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Neoliberal Higher Education: Background of the Pennsylvania State College and University Faculty Strike of 2016

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Dr. Rachel Riedner is Professor of Writing and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the George Washington University where she serves as Executive Director of the University Writing Program. Dr. Riedner's research brings analysis of global circulation of gendered and racialized rhetorics to an interest in transnational feminist activism. With Kevin Mahoney, she is the author of *Democracies to Come: Rhetorical Action, Neoliberalism, and Communities of Resistance* (Lexington Books 2008). She is also the author of *Writing Neoliberal Values: Rhetorical Connectivities and Globalized Capitalism* (Palgrave MacMillan 2015) as well as multiple essays and book chapters. In the late 1990s, Rachel worked as a labor organizer for the United Auto Workers (UAW), organizing part time faculty and graduate student workers.

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In October 2016, more than 5,000 faculty members and coaches in the Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculties (APSCUF) walked off their jobs in the first ever strike in the union's thirty-four-year history. Representing faculty at fourteen campuses, APSCUF struck for three days until a settlement was reached with the Chancellor of the state system, Frank Brogan. The strike pushed back the Chancellor's efforts to institute operational changes that included a recalculation of who could be considered part-time faculty and the ability for the system to move tenured professors from campus to campus. Concessions included higher health care contributions. "Three Days in October: APSCUF Strong," ed. David Chambers, Erika Frenzel, Nadene L'Amoreaux, Jamie Martin, and Robert Mutchnick, *Works and Days* 35 (2017).

In April 2018, we had an extensive conversation with two of the faculty leaders of the strike, Seth Kahn from West Chester University and Kevin Mahoney from Kutztown University, both professors of rhetoric and composition, to discuss how the union developed a culture that was able to effectively push back efforts by a new generation of administrative leaders to degrade faculty positions. As Kahn and Mahoney explain, the strike was a decade in the making, beginning with a new, more neoliberal leadership in the state system, who negotiated what union leaders called a "barebones contract" in 2004. Starting then, a new generation of faculty leaders, including Kahn and Mahoney, steered the APSCUF leadership to start mobilizing for fights over faculty contracts. This new generation of leaders created a culture around organizing that responded to changes in higher education that is part of neoliberalism: policies that value and advocate for strong property rights, "free" markets, trade policies and local and international agreements that claim to assure individual and social freedom. In fact, as economic policy, neoliberalism means withdrawal of the state from social services such as education or health care, and the upward redistribution of wealth.¹ In higher education in Pennsylvania and other states, neoliberalization took the form of administrative efforts to save money by hiring more contingent faculty and shifting more costs to workers, particularly around health care.

In the late 20th and 21st centuries – under administrative appointees who were both neoliberal Democrats (a term that Kahn and Mahoney discuss) and Republicans – academic labor has moved, like other industries, to a more casual model. This shift in higher education policy prompted higher education professionals far more comfortable with

¹ For further discussions of neoliberalism, see Rachel Riedner, *Writing Neoliberal Values*, xii, (London and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015); Lisa Duggan, *Twilight of Equality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005).

traditional academic research to turn their research expertise and energy to their own working conditions. That turn to analyze labor was a process through which faculty in the Pennsylvania State system learned labor literacies – another term that Kahn and Mahoney extensively discuss.

In the following excerpts from our interview, Kahn and Mahoney discuss how they got to the point where a strike was possible – a long personal process of learning about labor and injustice, to when they joined APSCUF as junior faculty members. After becoming faculty leaders, and after a series of disastrous contracts, Kahn and Mahoney were central figures in a cultural process and change through which faculty came to think of themselves as workers.

This interview focuses on events leading up to the strike, including a discussion of Kahn and Mahoney’s lives before APSCUF, rather than the strike itself. Our interest is in the emergent labor literacies that enabled Kahn, Mahoney, and others to build a labor culture within and across the 14 campuses of APSCUF that span the entire state of Pennsylvania where some campuses are hundreds of miles apart. Kahn and Mahoney pointed out in conversation that the strike was successful, *but* the work of pushing back against administrative efforts to degrade contracts and faculty working conditions continues. Excerpts have been edited for length and clarity.

Personal Labor Histories and Mentoring

We asked Kahn and Mahoney to provide a brief introduction that addresses their personal histories and connections to labor organizing that they developed before they were hired as full-time faculty in the Pennsylvania State system.

