstration and the contemporary campaign more broadly as a resurrection of his ideals. More specifically, his performance of memory foregrounded the anti-capitalist positions that increasingly came to define the later years of King's life but which he is so rarely remembered for. The presence of this historical campaign was evident throughout the demonstration, in part because many of the protestors have actually lived through that moment. During the interlude to the program, they led us in a performance of protest songs from the Civil Rights Movement such as "We Shall Overcome" in an attempt to resurrect their emotive and historical power.

Later, a public defender spoke about her and her coworkers' struggles to pass legislation allowing them to unionize. While she deftly merged her training in legal argument with a more visceral oratory style, my gaze wandered to the state house's shimmering, gilded dome, the apex of an architectural project of order, permanence, and impenetrability. As I scanned the building's facade, I noticed that there was no one in my field of vision, not even members of the security staff. My gaze could not penetrate the sunshine that was reflected off of its windows; from the bottom of the state house steps I saw it as an opaque monolith. I briefly tried to imagine the elected officials and various groups of bureaucratic and clerical staff that are working in this building at two in the afternoon on a Monday before reminding myself that anthropology was not

about speculating at what I was unable to see. Instead, I briefly inhabited that all too familiar feeling of protesting a faceless entity before a wave of cheers jolted me back into the moment. At the time, I interpreted the invisibility of any persons in this building as evidence of their fear for our demonstration, as a coordinated attempt to more or less batten down the hatches. In retrospect, I wonder whether those individuals' invisibility, being enabled by institutional opacity, might have been more habitual than dramatic. While this demonstration was a novel experience for me, and likely for many of the protesters in attendance, I suspect that for those working in the state house, it may have been a more or less quotidian event. As a keystone of the state government's symbolic presence, the state house was a near constant site of symbolic struggles against that government addressing a diffuse array of political concerns. Regardless of the energy that was generated in such demonstrations, individuals working in the state house retained the ability to leave through any number of side and rear entrances without engaging in any direct confrontation. The demonstration was unable to obstruct all of those pathways while remaining visibly legible to a broader public as well as to its own participants. Getting ahead of myself, I wondered whether this protest was an instance of countervailing power or simply another state-sanctioned mechanism for the diffusion of public discontent. To be completely honest, I still don't know.

By the time we had marched across the city center to the financial district, my legs had started to become sore. The buildings in this part of the city were constructed as markers of modernity through technological advancement. Whereas the state house projected an effect of power and intimidation through an aesthetic of historical continuity, these financial skyscrapers appeared to be outside of history altogether. Their image was one of technocratic efficiency, of power through calculation. After we had spread ourselves across the four corners of a busy

intersection, Fred and several other protestors locked their hands together and sat down in a diagonal line obstructing the flow of traffic in all directions. Earlier that morning, Fred had told me, "I'm supposed to be arrested today." I could tell based on his tone that he had been arrested for protesting before, maybe even that it was a point of pride for him. Despite Fred's willingness, he and the other demonstrators were not arrested that afternoon. Rather, police cars were positioned on all four sides of the intersection and others were placed a block or more away, redirecting the flow of traffic down various sidestreets. Just like at the state house, our demonstration was confronted with a spectral opposition that was simultaneously rigid enough that we were unable to "tear it down" but also too fluid for our disruptive tactics to block. I asked Rachel why the police weren't arresting people. She replied: "Because they're being smart….That would be bad publicity."

Unlike at the statehouse, where the legislative and bureaucratic audience were rendered invisible, people that worked here in the finance industry were visibly indifferent. While a few people did join in our demonstration, the vast majority simply walked past. Many did not even look up from their phones. Even more unsettling was the fact that of the many homeless individuals that occupy this part of the city, virtually none bothered to engage with the demonstration. After we'd spent roughly an hour in this square, our numbers had thinned dramatically, and the chanting had more or less ceased. I checked the time and realized that like so many others, I needed to leave. I had a train to catch.

The State and the Union

In this chapter, I will investigate the extent to which Local 2020 can be understood as a statelike structure, as an organization that produces and distributes state-effects among its

members. In doing so, I hope to illuminate broader tensions within and beyond the labor

movement surrounding questions of how to confront and potentially challenge entangled

governmental and economic forces. As the episode above illustrates, Local 2020 organizers

understood their work to be directly oppositional to both corporate and governmental forces.

However, within the broader context of Local 2020 staff members, this intersection was not so

clearly foregrounded. Possibly because Local 2020 was a majority public sector union, rhetoric

that confronted the collusion of corporate and governmental interests was less pervasive in the

forms of contact that reps had with 888 members. Additionally, the fact that virtually all of the

public sector members in Local 2020 had a "no strike clause" in their contract, which legally

prohibited them from striking in the case of a labor dispute, limited the extent to which they

could engage in militant action against their employers. This narrative of public sector unions as

inherently less radical than their private sector counterparts is a significant one that has received

some scholarly attention (Milkman and Voss 2004), but it is not the story I wish to tell here.

Moreover, the recent upsurge in public school teachers' strikes around the U.S. has provided

strong evidence that this narrative is at least partially false. Instead, I will examine Local 2020 as

a social and institutional entity that enacted state-effects that were related yet distinct from that

of the state government that it bargained with. In doing so, I oscillate between situating Local

2020 in relation to "the" U.S state and federal governments and as a state-like field in and of

itself. I recognize that these oscillations may become disorienting at times. However, given that

Local 2020 is stitched together in large part by a network contradictory ideologies and

positionalities, I hope that this disorientation becomes generative, rather than distracting.

On a base level, this discussion of unionism in relation to the state is not new. Louis

Althusser includes trade unions among the short list of what he describes as "ideological state

apparatuses" (Althusser 1971), the diffuse network of institutions that ideologically reproduce state power. However, I do not mean to frame Local 2020 as statelike in the sense of it simply being one of the mechanisms by which the U.S. government perpetuates itself ideologically. While this may tell part of the story, it does little to explain the contentious relationship between Local 2020 and local, state, and federal governments, and it certainly cannot explain the efforts of the U.S. government, evidenced in the *Janus* decision, to undermine the futurity of unionization. Particularly in the wake of the Supreme Court Decision in *Janus vs. AFSCME* (American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees), which outlawed compulsory dues collection by public sector unions, ontological questions regarding the status of unions in relation to the U.S. state were foregrounded during my fieldwork. As I hope to illustrate in this chapter, the *Janus* case offers a contemporary window into tensions in the union movement that are by no means new and can actually be traced back to the original legislation of the National Labor Relations Act. In the simplest possible terms, this tension circles around whether unions should operate based on the logic and practices of corporations, of governance, or of something else entirely. I do not necessarily intend to argue for or against any of these understandings but rather to illuminate their deployment by and among Local 2020 staff members.

Union Hybridity

As the near ubiquitous discussions and critiques of "business unionism" in the labor movement indicate, many union activists and advocates are concerned about the parallels between large unions like the SEIU and private U.S. corporations (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003, Rosenfeld 2014). In particular, the emphasis placed by many unions on defensive efforts to preserve union density (and the extraction of union dues) might be taken as evidence of just how

emaciated the grassroots power of unions has become. As the fact that its leadership council is referred to as an "executive board" implies, the upper echelons of the SEIU leadership operates at least in part on a corporate rhetorical system. During my fieldwork with Local 2020, this was reflected in the International's near singular focus on statistical union density which had percolated down to the internal politics of the Local. This topic will be engaged more thoroughly in the following chapter. Additionally, the SEIU's hierarchical structure of employment is read by many as evidence that the leftist oriented forms of unionization of the first half of the twentieth century have all but disappeared. While this critique is an important one, particularly in reference to union leadership at the level of the International, it does not address the status of unions as democratic institutions. Taking this into account, the narrative of union decline simply as a process of corporatization becomes conspicuously one-dimensional. How might we make sense of the fact that these practices of representational democracy have remained relatively constant throughout the corporatization of unions?

In order to understand the decline of American unionization since the 1970s, it is important not only to trace the increase of corporatization among unions but also to address the role that their state-like status has played in that decline. Like most contemporary unions, Local 2020 operated largely based on the same ideology of representative democracy that the U.S. state does. The practices and ideals of the Local were defined largely by its own specific constitution, which outlined a comprehensive, intersectional politics of expanding workers' power. However, this constitution was partially limited by the fact that the Local was not a self-contained, democratic organization but was rather subjected to the authority of the International. While the International's executive board members and president were all democratically elected officials, the bureaucratic and administrative distance between them and the membership of Local 2020

was extreme. Many of my interlocutors, both union staff members and rank and file activists, expressed a form of disillusionment with their union's democratic process that was not unlike the mistrust that a growing number American citizens held towards the U.S. government. Local 2020 and its staff members can therefore be best understood as a hybridized social entity (Latour 1993), operating despite and through the tensions between its competing ideological positionings as a state and as a corporation.[2]

One further complication to this line of discussion stems from Local 2020's status as a primarily a public sector union. As such, it occupied a mediating role that was markedly different from that of the trade unions that Althusser describes. Private sector unions have often been theorized as state sanctioned mediators between workers and corporations channeling workplace unrest into limited avenues of change while preventing more economically disruptive actions such as general strikes (Lichtenstein 2002, Burawoy 1979, McAlevey 2016). In a specifically American context, this positionality of unions can be historically traced back to the legislation of the National Labor Relations Act in 1935 and the resulting installation of the National Labor Relations Board.

To its credit, that legislation acknowledged "the inequality of bargaining power between employees who do not possess full freedom of association or actual liberty of contract and employers who are organized in the corporate or other forms of ownership association" (NLRA, p. 1). In doing so, it undermined the 19th century assumption that employers and employees were equally free in their mutual agreement to a labor contract. However, it did so less in order to empower the working class than in order to stabilize commerce. The Act's first paragraph

---

[2] This hybridity resonates obliquely with the fact that the U.S. government itself is profoundly inflected by corporate interests. The frequent invisibility of corporate influence in U.S. politics, of its entanglement in capitalism itself, results in part from the strength of its hegemony.

makes clear that its primary aim is to avoid "strikes and other forms of industrial strife, which have the intent or the necessary effect of burdening or obstructing commerce by (a) impairing the efficiency, safety, or operation of the instrumentalities of commerce; (b) occuring in the current of commerce; (c) materially affecting, restraining, or controlling the flow of raw materials or manufactured or processed goods from or into the channels of commerce, or the prices of such materials or goods in commerce; or (d) causing diminution of employment and wages in such volume as substantially to impair or disrupt the market for goods flowing from or into the channels of commerce" (NLRA, p. 1). Passed around the midpoint of the Great Depression, this legislation was first and foremost an intervention against the widespread usage of strikes by increasingly militant bodies of workers. By providing a state sanctioned mechanism for labor disputes that did not impact what is referred to and naturalized as "the current of commerce", "the channels of commerce", and "the flow of raw materials or manufactured or processed goods", the NLRA aimed to reestablish the "sound and stable industrial peace and the advancement of the general welfare." (NLRA, p. 20)

It is worth noting that Roosevelt's administration was wary of creating legislation that would be interpreted as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, which operated at the time based on relatively strict limitations of what the federal government could regulate, particularly in the economic sphere. The rationale that the Roosevelt administration deployed in order to pass the NLRA invoked a Keynesian notion of the "economy" as a monolithic, mechanical entity that could be streamlined through particular government interventions. This is aptly represented in MONIAC, the monetary national income analogue computer (figure). While this framework for understanding "the" economy has by now become naturalized to a large degree, it is important to recognize that during the Great Depression, it was a much more novel concept. Nevertheless, by

incorporating the naturalistic language of "flow" and "current" to describe commerce, the NLRA reifies the capitalist mode of industrial production as a constant, independently functioning system. It categorically denies any conception of that mode of production as a process of labor exploitation that requires constant state intervention and ideological processes of masking.