Gordon Mantler: Do you come from a political family? Is your interest in labor organizing something that is strictly out of your experience and where you find yourselves in your jobs, or are there antecedents to this where it comes to your mom and dad, or the kinds of political conversations you had or did not have at home?

Seth Kahn: My family was a textbook, upper middle class, suburban, Jewish, Democratic family, so hell-raising around the kitchen table, but not especially activist. I don’t know what it was that made me do this, but when I was like sixteen or seventeen years old, I started writing letters to the editor of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution that never ever got published. [Laughter] But I just felt it.

I just felt like saying things. I didn’t really start doing activist things in any meaningful sense until college. The summer before my senior year, I got a job working for Greenpeace. The first ten minutes that I spent in that office, I thought “How the hell did I not know this beforehand?” I had no idea that activism was a thing. Ever since then, it feels really intuitive and

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obvious to do that kind of getting out and talking to people and organizing. That's what you do, or you lose.

Kevin Mahoney: For me, politics became an answer to questions that I had growing up. My parents were divorced when I was five, and both my parents were teachers in public school. My dad left teaching shortly before my parents were divorced when he got involved with the unionization efforts in Utica public schools. He went on to become both an organizer with NYSUT, the New York State United Teachers, and then a negotiator. There's a long line on my dad's side of union involvement. My grandfather was one of the organizers for a printer's union in Rotterdam, New York. Labor had always been in the background.

Right before my parents were divorced, my sister became mentally handicapped as a result of the measles-mumps-rubella shot. She was one in a million, literally—we have court documents showing exactly this—in response to the shot. She was a completely normal kid, and because of both a doctor pressuring my mother to give her the shot, even after I had a severe reaction to it when I received the shot, and then medical malpractice after that, she became mentally handicapped.

My mom had to leave work to care for my sister full-time. That meant we went very quickly into poverty. If it had not been for my dad's union position for medical insurance and things like that, that health care would have been gone. I grew up with food stamps, with negotiating public services for how to deal with handicapped kids. I have distinct memories of shame, both of my sister, trying to negotiate her differences, and then, of my mom having to pay with food stamps at the grocery store and so on.

Long story short, I'd always been interested in the world, and I'd always get upset when I'd see injustices, although I wouldn't have called it that at the time. In high school, I became just more and more of an angry kid. The story that I always tell—I even tell this to my students—is that it was punk rock music that saved my life because that was the first time that I had a political language to help understand systems, but then also the anger and the rage and the shame in a positive way. I mean I was lucky. A kid came skateboarding down my street [laughs] with a Dead Kennedys thing on and said, "Hey, how are you?" It's literally how it happened. James Gigliotti, who's a lawyer now. So, thank God for him.

From there, it became a process of finding spaces. In high school, I'd write little treatises with my punk rock crew. When I got to college in the late 1980's, I connected with a great group of people that were interested in alternative media to doing solidarity work with Central American refugees. We had direct affiliations with the Revolutionary Student Front of El Salvador and started thinking about that kind of mobilization in a

broad base. Most of my politics until then were about U.S. government policy and protests against tuition increases on campus. It wasn't until graduate school when I really started seeing the intersections of what I was doing with labor issues in higher education, in part because in the field I ended up in, Composition and Rhetoric, labor was one of the front and center discussions at that point.

SK: I was about halfway through my Ph.D. program when a bunch of my friends started to organize the T.A.s at Syracuse University. I knew they were organizing, but I wasn't involved with it. One friend knew I had done activist work and had been trained well. They said to me, "We need somebody who knows how to do just like the nuts and boltsy stuff, like how to organize a protest and how to write a petition." Activism 101 stuff. They asked if I would come to one of their core group meetings. The meeting was another one of those epiphany moments where I listened to them for fifteen minutes talk about what they were doing and why, and it was like [slaps forehead], "Duh?!" [Laughter] And I started working with them. It was ultimately a failed effort, but that was when it clicked for me: we organize or we lose.

KM: The first time I got arrested for direct action was in Washington, D.C., trying to block a vote that was going to approve additional funding for Central American death squads. At that time, to give you a sense of where I was, the police would drag us away, and we would fight to get away from them to get back to lock down the doors. At one point, they actually had to bring four different black jump suited people over to pull me away, one on each arm and one on each leg. The guy in the white shirt, the captain or whatever, comes over and says, "Now, son." He called me son—mistake. "Now, son, this is a nonviolent protest." I looked him straight in the face and said, "Whoever said I was nonviolent?" [Laughter]. Not what I should have said! That's when the zip ties got really tight on my hands.

Rachel Riedner: How long have you been a member of APSCUF, and why did you join? Then, after you were hired as a faculty member, what was the moment where you joined APSCUF?

KM: I applied to Kutztown University because I knew of APSCUF. I had a summer internship at the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) when I lived in Washington, D.C., during the late 1990s. As part of working in the Higher Education Office at the AFT, I did background research for an updated report on adjunct faculty. My job was to call people who were in the previous report, as well as other names that had been given to me, and ask if there had been any updates in contract language and/or new innovations that would support contingent faculty rights.

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At this time, Rachel [Riedner] and I were at George Washington University, teaching part-time, and were actively organizing graduate teachers and adjunct faculty. The AFT internship was a great fit. I did background research, and everyone I called kept saying to me, “You’ve got to read the APSCUF contract. That’s the gold standard.” I had no idea what APSCUF was or what the Pennsylvania state system was. Like most people, when I heard “Penn State”, I heard, “There’s Penn State, Nittany Lions.”

At that time, the Pennsylvania State system had the strongest protections for adjunct faculty of any faculty contract. That’s what put the Pennsylvania State system on the radar for me. The only question for me when I was hired at Kutztown was, “When’s the first meeting?” There was no question about whether or not I would join the union. It was just like how quickly could I get myself to a meeting.

It was remarkable, because that August when I called the local union office and I asked, “When is the first general membership meeting?” I was told, “We don’t have general membership meetings generally.” I was like, “What are you talking about?” My first conversation with the office manager at APSCUF! But, joining the union was a no-brainer. This was just the next step in a trajectory that had already been there.

SK: I signed my card during the faculty orientation. There was never any question about signing. What enabled my mobilization was our chapter president who had an office four doors down from mine. Every time I walked by Linda Myriades’ office, I would say, “What have you got for me?” Often times it wasn’t actual work, because she didn’t want an untenured brand-new person to work, which I appreciate. But, I got an awful lot of history from her and explanation about what the contract is and does.

In retrospect, the stuff she told me is a lot more cautious and institutional than I would have liked for it to be, coming from the president, but I learned a hell of a lot from her. She’s the person who introduced me to people and got me into the union structure. I could walk by her office three or four times a day and, every single time, she would stop what she was doing. She would say, “Alright, here’s a lesson for you,” thinking, “I’ve got somebody who wants to hear it.”

GM: So, you were quite aware of what APSCUF had been able to accomplish in the terms of the contract. You didn’t know that until you got here, but you learned it quickly from your colleague, right?

SK: I knew that there was a strong union presence, but I didn’t know particular details about it. I had a good friend in my Ph.D. program who

had done his master's in the English Department at West Chester. Because of him, I knew a whole bunch of the Composition and Rhetoric faculty before I got here. There were five or six people who I was already friends with, and they had been talking with me about the union for years. When I interviewed for the job, one of the conversations we had at a meal was like, "Union—awesome!" I got pitched on the union and had a very viscerally irritated reaction with the dean when she started telling me about what a pain in the ass the union is. I said [speaking curtly], "Okay, I get it. I'm sold. I want the union." [Laughter] "You just sold it. I like them better than you! See you in a month."

KM: I'd come out of D.C. with President Stephen Joel Trachtenberg at George Washington University who basically wrote the book on why faculty in higher education are basically the worthless part of the higher education system. Trachtenberg was nothing special. He just gave voice to tendencies that were going on in higher education at that point. I had been trained through the union organizing at George Washington University, from the folks at United Auto Workers (UAW) about how you talk to colleagues, how you build a rap, and why training and organizing is important.

Shift to Neoliberal Model

We asked Kahn and Mahoney to discuss the change in administrative leadership in the Pennsylvania State system, particularly a new strategy that began with the appointment of Chancellor Judy Hample in 2001 bringing in chancellors from Florida who had worked with Republican state leadership. These new chancellors were invested in a strategy of shifting costs away from the state by cutting positions, salaries, and health care costs. These neoliberal politics worked in part by creating political consensus by supporting "liberal" social policies such as domestic partnership benefits – a shift from conservative social politics that was accompanied by attacks on social services.² This new generation of chancellors were a shock to faculty union culture that had previously enjoyed an uncontentious relationship with upper administration. Kahn and Mahoney discussed new chancellor John Cavanaugh who came from the Florida system in 2007.