As a primary example of such state intervention, the NLRA is saturated in paradox. At the same time that it seeks to portray "commerce" as a naturally and seamlessly flowing entity, the necessity of its existence offers a different portrayal of commerce, one that instead depicts a constant state of friction. The NLRA describes events of "industrial strife" as unnecessarily "burdening or obstructing commerce" as if the flow of commerce is completely distinct from workers and for them to intervene in that flow would be an unnatural intervention. By framing strife as an act of harm against a generalized "public" interest, the NLRA erases the fact that commerce itself necessarily implicates the participation of workers on a massive scale. Against this conception of industrial strife as a process of active obstruction by workers of an exterior entity (commerce), we can more precisely read it as a result of the deliberate refusal to participate by workers. Because they are already situated as an integral mechanism of commerce, workers create strife merely by ceasing to act in that mechanistic role. The NLRA's central aim was to prevent this ceasing from occurring, and to the extent that it has succeeded in doing so, it has further naturalized "commerce" as a constantly flowing system, rendering invisible the innumerable nodes at which that flow requires active labor. By diverting tactics of resistance by workers against their employers into state-sanctioned channels of bureaucracy, the NLRA acted and continues to act as a lubricating agent of industrial production.

This lubrication was accomplished in part by the shift in temporality that these new channels of bureaucracy resulted in for the labor movement. Whereas forms of direct action such as strikes could immediately halt processes of industrial production and circulation, negotiations between union staff members, employers, and potentially the NLRB entailed a much more extended process. As a result, the potentially instantaneous leverage that workers possessed against their employers extrinsically to formal unionization became partially obscured in these efforts to stabilize "commerce". In an increasingly post-industrial economic context within the U.S., where finance capital and information technology occupy positions of central importance, this fractured temporality becomes more extreme. At the same time that "commerce" itself has become less materially grounded and more instantaneously transferrable, the process by which workers and their unions struggle to gain legitimation and legal backing from the NLRB has remained painstakingly slow.

Nevertheless, while these processes of bureaucratic obstruction and latency elongate the time frame within which organized labor operates, they do not necessarily prevent workers themselves from engaging in comparatively spontaneous forms of direct action. The recent increase in wildcat strikes in the U.S., particularly among teachers, can be read as prime example in which union members went against their union leadership and the union bureaucracy was compelled to adjust their strategy based on members' direct action. The spread and relative success of these strikes significantly complicates a widespread narrative of the labor movement's inevitable decline, but it remains to be seen how organized unions such as the SEIU will play a role in that movement's future. Moreover, as promising as these tactics of direct action might be, it is not necessarily clear how they might be deployed as a means of disrupting the transfer of finance capital on a global scale. If this recent increase in strikes does in fact indicate a kind of

rebirth for the labor movement, then a key question becomes how that movement will adjust its tactics, developed in the height of American industrial modernity, to a moment in which economic power has in large part shifted from sites of production to sites of transduction (MacKenzie 2002).

Relations of Opposition and Entanglement

It is important to note that public sector unions are constructed around a relationship to the state that is distinct from their private sector counterparts. Whereas the effects of the state in private sector unions are not directly apparent in moments of negotiation until the National Labor Relations Board becomes introduced as an arbitrating, ostensibly neutral force, many state-effects (particularly at the state and local level) in public sector unions like Local 2020 are more readily apparent. As a result, public sector unions occupy a position of constant entanglement with those state effects. This is not to say that private sector contract negotiations are not framed by the state in the form of labor law but rather that in addition to that framing, public sector unions engage with state officials as their opponents in bargaining processes. Because Local 2020 generally represented workers employed by the state or by specific municipalities, the federal government and its National Labor Relations Board became a source of recourse to labor disputes for both sides. As a result, while there was not an assumed neutrality in the relationship between Local 2020 and the state government, the assumption of neutrality at the level of the federal government was crucial to the Local's efforts. In part because of this, Local staff members were keenly aware of the forms of power that corporate interests held in state legislative bodies and were in a near constant state of struggle to balance out those powers. Whether they were attempting to leverage their position against state bureaucrats or seeking to

forge alliances with particular candidates or elected officials, they succeeded in their efforts to the extent that they possessed and deployed an intimate knowledge of those governing communities.

Overwhelmingly, union staff members (as well as particularly active members of the rank and file) discussed and interacted with the state not as a monolithic, bureaucratic machine but as a complex yet penetrable assemblage of social actors (Abrams 1977). Moreoover, those social actors were not always simply anonymous, atomized individuals assembled into a state system; more often they were intensely familiar. Particularly during the meetings of Local 2020's Committee on Political Action, committee members placed a huge emphasis on any interpersonal relations that they had with political candidates. When deciding which candidates to offer financial support to, political statements on paper were typically trumped by experiential forms of knowledge of their political careers. If no one on the committee had a relationship of familiarity with a candidate, this was generally taken as a valid basis for skepticism if not outright distrust. If they were truly an ally of labor, they likely would have been known on some level by the committee's regular attendees, who were all well seasoned in the local labor movement.

In situations where the Local staff attempted to leverage power against local or state governments, they attempted to intervene in those governments not only on a performative, but also a concrete and tactical level. In response to the compromise in the state legislature that abruptly concluded the Raise Up! Campaign, which aimed at gaining rights to paid family and medical leave and a $15 minimum wage statewide, Fred acknowledged that "we were outmaneuvered by the retailers." Within this rhetorical framework, the state legislature exists simultaneously as an assemblage of social actors but also as the imagined space of contention

between the competing interest groups of corporations and unions. Later, this became more

tangible to me as I followed Fred as he dashed around the state house, attempting to convince as

many legislators as possible to support a bill allowing public defenders to unionize. I was

shocked by the personal familiarity he had with many of them; as friends or as enemies, he knew

the state as an institution comprised of people. Despite the fact that the earlier Raise Up!

campaign's major goals were legislated, retail lobbyists managed to undo a law mandating that

workers be paid overtime on Sundays and holidays. More importantly, many union staff

members and activists were upset by the fact that this compromise was negotiated in a closed

door meeting between state legislators and many of the larger unions involved in the campaign.

This form of negotiation with the state in effect evaporated all of the energy that had been

mobilized via the campaign by drastically and instantaneously delegitimizing role of grassroots

participation in the campaign. Because the legislation never even made it to the ballot, it was not

felt as a victory by those who worked on the front lines of the campaign. The varying degrees of

revolutionary imagination that had characterized the campaign were thus deferred to an

indefinitely postponed future.

While he framed this compromise as a defeat, it is nonetheless significant that Fred spoke

of engagements with the state on the part of unions and corporations alike in terms of

maneuvering. Framed in this way, the state was not a fixed entity which could be engaged with

only through specific, controlled checkpoints. Rather, the state could be seen as a complex

network of actors and effects moving through space and time which could in turn be accessed

through well-calculated tactics. In Fred's own words, "Politics is messy….We're not a big

player." Particularly regarding other union locals, many of which were also affiliated with the

SEIU, Local 2020 possesses very limited means of intervening in politics at the state, let alone

federal, level. Nevertheless, Local 2020 was still a "player" in the political landscape and formed

tactical alliances with various community organizations in order to expand on that power. Part of

what made the Raise Up! campaign noteworthy in the first place, despite its anticlimactic

conclusion, was that it relied on a complex network of social relations beyond the scope of

unions. My work with the campaign brought me into contact with groups that on their surface

have very little to do with any form of labor politics. Most notably, I attended a number of

religious services in order to gather signatures and raise awareness for the campaign. In a partial

sense, this campaign involved a periscopic model of organizing. It did not engage only with

microscopic struggles in isolated workplaces or communities, but neither did it originally engage

with the state in a telescopic gaze upwards either. It instead involved a process of looking

outwards for alliances in communities and organizations spanning vast distances. While its goals

were limited to particular legislative ends at the state level, the varied social networks that it

developed to meet these ends were not limited in such a way. If its grassroots potential had not

been undermined by the opaque nature of the campaign's resolution, its legislative reforms could

have potentially developed into a more robust, long term social movement.

Unionism and State Effects

In contentious addition to its continuous engagement with the state via tactical, political

interventions, Local 2020 was socially constructed around a notion of statehood in its own right.

For one, its social structure was explicitly grounded in the logic of representative democracy as

typified in a U.S. context. It's president and vice president were democratically elected officials

who have oversight (at least in theory) on all matters located within the governing prerogative of

the Local. Similarly, its executive board was comprised of individual union members

democratically elected by each major chapter to represent their interests. Comprised of elected members serving three year terms, the board was roughly analogous to the U.S. House of Congress in terms of its role within the union as a governing community. Beyond these positions of leadership, the complex relationship that rank and file members had with their union can be clarified through an engagement with theories of statehood as constituted through a particular division of labor and the actualization of state effects.

Within Local 2020, staff members and rank and file members occupid distinct (though at times overlapping) roles that intersected with a statelike division of labor as elaborated by Nicos Poulantzas in *State, Power, Socialism*. He writes that "Separated from the relations of production, the State takes up position alongside an intellectual labour that has itself been divorced from manual labour: it is the corollary and the product of this division, and at the same time plays a specific role in its constitution and reproduction" (Poulantzas 1978, pp. 56). Within this framework, the relationship between the state and the division of intellectual and manual labour is circular in the sense that they reify one another. To shift briefly to Foucauldian terminology, the two are mutually constitutive. In addition to the myriad divisions of labor among its staff members, Local 2020 was in part constituted through a division between the intellectual labor of staff and the manual labor of the rank and file. In this case, I am using the terminology of manual labor less in a physical sense than in a social sense of producing social relationships. In this context, the manual labor of union members involves the production of workplace cultures of solidarity in relation to unionism. [3] The occupational role of reps in particular was defined in opposition to that of the members. As was shown in chapter one, their

---

[3] While it is important to acknowledge the fact that a few current staff members have been hired directly from the Local's membership, the vast majority of both reps and organizers are college-educated individuals hired from outside the Local.

work involved acts of abstracting and representing the collective and individual interests of members to their employers. More specifically, they worked to inscribe those interests and by extension, subjectivities, in the textual form of grievances and contracts. As a result, the union model of representation necessarily withheld certain forms of knowledge and power from the rank and file. This hierarchical division did emerge from deliberate efforts to oppose the powers wielded by the state and by corporate interests more generally, but it also reified some of the key systemic dimensions of a capitalist state. While this division of labor was to an extent necessary in order to ideologically produce and reproduce the the union as a legitimate state-like apparatus, that legitimation involved a process of profound alienation and distancing between union members and the union itself.