KM: Before the arrival of Judy Hample in 2001, there was a culture in the state system of higher education where faculty would go up through the ranks, and then eventually become chancellors. There had been an experience and a support for the state system organically from faculty.

² For a discussion of the connections between liberal social ideologies and neoliberalism, see Lisa Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*.

Obviously, there was always conflict between management and workers. That's going to happen. But, before 2001, there was a general commitment to the state system. The story was always told that faculty and management would get together and then solve problems.

Up to this point, APSCUF leadership had been about reasonable defense of the contract. I think that for a long period of time, and the story was always, after APSCUF formed that there'd be fights and people would be rattling their swords. Then, the APSCUF president and the head of the state system of higher education would go into the back, dark room, and they'd come out, and they all had their hands around each other, drinking bubbly, smoking cigars. [Laughter]

That was kind of always the image, the backroom thing, and the solutions were generally quite good. If you talk to some of the older members when we first came in, they say that they didn't feel like the backroom deal sold them out. Actually—the backroom deal was made, and faculty came out okay. This system preserved the contract.

It wasn't until three chancellors ago, when we saw a break with that deal-making culture. The Board of Governors decided to go outside the system and start tapping into the Florida higher education system. That's when we started seeing the divergence.

RR: From your perspective, what's the effect of going outside the system and bringing people in, particularly from Florida? What did that mean to the union?

SK: Then-governor Tom Ridge is a very close friend of the Bush family, which is very well-connected in Florida. That's where I think the pipeline got built.

KM: There were changes happening, probably on the Board of Governors, and there was a turn to market-based approaches that was happening at the state level. In Pennsylvania, these changes followed a pattern in higher education administration that was happening across the country. At this point, now business folks were on the board of governors who think they know better about higher education than anybody else does.

The contract expired on June 30th, 2004 was when things really began to change. This contract was the first contentious contract. This was the first time the deal-making story got contested. The union leadership was really caught off guard and they were unprepared. I'm not disparaging them. They were unprepared for what they were about to face.

Judy Hample was the first chancellor to come from Florida. She went after the union. It was like “Okay, I’m the outside CEO coming into a state-owned higher education system, and I’m looking for ways to maximize its efficiencies and stuff.” She had no personal connections to anyone in the system. Those relationships were gone.

I’ll never forget the contract that came out of those negotiations in 2004, where there were those of us who were younger, or newer, we said, “We should be organizing!” But organizing wasn’t happening within the union. I was really frustrated. I’ll never forget when that contract was done, it was a really bad contract if you stack it up to the ones beforehand.

I’ll never forget (in 2004) there was a press conference where Bill Fulmer, the APSCUF president, stood up and—it almost looked like he was about to cry— and he said, “We recognize this is a barebones contract.” That was the language that he used, and he was clearly shook. I think Bill was shook, in part, because he felt that he let people down. On the other hand, Bill and the union leadership knew they didn’t have any other option. What are you going to say? Are you going to strike? How?

RR: You weren’t ready to strike?

KM: No organizing had been done for a strike, and so there was no other option. I will never forget the look on that guy’s face. That was the turning point for me.

RR: Seth, you said, “There was a division between people who were in love with Chancellor Cavanaugh’s social politics and the rest of us.” Can you describe that division?

SK: With Cavanaugh, in pretty short order, many of us started to feel like, “This is really bad.” I was seeing Cavanaugh’s labor history and what he had done to the faculty on his campus at the University of West Florida. His record was really clear. As an example, a colleague who I have endless respect for otherwise, this person...was like, “I’m so glad that we have a chancellor here who’s interested in talking about domestic partner benefits. The last chancellor (Judy Hample) wouldn’t even [discuss domestic partner benefits]—she would blanch if somebody even used the phrase.” He’d say, “I love this guy because he’s willing to consider domestic partner benefits.” And I’d say, “I hate this guy because he’s a fucking monster, and the fact that he gets one thing right doesn’t absolve him!”

RR: That’s the neoliberal Democrat.

SK: Yeah!