Beyond this division of labor, Local 2020's constant struggle for a state-like status involved a variety of ideological efforts to bind workers' identities to their participation in the union. Drawing from a particular vein of leftist thought which adopts an expansive conception of statehood as "system" (Abrams 1977, Poulantzas 1978, Trouillot 2003), I understand the state to exist primarily as a project of ideological legitimation. My arguing that Local 2020 is engaged in a similar project need not imply that I am denying the stark power dynamic between the union and the state government. Rather, I intend to illuminate the particular ways in which the Local 2020's ideological efforts of statehood are necessarily limited by that power dynamic and more specifically by the union's envelopment within a hegemonic U.S. state. Trouillot in particular offers a call for anthropological analyses of states, not as concrete entities but rather as systems that gain recognition and legitimacy to the extent that they produce state effects. One such state effect he identifies is an "an isolation effect", which constructs simultaneously the atomized subjectivities of individualized citizens and the collective subjectivity of an undifferentiated, yet

bounded, public. Trouillot also elaborates a process related to the "isolation effect," which he refers to as "an identification effect." (Trouillot 2003, pp. 81). This effect describes the process by which citizens come to realign themselves along the lines drawn by the isolation effect. This contradictory dimension of both effects, in which they simultaneously inscribe individual and collective subjectivities, provides a linkage to the processes by which workers come to identify as union members.

Much of the labor of Local 2020 staff members, elected leaders, and rank and file activists involved efforts to cultivate a sense of solidarity among current or potential union members. During my conversations with organizers in particular, notions of workers' collective identities were repeatedly referenced as a facet, if not the primary goal of their work. As we sat down next to his cubicle in the union office, Rob began to describe exactly what his organizing work entailed day to day. A self proclaimed leftist, he tended to interject discussions like this with his broader political worldview and the revolutionary future that he hoped to be a part of. According to him, one of the most immediate steps towards this future was "just getting people to see that they're not atomized, that they're connected to the other people in the college, or the workplace in general, and how they all work together to make everything happen...getting them to see that collective power is definitely part like of our day to day work." In Rob's view then, "collective power" was both the goal of his work and a preexisting fact that was necessarily present but obscured within the workplace. On a localized scale, his organizing efforts were directed less towards the formation of an abstract and undifferentiated public than towards a more experiential understanding of a collective identification. However, if these organizing efforts were successful, these experientially grounded forms of collective power were then necessarily transduced into formal, contractual participation in Local 2020 as a simultaneously

democratic and bureaucratic institution. At that point, isolation and identification effects were deployed in an effort to render the Local, comprised of a diffuse network of unrelated workplaces, into a cohesive social entity.

As in the case of the more hegemonic states that Trouillot describes, this deployment involved abstract processes of collective and individual identity formation, most notably the democratic elections which determine various leadership positions in the SEIU, ranging from shop stewards to the International Presidency itself. Through these democratic processes, Local 2020 engaged in a project of ideological state formation through the formalization of the individualized subjects as atomized voters and of an undifferentiated total public congealed around these principles of democratic participation. This kind of "public" necessarily entailed a degree of anonymity. It was constituted not by experiential relations but through the abstract imagining of social belonging, represented in moments of textual inscription such as voting (Warner 2002). Within this scaffolding, the executive board members became institutionally exalted as the the democratically elected voice of the membership. In relation to the International, the executive board's power and audibility far surpasses that of the Local staff members. For instance, the executive board's unanimous resistance to the threat of a jurisdictional hearing imposed by the International was a pivotal factor in that threat's reversal, possibly more so than any actions performed by the Local staff. Operating squarely within the logic of representative democracy, the International situated the executive board as a transparent representation of the interests of the Local membership as a whole. This process by which the membership became voiced to the international will be addressed at length in the next chapter, but it is worth mentioning here that it evidences the efforts of the union to enact a third state effect, one of legibility.

Despite the extent to which the SEIU and Local 2020 specifically attempted to enact all of these state effects, I want to reemphasize the fact that these attempts were constantly limited by the presence of U.S. state hegemony. Regardless of the degree to which a particular worker identified as a union member, the fact remained that they were subjected to the laws of the U.S. state and were vulnerable to the threat of punishment and potentially violence by that state. Surrounded on all sides by a pressurized political and economic environment in which the authority of the U.S. state is largely invisible, the union's ideological efforts to encapsulate the identities of its members through isolation and identification effects were repeatedly unwoven. Similar to how Trouillot describes the limitations of state power outside of the North Atlantic, where "the centrifugal forces inherent in political and economic dependency gather enough strength to significantly challenge the centripetal direction of the state" (Trouillot 2003: pp. 92), Local 2020 was perpetually trapped in the gravitational field of U.S. state and economic power. It was precisely this centrifugal pull which enforced its hybrid status in between a state and a corporation. Because the Local was ideologically and materially unable to generate a public outside the context of U.S. state hegemony, it became situated in part as a private institution capable only of partial representations of its membership.

Janus, Unions, and the Public

As tenuous as this hybridized identity had always been, the Supreme Court decision in *Janus vs. AFSCME* rendered it legally and financially untenable. Specifically in the case of public sector unions such as Local 2020, the court ruled that the extraction of agency fees (partial union dues) from workers constituted a violation of their free speech rights. Whereas union dues can be understood as a monetary contribution (usually deducted automatically from wages by the

employer) that constitutes membership in the union as a social and democratic entity, agency

fees are instead lesser monetary contributions that are supposed to compensate for the specific

union service of contractual representation detached from any platform for voicing oneself

within the union. In simpler terms, agency fees allow workers to access the union as a corporate

institution; dues allow workers to access it as a state-like one.

Leaving aside for a moment the bizarre alchemy by which the contribution of money to a

union became read as a speech act, it is necessary to highlight the fact that this case applied

specifically to public sector unions due to the extent to which the court perceived them to be

entangled with political interests. In the case of *Janus*, the court read even the most fundamental

union actions such as grievance processes and contract negotiations as issues of "public concern"

which therefore merited "special protection" of first amendment rights (585 U.S_2018, p. 31).

The Janus decision rested on the fact that "even union speech in the handling of grievances may

be of substantial public importance and may directed at the "public square."....For instance, the

Union respondent in this case recently filed a grievance seeking to compel Illinois to appropriate

$75 million to fund a 2% wage increase….In short, the union speech at issue in this case is

overwhelmingly of substantial public concern." (585 U.S_2018, p. 31) It is important to

acknowledge here both that John Janus was an outlier in advocating for decreased government

spending at the expense of his own salary and that as a well paid, salaried employee, he did not

represent the vast majority of public sector union members. Still, the fact that the contradiction

between his "free speech" and his own economic interest became a central tension of the case

helps to illuminate the positionality that it ascribed to unions in relation to the state and to the

economy.

In disaggregating the "public" and "private" spheres, the *Janus* ruling also extracted

reason from notions of interest and power by relegating the former to the "public" sphere. It

therefore unraveled some of the key assumptions that underwrote the passage of the NLRA, most

importantly, the lived experience of class struggle between workers and the ruling class.

Whereas the *Janus* ruling relied on a heightened concern for free speech and for individuals'

ability to express some form of "reason" (broadly conceived), the NLRA framed the stakes more

concretely in terms of maintaining "sound and stable industrial peace and the advancement of the

general welfare." (NLRA, p. 20). Taking the "general welfare" as a given fact, the NLRA

represented in part an attempt to unify a profoundly fractured American public around a

monolithic notion of "the economy". While reason was present here in a masked form via this

naturalized assumption of "general welfare" in relation to economic progress, it did not surface

in the form of deliberate speech acts that it does in the case of *Janus.*

This particular demarcation of "private" and "public" spheres as a means of undermining

the ability of public sector unions to collect agency fees from non-members was operative

precisely because it exploited two of the primary tensions that I am concerned with here: 1.) the

hybridized corporate and statelike identity of unions like Local 2020 and 2.) the contradictory

relationship between the Local's statelike identity and the state government itself. By defining

unions as neither exclusively corporate nor exclusively statelike but rather selectively

emphasizing particular attributes of each, the *Janus* ruling legally undermined the efficacy of

both these functions. Referring to the agency fee system, the opinion of the court states "that this

arrangement violates the free speech rights of nonmembers by compelling them to subsidize

private speech on matters of substantial public concern." (585 U.S_2018, p. 1) By framing the

collection of an agency fee as an act of "private speech", the court situated unions as

corporations that actively represented the private concerns of individual members. However, following the court's logic, Mark Janus's rights were not infringed simply because the union collected money from him in order to provide a variety of services. Those rights were infringed instead by the fact that his union could potentially intervene in the processes of U.S. state and federal governance. Therefore, the court's decision departs significantly from the "service model" of corporate unionism examined in Chapter 1 by expanding public sector unions' sphere of influence into issues of "public concern".

Still, understanding the collection of an agency fee as an infringement of free speech rights was only possible to the extent that the democratic processes employed in order to elect union leadership were erased. While the court did not situate public sector unions simply as institutions that charge workers a fee in order to provide services to them, neither did it go so far as to acknowledge the possibility that unions might be understood in governmental terms not so different from the U.S. state itself. It was precisely through the erasure of unions as ostensibly democratic spaces in which workers could voice themselves that the U.S. court system became the necessary platform by which individuals like Mark Janus could voice themselves. If unions were understood in these democratic terms, the absurdity of the court's argument would become readily apparent.

For instance, if we can roughly analogize union dues to the taxes that all U.S. citizens pay, it would be a profoundly radical notion to read the process of tax collection as a violation of free speech rights. To do so, one would have to refute the fundamental principles of democratic governance that the U.S. political system operates based on and provide an argument for the dissolution of the state itself. Based on those democratic principles, the act of speech does not occur at the site of tax collection but rather in the voting booth. While it is rarely the case that an

individual approves every single mechanism that their tax dollars contribute to, they can ostensibly voice those critiques effectively through the democratic election of representative government officials. This same logic could apply to unions like Local 2020 except for the fact that they did not wield the level of hegemonic authority that the U.S. state did and that they were positioned in opposition to that state. By dislocating the site of conflict for Local 2020 and other public sector unions from the sphere of concern for the public of union members to a broader *American* public, the *Janus* ruling represented an attempt to erase that former public altogether and to reframe it as an arbitrary group of atomized workers.

Emerging Identities

Despite the threat that the *Janus* decision introduced to public sector unions and the dangerous precedent that it set for unions more generally, it is worth noting that as of this writing, most public sector unions and Local 2020 in particular have seen minimal decreases in their dues paying membership. To be clear, many former agency fee payers have ceased to contribute any money to their unions, but the vast majority of union members were and remain full dues paying members. Some attribute this to a drastic increase in internal organizing efforts by unions such as the SEIU in response to the court's decision. Others place a greater emphasis on the peer pressure that dues paying members exert on their coworkers who may be considering "free riding". In either case, the limitations of *Janus*'s impact provide strong evidence that unions such as Local 2020 can persist without the corporate rhetoric of "service" that is inscribed in the process of agency fee collection. Moreover, these limits may offer a lens for understanding the potential that unions like Local 2020 have to subvert U.S. political and economic hegemonies through the establishment of countervailing democratic processes.

Midway through our conversation on his organizing work, Rob was struggling to find words for exactly why he believed unions to be empowering for workers. At first he noted that the union "provides democracy in the workplace which is like amazing." Understood in these terms, the union was located not in the union office and certainly not in the executive board of the International but rather in the workplace itself. By introducing "democracy" into the workplace, the union wielded a certain potential to transform that workplace into a democratic space exterior to the institutions of the U.S. government. Still, I could tell right away that this answer was not enough for him. After a series of pauses and false starts, he stated with a sense of urgency that "beyond that….it provides an avenue for growing, just like, as an *individual*, as a person, and becoming more….more like you have *purpose*….I think it builds like your *identity*." This caught us both off guard. Up until now, our conversations had always gravitated towards notions of workers' collective identities, of social relationality and class solidarity. For Rob to ground the value of unions in the formation of workers' *individualized* identities was deeply surprising, even jarring to me.

In retrospect, I think this conversation might offer a means of understanding unions as an effort of countervailing statehood. As an organizer, Rob constantly navigated the interstitial space between workers' experiential knowledge and the representations of that knowledge which became abstracted and transduced into the hierarchical network of union bureaucracy. To an extent then, his job was to bridge the division of labor that Poulantzas identifies as a key tenet of capitalist state formation and reproduction. From this positionality, he was profoundly aware of the degree to which individuality became lost in these processes of transduction. In mimetic relation to the isolation and identification effects of modern capitalist statehood, the SEIU mapped the body of its membership as an undifferentiated public comprised of atomized

individuals who voiced themselves through democratic elections. However, as Rob was keen to point out, this paradoxical tension between individual and collective identity was not necessarily operative in the social context of the workplace itself. There, the union became a resonant space in which each worker's individual and collective identities developed less abstractly than experientially. This particular kind of identity formation departs from the highly individualized logic of the *Janus* which decision but also from the ephemeral performance of democracy narrated at the outset of the chapter, both of which imagined individuals as atomized subjects. In the context of their workplace, union members constituted themselves as a social body instead through mutual entanglement. They clarified their individual and collective union identities simultaneously through acts of voicing to an audience that was both present and familiar.

On the day that the *Janus* ruling was announced, I attended a meeting at one of Local 2020's largest chapters, a hospital located in a low income neighborhood. Sitting around a table in a break room that had just become the site of weekly union office hours, I was surrounded by recently elected rank and file leaders. These elections had taken place in part through the collaborative efforts of organizers and reps referenced in chapter one. I watched as they voiced themselves to Jorge, the executive board member who was elected years ago to represent their chapter. He sat with his arms folded on one side of the table, his posture shielding him only slightly from the voices of his coworkers. A rep, an organizer, and myself were dispersed around the table, remaining silent for the most part as the recently elected chapter leaders sat facing Jorge, articulating statements as assertive as, "I'm done being silenced" and "We're done with the closed door negotiations of the past."

Crystal, the recently elected chapter president at this hospital, was particularly vocal about the politics of race in their workplace. She had come in on her day off to be present at this

meeting and specifically to talk to Jorge. As a black, first generation immigrant from Senegal, her election was met with significant resistance among some of the union members. By this time, a petition was circulating questioning the validity of her election. This petition centered on the fact that she was at one point present in the room where voting was happening and had helped the Local staff member present by passing out unmarked ballots to members. In doing so, she unwittingly broke a rule designed to prevent voter fraud, but beyond her presence in that space, she in no way threatened the right of members to maintain anonymity while voting. In response to this petition calling for another election, she sought to talk to Jorge, who was known to be at least tangentially involved in the petition.

She called on him to "Put some water on the fire," to speak openly about any concerns he had about her future as chapter president. While gesturing towards a more peaceful future, she also firmly and explicitly claimed that this petition was predicated on a degree of racism, asserting: "This is because I'm black. It's because of racism. I know that….But I will never give up." By acknowledging the reality of racial tensions among her union chapter, she foregrounded a dimension of the union that was partially masked by its abstraction as a public. Whereas that public was defined around an undifferentiated collection of anonymous, atomized subjects, Crystal performed an alternative to this public in the form of participatory democracy (Lipsit, Martin, and Coleman 1956). She asserted her place in the union not by looking upwards towards its hierarchical structure of governance but by making herself present and audible to those in her workplace who might otherwise think of her as an outsider.

Chapter Three: Tracking, Transparency, Transduction

A Third Attempt

For the third time that week, I walked up to the doors of Davis Middle School. It was just past noon and unbearably hot out. I was on my own. During my two previous attempts, I repeatedly rang the doorbell and tried to open each of the many side doors along the school's perimeter. Both times, they were all locked and no one answered. Lucky for me, the door was open this time. I walked tentatively into the air-conditioned lobby, where I could already hear the distant back and forth of a faculty meeting. I decided not to bother them for the time being and to try to search for the two custodians I was looking for on my own. Beyond their names, Jose and Dylan, and the fact that they were Local 2020 members, we were completely unfamiliar. I walked down every corridor of the school without finding them, but the wet floors and various mop buckets and trash barrels clued me into the fact that they were here recently. "Probably just on lunch break," I thought to myself. I approached the teachers' lounge and knocked lightly on the open door, asking "Do you know if the custodians are here today?" Someone replied, "Yes, but I don't know where." I walked around the building once more, this time searching every classroom, bathroom, and closet. I even happened to enter the custodians' office, but it was vacant. I did notice a bulletin board with a few official SEIU documents attached to it and Jose's ID hanging up on the adjacent wall. Finally I could put a face to his name, but that face was one dimensional, withholding everything but the vague hint of a smile.

Eventually I ran into Dylan, the other custodian, in the school library. I recognized him by his "Davis Custodians" T shirt. I was a wearing a T shirt too, labeled Local 2020 and subtitled, "Stronger Together." He was still on his lunch break but doesn't seem to mind talking

to me, so I sat down with him at a table that was just a little too small. He was young, probably in his late twenties, with a slightly unkempt haircut. After brief introductions, I told him the reason I'm here: To get Jose and him to sign a card formalizing their consent to pay union dues. I briefly explained the Janus case as an effort to undermine the power of unions but don't mention the highly charged relationship between the Local and the International. Before long, he agreed to recommit to the union. As he filled out the card, I ask him how he felt about this work. He responded that he didn't mind it, but knowing this was not really what I was asking, he added that he was frustrated by the lack of bargaining power that he and his chapter members had to leverage against the city of Norwich: "At the end of the day, they have all the power...They get to skimp us". I mention that one reason for this imbalance was that his contract did not allow him or his coworkers the right to strike. He laughed dryly and responded, "I don't know who the idiot was who signed that back in the day."

After a brief but increasingly awkward silence, I asked him if he grew up around here. He replied that he was born in the adjacent town of Bradbury, same as me. As we exchanged memories I was surprised by the extent to which they overlapped: we went to the same house of pizza, the same convenience store, the same public high school. He reminded me of some of my older friends, the ones I used to drink soda and play basketball with. Our shared nostalgia was interrupted when Jose walked in. He sat down at the table with us immediately. Older than Dylan by at least fifteen years, he seemed to be in remarkably good shape. He was wearing the same shirt as Dylan but had tucked his into a well fitted pair of pants. He was the senior custodian at this school, and I could tell based on his appearance that he took pride in his work. After he greeted me with a warm, broad smile, I explained that I was here to get him to sign a card which would represent his voluntary choice to pay union dues. He agreed right away but read the card

thoroughly before signing it. As he continued to inscribe in this card his address, date of birth, phone number, etc. Jose asked me if I knew their rep, Josh. I replied that I knew him fairly well and that we actually worked together recently at a ratification vote for the Norwich cafeteria workers. I then relayed Josh's own statement that this contract was "a first step" but that they were still being "seriously underpaid". Unthinkingly, I added that the cafeteria workers were the worst paid of any of the Denison public school employees; only after did I consider that this might have come across as dismissive of their own dissatisfaction with their wages. To my relief, Jose responded passionately, "Yeah, they have it really bad," and Dylan added, "I believe it." Eventually, they both had to get back to work, and I had over ten more schools that I needed to visit in order to gather all of Denison custodians' signatures. I departed reluctantly with two stiff cards to remember them by.

This process of gathering cards was the first of many acts of transduction that came to define Local 2020's recommitment campaign. An emergency effort initiated in response to the dual threat posed both by the *Janus* decision and International's threat to hold a jurisdictional hearing, this campaign incorporated virtually all staff members in some capacity. Despite the seemingly mundane, bureaucratic materiality of these cards, their collection was of central importance to the Local's futurity as a social entity (Hull 2012). The International's threat was ambiguous and spectral in a number of ways, but it seemed directed at least in part to perceived inability of the Local to represent its membership in a bureaucratically legible way. To the extent that the International's threat could be distilled into a singular imperative, it would revolve around the ability of the International to conveniently surveill Local 2020 and its membership. If the Local did not rapidly align itself as a transparent lens by which its membership would

become clearly legible to the International, the International would transfer those members to other Locals, ones which could render them more immediately legible.

Within my team comprised of Josh, a rep, and Rob, an organizer, my primary role was to gather cards from all of the Local's chapters in the public schools in the city of Denison. Situated at the fringe of Local 2020's geographical jurisdiction, Denison was not an accessible or familiar location for either of my team members. We decided that since I grew up and was currently living in the next town over, it made sense to assign me to reach out to those members who were not immediately accessible through events like ratification votes or chapter elections. Whereas those events would allow for virtually all chapter members to be asked to recommit simultaneously, union members such as the Denison custodians were not scheduled to convene as a whole in the time frame necessary to prove the Local's viability to the International. Instead, I reached out to union members at the schools where they worked, gathering cards one by one as I developed temporary relationships with each member in order to convince them to pay their dues.

At the Union Office

I arrived in Braintree at about ten in the morning to help out with data entry. The office was almost completely empty. I stood in an unoccupied cubicle, gradually working through the pile of recommitment cards to my left. Leaning over the desk, I tried to align Dylan's card with the superimposed frame shown on my phone through the app, Office Lens. After a few seconds spent minutely adjusting the position of my phone, the red frame on my phone flashed, indicating an adequate alignment. Instinctively, I snapped the photo as soon as it came into focus and saved it to OneDrive, where I had stored all of the previous card photos. Over and over

again, I transduced these course, stiff, at times wrinkled cards into a digitized form. An hour later, I sat in the same cubicle, my eyes darting between two computer monitors as I meticulously entered the data inscribed on recommitment cards into Winmill, our membership database.