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KM: That's exactly it.

KM: I think Cavanaugh's politics were especially effective with faculty, too, because, people are writing and researching about identity, and those politics are important and carry a lot of weight. However, faculty don't have an analogous education in academic labor. We're trained in issues of identity, issues of culture.

Preparing for Strike: Labor Literacy and Union Culture

As a series of chancellors hostile to labor moved through upper administration, contracts were weakened. Starting in 2007, Kahn, Mahoney, and other campus leaders began creating the ground work for a potential strike. They successfully ran for leadership positions in the union, replacing a previous generation of union leaders who had enjoyed a collegial relationship with previous chancellors with new leadership who recognized that management/labor relationships were shifting because of the neoliberal model. We asked Kahn and Mahoney to discuss how, over time, they created faculty culture where a strike was possible.

SK: How do you do not just the outreach and getting people to join, but how do you keep people working? How do you develop a leadership chain? How do you get your department reps to do something besides show up at the meeting and grade papers?

KM: I would think even—this is—again, this effort to develop faculty participation goes back to GW. When we were organizing there, I kept on thinking about breaking just through that first step, that barrier of feeling that people have with organizing. Faculty think, “Okay, I don't know how to do this. I feel uncomfortable.” And, then I remember from GW getting people past that first step where you're feeling, “I can do this.”

What's always stayed with me and all through this process of learning to organize is that you cannot underestimate the importance of treating people like people in those first organizing moments and helping them work through discomfort. You need to find real ways of getting people past their fear and discomfort, because it's not just a question of will. Believe me, I came to that conclusion the hard way.

SK: It's true, that human piece of it. We all have full-time jobs, and people have their complicated personal things that they're dealing with. There's a lot of moving parts here, in terms of trying to get any kind of union activity (besides paying dues and voting) to happen, and they're complicated.

RR: That's what happened when we were organizing at GW. Preparing ourselves to organize meant a reorientation, at least to GW people, from one kind of identity—a graduate student identity of critique and analysis—to identity of self-confidence and activism and labor, where people hadn't had a labor consciousness beforehand.

KM: Yeah.

RR: The steps that the UAW organizers took us through at GW were very physical. You have to literally have your body moved around, to change its orientation to be more assertive and active.

KM: I'll never forget—even doing like the exercise of going up and knocking on someone's door, and how unusual that activity is in a faculty-academic environment, to go up and knock on the door of someone you don't know, and you're there to ask something of them. [Laughs]

SK: We have these kinds of communications channels set up like Raging Chicken Press, and because I'm a pretty obsessive blogger, and that we're both social network junkies. We spend a lot of time just talking to people and listening. We walk up and down the hallways and have these conversations.

RR: What was the narrative that came out of this moment of organizing? I know from my own higher education colleagues that organizing and building a union is not what we've trained to do. As labor leaders, you prepare colleagues for organizing by building relationships through which you can prep them for organizing.

KM: Right, you have to prepare them. The shift to organizing is like anything else. A leader can lay out all the facts in the world, but until you've got a story and a narrative to frame it for folks, to give them a handhold into what you're actually talking about, it doesn't mean anything.

What was really useful at that point is that that was the kind of move we were making. It wasn't about trying to assemble the facts. We said to our colleagues, "You led with the story." "Here's the background." Of course, you've got the facts, you've got the research, you've got stuff behind it if people want to dig in. But, you know, the narrative is what we had down at that point, and that became absolutely critical for people to kind of buy into quickly.

The conversation we had locally at Kutztown and even at legislative assembly was, "Here's what [Chancellor] Brogan is." People would raise questions, "Well, how do you know? Maybe—he seems like he might be

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okay.” “Well, no, he’s not.” “Well, how do you know that?” I was able to say like, “Well, because I called the union guys down at Florida Atlantic University where he was at and I asked them.”

You could see people’s face go kind of like, “Oh.”

RR: That’s labor literacy.

KM & SK: Yes.

RR: Faculty get it. But you have to bring them there. You have to create a narrative that they can attach themselves to. In some cases, for example with scientists, you have to say, “Okay, I’ve done research or I have data. I can back up what I’m saying.” The strategy differs, depending if you’re talking to a scientist or a humanist or whoever you’re talking to. But you have to create those literacies and bring faculty to an understanding of what organizing entails.