As both Carlos and Lana had warned me, this software was extremely glitchy; every act of data input had to be double checked before moving on. Unlike the missing cards tracker, an alternative software made up of color coordinated, aesthetically flat spreadsheets, Winmill was a layered and somewhat opaque software. To use it correctly, I had to learn to navigate the many layers of depth that allowed for it to contain the totality of the Local's membership data. Beyond the mechanics of the software itself, I was surprised by the number of instances in which we already had an up to date card on record for a member, where the scanned card I was working with was completely redundant. I wracked my brain thinking about the multiple instances in which a lack of communication might have resulted in this needless repetition. I gave up after realizing that I was spending time that could be used to input more cards. By this time it was late in the afternoon, and my mental stamina was dwindling with alarming speed. Despite rapidly diminishing returns, I transduced the few remaining card scans on the flash drive Carlos had given me into Winmill. Letting out a deep sigh of both exhaustion and relief, I started to pack up my things. As I walked to my car, I wondered how many errors in the system I had become responsible for.

A week earlier, I had attended the staff union meeting[4], an event planned in juxtaposition with the more regular *all* staff meetings, where Local leadership and higher ranking staff

---

[4] As is common among contemporary U.S. unions, Local 2020 staff were themselves unionized in order to protect their own rights as workers. When I asked one rep to explain this further, he replied somewhat jokingly that "unions are notoriously bad employers."

members would be in attendance. A staff union meeting is one of few spaces in which the cohesion of the Local staff is explicitly called into question. It is a space in which staff members who do not occupy leadership roles in the Local can voice their concerns, frustrations, and demands to one another. This particular meeting centered on the voices of Carlos and Lana, who both worked in the dues processing department. The problem itself was relatively uncomplicated: understaffing. Ever since the Local stopped outsourcing dues processing to an exterior agency, these two staff members had been responsible for the work that was once done by eleven individuals. Now that the recommitment campaign had begun and massive numbers of cards needed to be entered into the system, Carlos had become increasingly overworked: "It's just ridiculous. I can tell you, like, we really need help. If not, it's gonna get out of control, like things'll start falling through the cracks." This grievance was met with resounding empathy and appreciation from the staff present. As one organizer lamented, "It feels like we've failed to make things work on the inside."

Eventually, Rachel called Sarah and Fred into the room, and they stood up in front of all of us. I was unsure whether this moment felt more like we were putting them on trial or like they were about to discipline us. After Carlos and Lana explained their position, it was clear that Sarah was affected. She responded with equal parts empathy and frustration; she was facing internal dysfunctions that predated her election on all sides at the same time that she is attempting to combat multiple existential threats to the Local itself. Tuned into her extraordinarily taxing position, Pete reassured her, "We're in this together." The meeting ended inconclusively with a consensus that there was no readily available short term solution for understaffing but that given the precarity of the Local's futurity, none of us were in a position to think about a long term solution. For the time being, a few organizers and myself agreed to put in

extra hours helping Carlos and Lana with data entry, hoping that we might have been enough to seal the cracks in our system for now.

Transduction

This chapter examines the relationality between union members, Local 2020 staff, and the International in terms of transduction. Building off of my analysis of the union and its state effects in the previous chapter, I will now shift my focus to the processes by which the Local attempted to prove its legitimacy to the International by re-aligning itself as a transparent lens through its membership could be viewed. This re-alignment was facilitated by a chain of signs but also by the human relations through which the subjectivities of union members became transduced into legible data within a software apparatus. Unlike a term such as transfer, transduction entails an alteration of not only of location but also of medium (MacKenzie 2002). As the two narratives above evidence, these transductions did not occur automatically but were facilitated by the presence and labour of at least one transducer. The fact that the results of these transductions were presented to the International as a seamless, transparent flow of information is indicative of the extent to which the human labour of both union staff members and union members became rendered invisible. Moreover, just as an electrical transducer such as a loudspeaker inevitably loses some energy in the transfer from one medium to another, the transduction of union members' subjectivities involved to a large extent an erasure of those subjectivities. For the duration of the chaotic moment of the recommitment campaign during which nearly all staff members' work involved transduction in some form, the eventual output of these transductions was aimed towards a goal of representation. In order to prove that Local 2020

was a union worthy of a future, we first had to reconstruct the Local in a form both visible and legible to the International's gaze.

This representation was constructed to a large extent around an assemblage of spreadsheets, labeled as the "missing cards tracker" and typically referred to simply as the "tracker". By examining in depth the mediating roles that this tracker came to occupy in transducing a chain of meaning through this network, I hope to shed light on the moments of distortion that characterized this process. My aim here is not simply to take these moments as evidence that the tracker was an inaccurate representation of the Local. While it is true that the tracker was not as precise a medium of representation as Local staff and leaders might have liked the International to believe, this fact alone does not tell the whole story. Rather, I want to emphasize that seen in a critical light, these distortions can be understood as indicators of how the labor and struggles of Local 2020 staff members and rank and file members themselves were erased during this transduction. In other words, the discrepancies that characterized the transduction of information through the missing cards tracker are evidence not so much that the tracker itself was not working but rather that part of its function was to erase the struggles and power relations experienced by Local 2020's staff. Formerly established chains of meaning within the Local relied on communicative modes in which staff members were able to inscribe their subjectivities. Part of the significance of the missing cards tracker was that it facilitated communicative pathways which circumvented these acts of subjective inscription. In part because of its ideological positioning as an objective and transparent representation of the Local's membership, the tracker obscured the subjectivities of staff and rank and file members whose labor facilitated that positioning.

Before going further, I wish to emphasize that my aim here is neither to praise nor condemn these processes of tracking or any individuals involved in them but rather to analyze the social transformations that accompanied them among Local 2020's staff. Beyond this, I aim to foreground those staff members' creative and strategic responses to an increasingly present technological apparatus. To be clear, I am not writing this under the assumption that technological apparatuses are inherently dehumanizing or exploitative. Similar to Donna Haraway, I am optimistic of the potentially emancipatory dimension of technology (Haraway: 1985), particularly as a tool for developing a robust labor movement. However, it is worthwhile to recognize and explore the fact that technological apparatuses like the missing cards tracker did not emerge as autonomous entities but rather reinscribed and reified existing networks of human relations. In light of this, part of my aim in this chapter is to examine the tracker not simply in terms of its technological effectiveness but rather as a lens which is revealing precisely due to its distortions and opacities.

"Still Backed Up"

Other than the sunbeams peeking through the office's windows, the meeting room was lit solely by the projection of Alex's computer screen onto a blank, white wall. He was seated to the left of a few members of the Local's leadership including the chief of staff and vice president, all of whom remained quiet while he prepared to begin a lesson on the missing cards tracker. Though he was not generally referred to by it, his own official title was "director of member services and operations." The other three sides of the rectangular outline of tables were occupied by the remaining union staff members, all of whom were silent as he started speaking. From the start, he highlighted its scope and accessibility: "Every single member, every single

chapter,….who the individual [is] that we're missing the card for. It's in there, very easy. So I'll show you that…" This was the second all staff meeting in a row in which a software training session led by Alex had taken up the majority of time, and by then his voice had taken on a quality of relaxed authority. After Alex provided some broad statistics regarding the percentages of union members that have signed recommitment cards, some staff members began asking questions relating to the process of scanning cards into the system. As this query started to gain momentum, he deferred it until after the meeting and instead requested impromptu reports from each team: "We can talk about those scanning processes offline, cuz….I actually got a whole training to do (Connor: "Ok", Lauren: "Alright"). I don't want to talk about scanning right now. I just want to hear from the teams, how they're being successful and what….challenges their seeing." One by one, he called on members from each team to account for the tracker's numerical depictions of their progress and to explicate a plan to increase that progress going forward.

When he got around to Randy, a rep who had been hired a few months ago, the atmosphere of the meeting took a subtle turn. Alex initiated the discussion with the same formula that he had for the previous four teams: "Team Blasano, um, 245 cards identified. Collected 10 cards. Collected 4% of your cards. [pause] Um, feedback, challenges, what's going on?" By the end of this question, his voice had shifted from the even recitation of the tracker's categories to a more disappointed yet pressing tone. 4% marked the lowest rate of card collection among the teams at this point. Keenly aware that he was being prompted for an explanation of this rate, Randy responded calmly: "Time. I've got a chunk of cards I haven't put into winmill yet….It's a matter of actually getting the time to….put the information in winmill." As this back and forth unfolded, Alex emphasized the importance of inputting cards into the tracker regardless of

whether they had been entered into Winmill yet. He went so far as to instruct Randy: "As soon as you get those cards please I.D. them on the dashboard so we can know what you have….Actually the dashboard will track what's been entered into Winmill. So if you have physical cards, we would know you would have "x" amount of physical cards, and they're still not in Winmill. We're tracking that also."

By this point of the recommitment campaign, the tracker had become foregrounded as an indicator of Local 2020's progress to a greater extent even than Winmill, the database of the Local membership itself. Whereas the tracker was easily though only partially accessible to staff members, Winmill was far less user friendly. This was due not simply to flaws in its design but more so to the fact that it needed to contain and portray a vast assemblage of membership data. Despite its visibility in meetings like this one, the tracker's role was much more limited. It mimetically represented the data that was either currently present or would later become present in Winmill. Despite the fact that the maintenance of membership data in Winmill was a significant, long term struggle for the Local due in large part to understaffing, that struggle was obscured behind the contained, palatable presentation of its membership in the tracker.

Beyond this subtle shift in emphasis from Winmill to the tracker, I recall being somewhat confused by Alex's use of "we" at this point. His instructions to Randy seemed to be aimed towards an endpoint in which "we can know what you have," but what specific group was this "we" articulating? Was he implicating the entire staff in this project of tracking? Or was he locating himself among the Local leadership, a group of authorities who were responsible for this kind of oversight? Alternatively, given that he constructed the tracker specifically as a representation of the Local to be made visible to the International, could Alex be using "we" in

order to situate himself as part of the International, or as a connection between the Local and the International?

Before I could follow this thought through, I noticed that Pete was raising his hand next to me and attempting to interject into Alex's monologue. The longer Alex spoke, the more he seemed eager to chime in. Since all of the reports were stated by members from each team, Alex had begun the lengthy process of outlining the forms of encoding present in the tracker. This task was formidable as the tracker contained data relating not just to membership status but also voter registration status and a variety of metrics for evaluating the progress of individual teams. Though Pete's murmur of confusion remained almost inaudible, Alex yielded to him: "I'm sorry, go ahead Pete." Pete began by referencing one of his chapters "where there's nine of them in the thing, and some of them are most assuredly gone, and they're still listed as like member active….So I would like a definition if you would of what those different member active, nonmember, missing dues, ahhhh…the status, means because it's very confusing sometimes when you know somebody's not there, but there's somethin that says they're member active. That seems, uh, antithetical to-" Alex abruptly cut him off, responding flatly: "Lauren has defined those statuses for us," before postponing the question until later in the meeting.

Though Pete's question was primarily regarding a semantic concern over how different categories of members were being defined, the various "statuses" that the tracker demarcated were by no means insignificant. Because of the pressures emerging simultaneously from the Janus decision and the International's threat to hold a jurisdictional hearing, statuses such as "member active", "missing dues", and "member inactive" held a significatory importance far beyond their semantic distinctions. The tracker's importance was predicated on the assumption that these signifiers be read as objective representations of the Local's cogency as a social body.

As a result, the statuses depicted and particularly their percentages in relation to the membership as a whole carried the weight of Local 2020's futurity. Simultaneously within and beyond these broad categories, the tracker also depicted various signifiers of the status of the data forms themselves, terms like "verified in Winmill", "total updated", "pending upload", and "winmill outstanding". Highlighted in green, these categories served primarily as indicators to Alex. He only referred to them peripherally during the lesson; they did not pose any serious concerns regarding the tracker's accuracy or transparency. Still, read in a critical light, they hint at the degree to which discrepancies between the tracker and Winmill were commonplace. These discrepancies resulted in large part from the latency between when a recommitment card became collected and when it became transduced into Winmill.

A few minutes after Pete's interjection, Alex was still attempting to articulate what certain statuses within the tracker signified while also asserting his own authority regarding those statuses: "*The admin upload* could mean that the card was uploaded into the system by someone, whoever….and they haven't ID'd it. What I do is I go check….I'm the only one that can make these changes. I am verifying in winmill that those cards are actually, are in the system. So, if I say yes, that means I verified that this card is in the system. Because nobody checked it off, I mark it as admin upload….That's what that means, that we have the card. It's been uploaded into the system." By positioning himself as the mediator between the card tracker and winmill (the database containing all of the Local's membership information), he effectively became the missing link between the two. If it were not for him "verifying" that the data in the dashboard and winmill were synchronized, there would always be chaotic disjunctures between the two, which in turn would undermine the ideologies of transparency which governed the increased usage of softwares in the first place. However, the system did not always work as neatly as this

explanation would imply, a fact which categories like "pending upload" and "data to be cleaned" hinted at and which staff members were keenly aware of. Amidst the nods and murmurs of comprehension, Pete decided to probe further: "So let me ask you this. When it says member active, is the inference…. that they're actually paying dues?" This time, Alex did not respond immediately. Rather, after a moment of awkward silence, Carlos intervened quietly with a simple "No." Struggling not to laugh, Pete shot back; "Then what the fuck's member active mean?"

As the scattered laughter began to diffuse throughout the room, Carlos explained soberly that "The issue is we're still behind on entering dues (Pete: "Ok?"). We're still backed up, and how it works is I enter it….in chronological order, so I go from whenever you guys collect [inaudible] all the way to today's date (Pete: "Ok"), and as I'm entering dues, it tells you if they paid that month, or week, or whatever. (Pete: "It'll say") It'll say member active." Carlos was perfectly comfortable with Pete's near constant interruptions. They did not threaten his technical authority but actually reinforced his desire to explain these complications. "The minute they stop showing up on the roster as I'm entering it, it becomes missing dues. If I know that they['re], (Pete: "Ok.") not employed, then it will automatically come up as unemployed. But the problem here is if the, if we're not getting rosters from the employers that don't tell us that, it's gonna keep saying missing dues until somebody figures it out….We're always gonna run into that. That's never gonna change unfortunately." Rather than explaining the tracker based on its formal logic as structured by Alex, Carlos brought our attention to moments of distortion in the tracker resulting from the slippage between the statuses of "member active", "missing dues", and "unemployed". By emphasizing the periods of latency between when a member's status changed and when that change became codified in Local 2020's software apparatuses, Carlos also foregrounded the human labor necessary in order for the tracker to become a transparent

representation of the Local. Given the fact that the dues processing department of Local 2020 was particularly understaffed and that this lack of human investment substantially compromised the tracker's accuracy, we can read Carlos's narrativity as an incisive critique of the heightened agency attributed to software technologies during the campaign.

In light of the struggles that Carlos voiced in the staff union meeting referenced earlier in this chapter, his repeated usage of phrases like "as I'm entering it" and "we're still behind" carried a particular sympathetic resonance for those who had heard his grievances previously. By placing himself as a worker in relation to the software technologies of tracking, he shifted the discussion from the tracker as an autonomous, transparent means of representation to complex internal power dynamics within the Local that delineated staff members' efforts of tracking it. Possibly more importantly, his intervention also made explicit reference to the the oppositional role that members' employers occupied in relation to our efforts of data collection. When he claimed that "We're always gonna run into that. That's never gonna change unfortunately," he was not simply expressing a pessimism employers would never be mandated to send the local updates regarding members' statuses. Rather, by situating these employers as a constant impedance to his department's efforts to maintain the data of the Local's membership, he emphasized the extent to which the Local needed to actively mandate its members' employers to communicate changes in their rosters. Simultaneously, he implicitly referenced the role that internal understaffing issues played in the Local's inability to declare and legitimize such a mandate. In addition then to the workplace conflicts experienced by Local 2020's members, Carlos also shed partial light on the tensions experienced by Local 2020's staff members working within the bureaucratic asymmetries of a professionalized, hierarchical union.

Tracking, Legibility, and Surveillance

Before going further, I want to outline more clearly what the missing cards tracker was, why it was created, and how it transformed social and semiotic relations between the Local and the International. Comprised of various spreadsheets detailing information for all teams and for the Local as a whole, the tracker was intended to be used by staff members as a tool for getting recommitment cards signed. Each team's spreadsheet ascribed particular statuses to individual union members, and staff members were instructed to target all individuals who had not yet signed a recommitment card, typically indicated by the status "missing dues". The Missing Cards Tracker also included a meta-data set called the dashboard which numerically represented the progress of each team and ultimately, of the Local as a whole. These metrics carried particular significance not only for members of the Local's leadership such as Sarah and Fred but also for officials representing the International. Therefore, the form of "tracking" facilitated by this software was both stratified and linear. It involved simultaneously the efforts of Local 2020's staff members to track individual members, the efforts of Local 2020's leadership to track staff members, and the efforts of those working at the level of the International to track Local 2020 as a singular entity.

In the previous chapter, I discussed Local 2020 as an organization that attempted to enact state effects upon its members, particularly the isolation effect and the identification effect. The processes and technologies of tracking that emerged during the recommitment campaign evidence a third state effect of legibility, defined as "the production of both a language and a knowledge for governance, of theoretical and empirical tools that classify, serialize, and regulate collectivities, and of the collectivities so engendered." (Trouillot 2003: pp. 81, see also Scott 1998) In the case of Local 2020, we can situate the tracker itself as a primary example of these

"theoretical and empirical tools" and particularly as a tool directed towards "the production of both a language and a knowledge for governance." However, despite the agency that became attributed to the tracker by Alex and other Local leaders, it still relied on the labor of individual staff members in order to transduce members' subjectivities from conversations to cards and finally into the software itself. This legibility effect therefore implicated a number of events of transduction and signification beyond those contained in the tracker itself. Borrowing from Michael Silverstein, I understand these transductions as "real-time chains of semiotic (communicational, verbal) events." (Silverstein 2004: pp. 650) Conceptualizing the tracker in this way is useful in that it does not assume the existence of an unimpeded flow of information but rather foregrounds the communicative human relations within the Local that transduced that information into new technological spaces and forms.

Additionally, considering Local 2020's legibility effect as a chain of meaning allows us to trace that legibility in multiple dimensions. On the one hand, the International attempted to render the Local 2020's membership as a legible social whole by threatening to dismantle the Local. On the other, Local staff members and leaders themselves engaged in a project of rendering the Local membership legible to themselves. More complex than a dualistic hierarchy between a governing community and those being governed, the recommitment card campaign involved multiple layers of legibility and evaluation. As this campaign became an increasingly central goal of Local 2020 inextricably linked with its survival, Local staff members' labor became evaluated in correlation with the percentage of their team's membership whom they had gathered cards for. The tracker therefore reflected the International's disciplinary effort to realign the tripartite relationship between rank and file members, Local 2020 staff, and itself. This process of realignment centered on an increased legibility through transparency, but this

transparency assumed a fixed directionality along which both rank and file members' and staff members' subjectivities became transduced into bureaucratically legible, numerical assemblages of data. These assemblages were at no point made accessible or visible to the rank and file. At the same time then that the Local was becoming realigned as a transparent representation of itself, encompassing both the membership and staff, the International maintained a spectral presence, simultaneously invisible and authoritative.

Here, I rely in part on Michel Foucault's theoretical framing of discipline in relation to technological development, particularly of the "telescope, the lens and the light beam." (Foucault 1975: pp. 171) Partially analogous to a telescope, the missing cards tracker involved a magnification of Local 2020 members positioned at a bureaucratically imagined distance from the International's gaze. In order for this magnification to occur, the Local staff had to first be realigned as a transparent representation of those members. This realignment was not attempted by officials from the International; they remained situated outside of the Local and could only perceive it via the telescopic lens of the tracker. Instead, members of the Local leadership and particularly Alex became implicated as agents of this disciplinary process. In Foucauldian terms, he was located within a system of "hierarchized surveillance," as one component of a "relational power that sustains itself by its own mechanism." (Foucault 1975: pp. 177) As one actor in this technologically embodied system of relational power, Alex did not cause or initiate these efforts of surveillance. He too was subjected to the gaze of the International at the same time that he extended that gaze to other Local 2020 staff members. Still, it is worth looking in depth towards precisely how his authority within the Local increased through his intimate, authorial relation to the tracker.

***Technocratic Powers of Transparency and Erasure***

While supervision of Local 2020 staff members by the leadership long predated the missing card campaign, the tracker dramatically curtailed the range of possible forms of input legible to that supervision. Prior to the campaign, all staff meetings included apportioned times for organizing reports and rep reports, during which nearly all members of those departments would speak to the entire staff about some of their most significant efforts and difficulties. During the rep report slot of one meeting, Catherine stated casually and spontaneously that the Natick municipal workers were "very happy. I don't think we need to worry about them." Shortly after, Anita expressed her frustration that "We weren't able to get the [contract] language" that she initially wanted. After a few more minutes had passed, Randy voiced his satisfaction that members of his chapters were beginning to take union organizing into their own hands and becoming more assertive in contract negotiations. It was tacitly understood that all of the reps would report on their work before the meeting progressed further, but they did so on an elective basis and often responded collaboratively to previous reports. Although these reports were never truly voluntary in the sense that someone would be able abstain from giving one, earlier meetings allowed for staff members to vocalize themselves spontaneously and to frame their work for themselves. In those meetings, staff members tended to speak in a narrative form emphasizing the interpersonal context in which they were working with Local 2020 members.