KM: Yes. I think there’s two aspects to this process. In getting trained as an academic, you’re getting trained to be an expert in a particular area, so you’re learning about your own importance.

I’m not saying that we all think about ourselves actively in that way. But when it comes to asking people to organize—it is a different kind of story than faculty are used to telling. At the same time, it’s the kind of practical stuff that Seth talked about with the strike manual. It’s saying, “What does this work look like in a practical way? What does it look like to ask a person to do a particular task that will get them past an organizing threshold.” It’s saying, “I’m not going to say that you suck because you don’t know how to knock on someone’s door.” I’m going to say, “Hey, look, we can do this! And here’s how we do it.”

SK: Another piece of our efforts was a talk that we wrote together for the 2013—the strike workshop that we did after the big protest outside the chancellor’s office. The workshop addressed how you recruit members into positions where they’re good at—how do you effectively get people to work?

We sent out a survey that asks faculty to give us off-campus contact information, and here’s some other things we’d like to know. There is work that needs to get done at various times, so if you’re good at clerical things, if you’re good at art, if you want to show up at rallies, if you like making phone calls, there’s just a checklist. The survey asked faculty to check all the things that they’re willing to do and check a box that tells us about how many hours a week we should expect to ask you for.

I have a spreadsheet that's set up where I have the answers to all these questions, and if I need somebody to do tabling for something, then I can search in the database for the word "tabling," and everybody who told me that they would do that just gets highlighted. When I send out emails, I'm not sending out emails to nine hundred people saying, "Can somebody do this task?" I'm sending emails out to forty people who have said, "You told me that you're willing to do this. I need you. I need you for this long, I need you on this day, I need you in this place." The more specific the ask is to people who have already told you that they'll say "yes", the more likely they are to say "yes". Just like those kind—so like those kinds of moves. That's a lot of what infused the revisions to those basic organizing moves.

Instead of holding people accountable, the question was, "How do we help everybody get involved. Because, we have a charge.

KM: Instead of it, saying, "Hey, this is what we're doing." We'd start with cross conversations as well. "How did you guys do this?" Or, "What do you do about this?"

SK: We'd say, "Let's all talk about what we do."

KM: It was cool. We'd do round robin check-ins, campus by campus, and each campus would report what they're doing. Very early on everyone was a bit anxious, they'd say, "I'm not doing what I'm supposed to be doing." But there was little judgement at the beginning, and it was about saying, "Oh, you might want to think about this strategy." It was really a space for conversation.

SK: As an organizing committee, we have a formal charge, and the model was, "How do we make sure that everybody can actually take up the charge?" If we trust our charge, then the business of the committee is to make sure that it happens, rather than busting people's chops for not doing it.

KM: At least at Kutztown, there hadn't been an organizing culture, it certainly wasn't something that we were trained in or talked about as a union: how you actually continually activate new members, how you bring new people in, not just have them sign cards to become new members, but actually do things.

SK: You have to learn how to listen to people. When I said earlier that a lot of what I learned was how to soak up people's freak outs, that's one example. I didn't understand how weird organizing was for many of the pre-tenured junior faculty until I was having lunch one day with a colleague who I was mentoring. She was in her second year, and she told

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me pointblank, “There’s a lot of junior people who feel like we can’t even read the emails coming from state anymore, because they’re just so angry, and they don’t mean anything to us. If you want to tell me the important things I’m supposed to have learned from all those updates in the last six months, what would they be?” I said, “To read your email.”

Then, I realized what she was telling me was important. I think that conversation compelled more careful listening. This listening included more day-to-day work of explaining what was happening, why we were asking people to do tasks, and what the permutations were. I began to be a lot clearer about why we couldn’t promise people stuff.

KM: Exactly. This is the moment when we really ramped up. We started this ramp up at the end of that 2016 spring semester. All through the summer, every Wednesday, I held small group meetings, similar to mobilization meetings. Everyone had signups that would go out ahead of time. Half of our conversation, I can tell you now—I wouldn’t have said this out front like to everybody at that point—was performative in the sense that there’s a place to go where faculty can get questions answered. At these meetings, the same faculty would show up, including some of the local leadership. Some of the newly-elected leaders were getting really annoyed with me. They said, “It’s the same conversation and questions every single week.” My response was, “But that’s the point.”