After the campaign began to gain momentum, the form of these conversations was significantly altered, in large part due to the shift in emphasis towards digital mediums for representing the staff members' progress. To be sure, staff members did not immediately abandon this earlier narrative style of speech, but they struggled to do so and particularly to contextualize their work in juxtaposition to the quantized data expressed in the tracker. Rather

than individual staff members initiating a discussion voluntarily regarding their recent work, representatives from each team were required to account for the hypervisible data which was literally and figuratively projected an indicator of their progress. Because the dashboard and the data that comprise it were assembled in such a way to make each team's progress directly comparable and therefore competitive, the particularities of each team, each chapter, and each member became flattened in this process of transduction. These particularities surfaced obliquely in each staff member's explanation of their team's percentages, but such acts of voicing were allowed only slight amounts of time and were necessarily framed by the terms already presented by Alex: "I just want to hear from the teams, how they're being successful and what….challenges their seeing." The vast majority of these later meetings were devoted not to acts of personal explanation but instead to extended surveys of the data that existed in the dashboard and a process of instructing all staff members on how to correctly record the results of their labor into the software.

In addition to these normative changes in how staff members were expected to vocalize themselves, Alex's role in the first all staff meeting I attended was radically different from the authoritative one that he would later perform. Limited to a narrow portion of the meeting, he passed out a document describing and pictorializing the different avenues by which union members could communicate with the Local and in the worst case scenario, withdraw from the union (Figure 3.1). The document's network of lines and boxes attempted to abstractly represent the flows of union members and their ideas relating to the union while providing gaps in which staff members could insert themselves as agents of resistance to a member's theoretical desire to leave the union. The members themselves were represented by stock images of disembodied torsos holding happy, neutral, and sad expressions obscuring their faces. This document was not

(Figure 3.1)
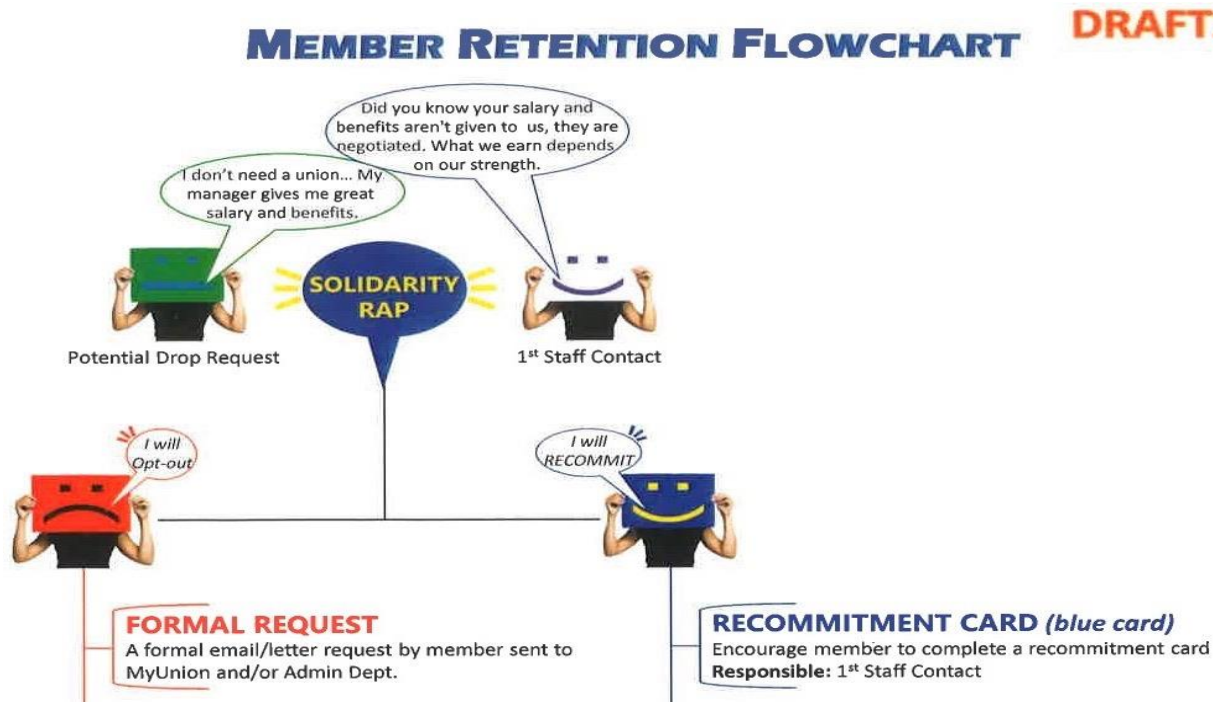
received particularly favorably by the Local's leadership. Fred, the chief of staff, was vocally

critical of it, stating that "What I need to see is more of what happens in the workplace". In light

of this critique, it is worth noting that the "workplace" was hardly represented at all in the

missing cards tracker and in the meetings that increasingly came to be structured around it.

(Figure 3.1)

    In part because it functioned by condensing each individual chapter into a totalizing

representation of Local 2020, the dashboard's legibility was predicated on a lack of specificity

regarding members' specific workplaces and jobs. Moreover, the relative invisibility of the

workplace within the tracker as a whole is indicative of the extent to which both staff and rank and file union members were structurally unable to inscribe their subjectivities in it. Unlike every individual team's spreadsheet within the tracker, where they could input certain forms of information, the dashboard was malleable to Alex alone. As the centralized spreadsheet in which every team's data was compiled and transduced into numerical statistics, the dashboard condensed all of the tracker's spreadsheets into a concise, legible table of statistics. Excluded from any means of editing this dashboard, staff members' engagement with the tracker tended to end at the level of data entry. They were expected to mark a change in status in their individual team's spreadsheet whenever they received a new recommitment card, but the tracker did not allow any space for them to inscribe the context in which the card was received. For instance, it did not show whether the card was signed at a ratification vote, in a one on one encounter, or during an organizing event.

Moreover, the tracker did not allow for staff members to create their own text in the software but instead restricted each box to a narrow set of categories presented in a drop down menu. Somewhat ironically given the emphasis Alex placed on team collaboration during the campaign, it could not represent whether the card was collected by multiple members of a team or not; the drop down menu for that box only listed individual names. To be clear, the spreadsheet software itself was not practically suited to accommodate the complex narrativity of Local 2020's staff members, and most did not did not take editing statuses in the tracker seriously as an initiative to strengthen the Local. This lack of staff members' personal commitment to the tracker renders its heightened importance to the International all the more significant.

In addition to its foregrounded position in relation to the International, the tracker represented an effort to streamline existing channels of communication within the Local even as it silenced others. As such, it partially reproduced and concretized an existing hierarchy among staff members. Part of the campaign involved the sequestering of the staff into teams of three, each one led by a rep and tasked with attaining recommitment cards for all of the rep's chapters. These teams were established somewhat arbitrarily; they bore little indication of the preexisting relations of personal and occupational intimacy among staff members. The decision to appoint reps as leaders made practical sense because their work involved social entanglement with specific groups of members to a greater extent than most other staff members. However, this decision also further solidified a network of power relations which placed organizers at the bottom, reps above them, and the Local leadership higher still.

These teams and the power relations that they concretized did not include staff members in positions relating to dues processing or other administrative tasks. From the perspective of the International, the labor that those staff members' contributed to the missing cards tracker was rendered anonymous, if not wholly invisible. Whereas other staff members could inscribe their names into the tracker, thereby laying claim to an individual member's signature, staff members whose jobs involved administrative work in the union office itself could only inscribe themselves into the tracker through the vague and anonymous term, "admin upload." As the de facto head of the "admin" department, Alex was the only one of these staff members poised to receive any recognition for this labor from the International. Moreover, while relatively few cards became transduced into the tracker through an "admin upload", nearly all of them involved the labor of the admin department in some capacity. The transduction of these signatures into the tracker and Winmill was in fact a massive component of their work day to day. The positionality of staff

members like Carlos and Lana within the tracker was therefore unlike that of most other staff members, who could briefly enter the tracker in order to inscribe evidence of their labor in it. Instead, they were so perpetually involved in the processes of tracking that they were rendered invisible in the tracker itself; their subjectivities were both trapped and obscured within its presumed technological transparency.

These processes of reification and erasure are revealing of a broader ideological shift stemming from the International and extending through the directives of Local 2020 leaders. As the increased presence of the tracker in all staff meetings indicated, the emphasis on internal communications among Local staff had begun to drift away from lived conversations and towards a technological apparatus operating through the logic of transparency (Hetherington 2011). Unlike in the first meeting I attended, in which Fred critiqued Alex's use of software to represent the social relations between staff members and the rank and file, Fred congratulated Alex on his work in the dashboard. He brought the meeting to a conclusion by remarking that "this is such a step up from where we were, right, to have total transparency and accountability, everything up on the board, we can see where we're at. We're, we're getting to be *data driven*, right, and moving towards, uh, the twenty-first century here." Framing the Local's situatedness in the 21st century as being conditional on a "*data driven*" model, he implied that the adoption of this model was the inevitable cost for participating in the contemporary moment. This participation in the present required not only that the Local utilize data to relate to and represent its membership but that data itself adopted a position of agency, of driving the Local's futurity.

By connecting the Local's progress to "transparency and accountability", which were in turn enabled by a "*data driven*" workplace infrastructure comprised of an expanding software apparatus, Fred attributed this apparatus a tremendous degree of agency and near Messianic

potential. Deploying an ambiguous "we" in a way that echoed Alex's speech from earlier in the meeting, he placed the value of the tracker and the data that it contained in the way in which facilitated the ability of the Local to represent itself, not only to the International but also *to itself*. For Fred, the allure of the tracker did not revolve around its function as a strategically useful, if distorted, representation of the Local. Rather it centered on the fact that it offered simultaneously the possibility and realization of a cogent means for self reference, for "total transparency and accountability, everything up on the board, we can see where we're at." At the same time then that the tracker was constructed as a telescopic lens through which the International could perceive the Local, it was also constructed as a mirror which enabled the Local to perceive itself as a recognizable social body. Depending on whether it was being seen from above or below, the tracker assumed varying roles as either transparent and magnifying or opaque and reflecting.

Differentiating the Local

Looked through from either of these positions, the tracker's legibility was reliant on multiple distortions and erasures. We have already examined the extent to which the labor of union staff like Carlos and Lana were erased in the tracker's presentation of data. To an even greater extent, the tracker obscured the labor of rank and file members themselves by objectifying them as data to be represented. It portrayed them primarily in binary terms; either they signed a card and recommitted to the Local or they refused and opted out. The numerical percentage of members who signed recommitment cards was foregrounded in the tracker as a barometer of the Local's health and viability as a union. However, my relatively extensive experience collecting these cards did not support this dichotomous framework. For the majority

of union members I interacted with, the cards were not treated as a medium for support or rejection of the union. The stakes as they saw them were much lower. The cards represented to them either a minor inconvenience disrupting and therefore prolonging the rhythm of their working lives or an opportunity to temporarily escape that same rhythm.

Conversely, for the most active and invested rank and file members, their entanglement with the Local far surpassed the forms of recommitment that were legible within the tracker. Structured around a fixed division of labor between union staff and the rank and file, the tracker could not accommodate the reality that union members themselves became actively involved in its chain of meaning. They did so not simply as initial representations of themselves in the form of signatures but rather as transducers of those signatures in their own right. By obscuring these instances in which rank and file members worked to facilitate this boundary, the tracker marked an effort to police the boundary between the rank and file and staff of the Local (Abbott 1995). This positioning of union members and particularly chapter leaders as agents of the recommitment campaign was heavily emphasized during staff meetings even as it was being continuously erased in the tracker. Alex repeatedly instructed us to ask them to collect cards from their coworkers. One rep in particular, Catherine, was repeatedly praised because she collected more cards than any other staff member. When asked to explain how she was being successful, she readily admitted that she had by and large delegated card collection to her chapter leaders. In part because she had worked at the Local for many years and had known a number of those leaders for the bulk of that time, she had no problem asking them to collect cards for her. Their long term entanglement allowed for her to delegate the campaign in this way. Inversely, a newly hired rep like Randy had no long term relations with chapter leaders that he could have

relid on. For him, delegating in such a way was impractical because of his lack of familiarity with those members.

While their long standing relations with chapter leaders proved crucial to the ability of staff members to successfully collect cards, these entanglements were not represented in the tracker. As a result, the stark difference in the numbers of cards that Randy and Catherine had collected was attributed simply to a difference in the degree of effort they put into the campaign. The tracker functioned by abstracting staff members from the contexts in which they worked, by hierarchically differentiating the staff and the rank and file in a way that only partially reflected those individuals' efforts of navigating the Local. This differentiation is indicative of the extent to which the International's disciplinary efforts were directed towards the Local as a mechanism of financial extraction rather than as a democratic space in which workers' participated actively. Within the tracker, democracy surfaced only obliquely in the form of statuses like "voter active," which related only to processes U.S. republican governance. It presented no metrics for the extent to which members were democratically participating in their own union.

Audibility and Disemia

I want to conclude this chapter by emphasizing the subtle ways in which staff members resisted the heightened emphasis placed on these processes of transduction and tracking. This resistance took the form of the persistent refusal to recognize the missing cards tracker as a transparent representation of the Local. Despite the ways in which existing power relations were exacerbated and new ones were produced in this moment of dual crisis, staff members responded to the crisis in large part by persevering their day to day relations with union members. For them, the Local's futurity did not involve an abstract representation of its membership through

software tracking. It involved instead a recognition of the importance of continuity, of remaining present in their ongoing experiential relations with members.

After Alex had wrapped up his training session and the other brief items on the all staff meeting itinerary had concluded, all of the reps and myself remained in the conference room for an impromptu meeting. As soon as the door closed, people began voicing their frustrations with these recent all staff meetings and particularly with the extent to which they focused almost exclusively on the missing cards tracker. All of the pent up frustration generated during those meetings was then released in a moment of profound catharthis. Similar to the staff union meeting referenced earlier, this event was predicated on the acknowledgement of dissonance, of the particular ways in which the Local had become out of sync with itself. These expressions of dissonance had been present in all staff meetings as well but in the form of sidelong utterances and critiques that were audible only to those tuned into their particular register.

In this later meeting, those critiques became amplified in an example of what Michael Herzfeld refers to as "*disemia*-the formal or coded tension between official self-presentation and what goes on in the privacy of collective introspection." (Herzfeld 1997: pp. 14) Local staff members and specifically reps performed an engagement with the tracker in all staff meetings by fulfilling the coded script provided by Alex. When prompted, they were willing to present a narrative explanation of their efforts of tracking in terms of success qualified by particular challenges. However, in the absence of Alex's presence, they collectively expressed the extent to which they considered these meetings to be distractions from their real work of engaging with their chapter members. Overworked since long before the recommitment campaign or the *Janus* decision, these reps had precious little time to waste. Given that they lived and worked across the union's diffuse geographical jurisdiction, some expressed that coming into the union office was

itself a waste of time. The union office and all of the meetings that took place there were not primary sites for their work but retained significance instead as physical and imagined spaces in which they could work to produce and reproduce the Local as a social whole.

In tandem with reps's efforts to enact the union's futurity by preserving relations of continuity with their members, they also did so by reproducing the social category of "reps" itself. During this moment of vocal frustration, that category and its accompanying identity became defined not through a software apparatus and its presentation of numerical statistics but in reps' ongoing, unquantifiable commitments to union members. In their acts of disemia, which simultaneously recognized the authority that the tracker had accrued while collectively playing with the limits of that authority through vocal performances of critique, reps maintained a critical distance both from the tracker itself and from the forms of technocratic authority that had accompanied it. This performance of collective disemia was necessary in order to resolidify their collective dedication to building relations not with the International but with Local members themselves.

Coda

I think it is necessary at this point to clarify that the recommitment campaign was not the only means by which Local 2020 staff and rank and file members responded to the International's threat to dissolve their union. In contrast with chapter three's depiction of a response that to realign staff members towards the International through the mechanics of the missing cards tracker, I will now shift my focus to a response that foregrounded the voices of union members themselves. Whereas the tracker served in part to erase particular forms of labor and contestation that it obscured. Towards the end of my fieldwork, Local 2020's executive board collectively drafted a letter to the International expressing a unanimous resistance to its decision to hold a jurisdictional hearing. That letter was based on the following reasons:

> "Whereas: This decision is premature, not based on any post-Janus membership data, and totally undemocratic; and
> Whereas: This decision will alienate our members at the exact moment when -- because of the Janus decision -- we need to be in better harmony with them; and
> Whereas: The membership alienation caused by this top down, undemocratic decision risks losing more members while not solving the very real problems our union must tackle; and
> Whereas: This decision will be used by our enemies to illustrate how SEIU is not an organization of, by and for the members, but instead is behaving just like any other corporation."

Rather than attempting to pick apart this incisive language, I choose for the most part allow it to speak for itself. However, I do want to highlight one critical choice. By referring to "our enemies" in the first person plural subject position, this letter rhetorically binds the Local to the International. At the same time that it expressed a robust plan of resistance to that International's threat, it envisioned a future in which both levels of the union would be unified against their common enemies. Interjecting these enemies into a discussion that the International had previously framed internally as a technical choice of bureaucratic reorganization, this letter

broadened its scope and stakes to the broader socio-political field that obstructed the work of the union at every turn. In doing so, it made transparent the fact that the crisis of the jurisdictional hearing was initiated primarily as a defensive tactic against that field and specifically to the *Janus* ruling. Calling out the International's threat as both undemocratic and misdirected, this letter argued for a future labor movement in which Local 2020 and the International would become reunited against the powers of U.S. capitalist hegemony.

Shortly after my fieldwork concluded, I was notified that the International had rescinded its threat. In part due to the phantom-like quality which characterized the International's communication with the Local in both the posing and rescinding of its threat, it is unclear to what extent this was due to the recommitment campaign, to the executive board letter, or to some other unknown factor. For an indefinite future, Local 2020 would be subjected to unusual and somewhat intrusive mechanisms of evaluation, and these evaluations likely introduced new tensions in the lives of my interlocutors. Still, for the time being, that future had been resurrected. As of this writing, it still lives and breathes in the grueling work of union staff members, elected leaders, and rank and file members.

Bibliography

Abbott, Andrew. 1995. "Boundaries of Social Work or Social Work of Boundaries." *Social Service Review* (December): pp. 545-562.

Abrams, Philip. 1977. "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State." *Journal of Historical Sociology* Volume 1, No. 1 (March 1988): pp. 58-89.

Althusser, Louis. 1970. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press

Burawoy, Michael. 1979. *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Coulter, Kendra. 2012. "Solidarity in Deed: Poor People's Organizations, Unions, and the Politics of Antipoverty Work in Ontario." *Anthropology of Work Review* Volume 33, No. 2: pp. 101-112

Durrenberger, Paul and Reichart, Karaleah. 2010. *The Anthropology of Unions*. Boulder CO, University of Colorado Press

Fantasia, Rick. 1988. *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action, and Contemporary American Workers*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA. University of California Press.

Figlio, Karl M.1976. "The metaphor of organization: An historiographical perspective on the bio-medical sciences of the early nineteenth century." *History of science* Volume 14, No. 1: pp. 17-53.

Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* London: Penguin Books

Griffith, David. 2009. "Unions without Borders: Organizing and Enlightening Immigrant Farm Workers." *Anthropology of Work Review* Volume 30, No. 2: pp. 54-66

Haraway, Donna. 1985. "A Cyborg Manifesto". In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 291– 324.

Herzfeld, Michael. 1997. *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics and the Real Life of States, Societies, and Institutions*. New York, NY. Routledge.

Hetherington, Kregg. 2011. *Guerrilla Auditors: The Politics of Transparency in Neoliberal Paraguay.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Hirschman, Albert. 1977. *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before Its Triumph.* Princeton, NJ. Princeton University Press.

Hull, Matthew S. 2012. *Government of Paper: the Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan*. University of California Press.

Janus vs. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees. 585 U.S (2018).

Latour, Bruno. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Lewis, David. 2016. "Abandoned Pasts, Disappearing Futures: Further Reflections on Multiple Temporalities in Studying Non-governmental Organizational Worlds." *Critique of Anthropology* Volume 36, No. 1: pp. 84-92

Lichtenstein, Nelson. 2002. *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor*. Princeton, NJ. Princeton University Press.

Lipset, Seymour Martin; Trow, Martin; and Coleman, James. (1956). *Union Democracy: The Internal Politics of the International Typographical Union*. Glencoe, IL. The Free Press.

Milkman, Ruth and Voss, Kim. 2004. *Rebuilding Labor: Organizing and Organizers in the New Union Movement*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press

MacKenzie, Adrian. 2002. *Transductions: Bodies and Machines at Speed*. New York, NY. Continuum.

Marx, Karl. 1846. *The German ideology*. In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert Tucker. New York, NY: Norton & Company.

McAlevey, Jane. 2016. *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

National Labor Relations Act. (1935). 29 U.S.C. 151-169.

Poulantzas, Nicos. 1980. *State, Power, Socialism*. London: Verso.

Rosenfeld, Jake. 2014. *What Unions No Longer Do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Silverstein, Michael. 2004. "'Cultural' Concepts and the Language Culture Nexus." *Current Anthropology* Volume 45, No. 5 (December): pp. 621-652.

Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed.* London: Yale University Press.

Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin. 2003. *Left Out: Reds and America's Industrial Unions*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 2003. *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World*. New York, NY. Palgrave Macmillan.

Warner, Michael. 2002. "Publics and Counterpublics." *Public Culture* Volume 14, No. 1
    (Winter): pp. 49-90