Every time there would be a new update, I would get a big sheet of paper, it would be taped up on the wall, with some of the highlights of points, and we’d talk it through. Invariably what would happen over the course of like several months is that there were people who had been there more often, and then it wasn’t just me explaining what was going on. Other people in the room could also help faculty answer questions. Faculty brought really good questions—some of them were extraordinarily technical, but you need to work through that.

You spend that time.

As much as it was frustrating for some of us who had been there like every single week, that time was extraordinarily valuable. Faculty knew that there were places to go. In the meetings, we didn’t say, “Buy into this program and be an automaton. March, ants, march!” But rather, “How are we in this together?” If we are going to kind of actually do what we’re promising from the strike manual and the mobilization committee, it’s important to build points of connection with faculty. This strategy turned out to be hugely important.

SK: On our campus, we didn’t do that organizing by meetings, because in addition to a giant faculty, people live anywhere from a hundred yards to

a hundred miles away. Getting twenty people in a room at once is almost impossible. There were as many as half a dozen of us who just live in social media. If you looked at my Facebook at any point during that time, you would have seen conversation after conversation after conversation, many of which were the same people asking the same questions. “If we go on strike, where am I supposed to park?”

Those kinds of conversations. But talking with folks on social media was less routinized, but the level of access was equivalent to meeting. People knew that they could ask questions. I lost my patience with people about the parking question a couple of times, but that happens. [Laughs]

KM: The conversations were also important on my end about getting comfortable in telling people that there were clear lines.

SK: There was also a moment in there for me, like early in the fall of 2016, six to eight weeks before the strike, as I was getting a lot of questions such as what do we do about student teacher supervision? People were asking me those kinds of detail questions. I got really frustrated by getting asked the same question seven or eight hundred times. And then, one day I finally realized, “You know, people are asking me these questions because they want to get it right.” They’re not looking for reasons not to do things. They’re not trying to generate excuses, and they want to make sure that they do right by as many people as possible. They’re not looking for loopholes. Everything changed for me that day. It was just like that put me back to position where my job was to train people.

KM: At the time, one of the things I told people was a story my dad told me about the first strike that he ever worked when he was a negotiator at the Westmoreland School District in New York. The teachers were pissed off. It was going to be a really bad contract, the administration were being complete assholes, and all the teachers were geared up to strike. My dad told me, “We had a meeting where we had to decide: Are we going to go on strike or not?” In New York State, public teachers are not allowed to strike, it’s against the law. He said, “Okay, look. If you strike, we got it. But this is what a strike might mean. If we go on strike, it’s potentially against the law. That means some of you actually might spend a night in jail. Some of you may lose your jobs. Yes, you’re protected. This is a protected right, but you may lose your job. There’s no guarantee.

There are people that are going to be yelling at you. There’s going to be a contentious situation on your campus afterwards, because there are going to be some people who are going to cross the line. So, if you decide to go on strike, this is what you need to know that could happen. I’m not saying it’s going to happen, but these are potentials.”

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If you vote yes, we're in it one hundred percent." [Laughs] And my dad said the vote was decisive. "Ninety-nine percent vote: Yes, we're going on strike!" The point of that story was that you lay it all out, because you can never be in a situation where something's going to happen afterwards, and they're going to come back and say, "You told me this couldn't happen!"

You break your solidarity, you break your trust. And so, you lay it all out there, especially once you've built enough of a background, and that was part of the mantra. So, don't sugarcoat. Say, "Is this a possibility? Yes. How likely is it? Not very likely, but this is a possibility. You could lose your job. And we will fight it. But you're going to make this decision. Do it with eyes open." For me, it's one thing to talk about that going on as a principle. It's another thing having those conversations with groups of faculty over and over again, where part of the reassurance is that you're going to be honest with them, not that everything is going to be just normal, and going on strike is not a big deal.

SK: I'm a different person than I was October fifteenth of 2016. One of the ways in which I'm different is that I will never forgive the people who made us go on strike. It's unforgivable that the people who run our system were so fucking stupid and incompetent that they drove us to that. They were so reckless and irresponsible.

RR: What were they reckless and irresponsible about, exactly?

SK: They lie about finances. They lie about the conditions in the universities. They lie to the press about what the union contract does and doesn't say. They lie about the faculty and what our workload is. They lie to the legislature about what we do and don't do, and how expensive we are and how much the system needs.