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Reds for Ed: Class Struggle in the Classroom

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Patrick Ernest Korte

Master of Science

Virginia Commonwealth University, December 2022

Major Advisor: Jesse Goldstein

Associate Professor, VCU Sociology

Virginia Commonwealth University

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Abstract

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Keywords: education; social reproduction theory; class struggle; labor history; labor movements; social movements; Marxism.

Utilizing the methodology of participant observation combined with semi-structured interviews, this ethnographic study aims to analyze the socio-historical development of the Richmond chapter of the Virginia Caucus of Rank-and-file Educators (VCORE), a left-wing opposition group inside the Virginia Education Association (VEA). This study aims to assess VCORE's politics, origins, growth, transformation, organizational structure, and cultural practices, focusing upon the role VCORE members played in the lead-up to and aftermath of the 2020-2022 campaign to reinstate collective bargaining rights of public education employees in Richmond.

Introduction

At around 11:00 p.m. on the evening of December 6, 2021, several hundred teachers, parents, and community members – adorned in red shirts, hats, pins, and masks, and holding red placards saying “Collective Bargaining Now!” and a giant red banner with the slogan “Collective Bargaining for the Common Good” – packed inside the auditorium of Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School in Richmond, Virginia. They were chanting “Vote! Vote! Vote!” to members of the Richmond School Board. A resolution had been introduced by Kenya Gibson, a pro-union member of the School Board. If passed, the resolution would – for the first time since 1977 – allow employees of Richmond Public Schools to unionize and negotiate their contracts through a collective bargaining process.¹ After dozens of public testimonies extolling the working and learning conditions in Richmond Public Schools and the corresponding necessity for the resolution to be adopted, and under the increasingly militant pressure from the crowd, the Richmond School Board adopted the resolution in an 8–1 vote.

I walked outside into the cold November air, and on the street masses of education workers and our supporters gathered. I led the crowd in a chant: “Get up! Get down! Richmond is a Union Town!” The energy was electrifying. I thought to myself, *“We did it! We successfully uprooted a pillar of our state’s anti-union ‘Right to Work’ legislation.”* As I looked around, I saw familiar faces from throughout the school district. A commonality shared by many was their

¹ In 2020, the state legislature of Virginia lifted the ban on public sector collective bargaining. However, the new law did not provide sweeping legalization of collective bargaining, leaving it to municipalities and the appropriate government bodies to determine if public sector employees would be granted collective bargaining rights. In the case of education workers throughout the state, school boards must first vote to allow a union to run an authorization card campaign before the union can call for a vote. Richmond was the first school district in the state to win back collective bargaining rights and win an authorization vote certifying the union. See §40.1-57.2 of the Virginia State Code.

membership in the Richmond chapter of the Virginia Caucus of Rank-and-file Educators, or VCORE, the subject of this thesis.

What is a ‘rank-and-file caucus’? The formation of rank-and-file caucuses in labor unions parallels the ebb and flow of broader working-class militancy. Jon Melrod, a veteran of the New Communist Movement of the 1970s who helped found the Fight Back Caucus inside UAW Local 75 at the American Motors Corporation plant in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, recalls in his memoir *Fighting Times* that “Although we had dubbed ourselves a caucus, no one but me really understood the concept, so we spent time getting on the same page. I explained that through my study of labor history in Madison I had learned that militant rank-and-file union activists throughout history had formed caucuses within unions to push them to fight harder and function more democratically.” (Melrod 2022, pg. 65) Melrod’s concise definition matches VCORE’s self-description and the results of data collected in this study: the phrase “a fighting democratic union” recurs throughout the interviews with VCORE members collected for this study.

The subject of this thesis is VCORE, a rank-and-file opposition caucus within the Virginia Education Association (VEA). Specifically, the aim of this research is to examine how the Richmond chapter of VCORE organized to transform their union local, the Richmond Education Association (REA), in a more militant and democratic direction. Specifically, VCORE members organized to move the REA in the direction of a ‘class struggle unionism’ opposed to both conservative ‘business unionism’ and ‘labor liberalism’ (Burns 2022). Chapter 1 places the emergence and organizational development of VCORE in historical context, looking specifically at the history and influence of the ‘rank-and-file strategy’ in the U.S. labor movement, and its application inside Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) by the Caucus of Rank-and-file Educators (CORE). Coming into contact with CORE’s parent network of union caucuses played a

formative role in the genesis and development of VCORE, as well as its strategy and practice. Chapter 2 starts from a simple premise: class struggle unionism requires class consciousness. As a member of this caucus, this study takes a participatory action research approach to thinking through the question of class with my comrades through a collective self-assessment of the class position of educators and our class composition. Chapter 3 turns to the specifics of how VCORE operationalized class struggle unionism, examining its internal organization, relation to the union, day-to-day organizational work, and how it played a crucial role in a historic milestone for the labor movement in Virginia.

The core questions raised in this thesis are: What is ‘class struggle unionism’, and how is it distinct from ‘business unionism’ and ‘labor liberalism’? What does the operationalization of class struggle unionism look like in the context of the U.S. public education system? What is the working class, and are educators members of this class? What structural power do educators have, and what challenges are there to the exercise of this power? How can bureaucratic labor unions be transformed into more participatory, democratic, member-led, and militant organizations? What does democratic leadership look like in the context of public education worker organizing, and how does the educational professional shape the outlook of militant union reformers organizing in such a context? How successful have Richmond VCORE members been in developing a class struggle tendency within their union local? It is to these questions which we shall turn to in this study.

Research & Methods

Since its founding in 2019, I have been a member of the Virginia Caucus of Rank-and-file Educators (VCORE). Throughout the fall of 2022, I conducted twelve interviews with members of VCORE, representing about 50% of the active membership of the group. As a member of this caucus myself, study participants were recruited via an open call shared with VCORE members, and through sharing an information sheet at VCORE meetings. All interviewees were members of a local chapter of VCORE, a local union affiliated with the Virginia Education Association (VEA), and were employed in public education in Virginia. The demographic composition of interviewees is presented below. All interviews were conducted and recorded in a private setting with the explicit consent of the interviewee. To protect the identity of all study participants, personal information and identifiers have been removed, and pseudonyms have been utilized. The average interview length was 90 minutes.

While a semi-structured interview guide was used to guide the interview process (reproduced in Appendix A), I followed an iterative, dialogic, and emergent method of data collection, rooted in the Marxian methodological tradition of workers' inquiry (McAllister 2022) and social investigation (Hoffman 2019). As will be clear, this resulted in a collaborative mode of thinking with, as opposed to about, my subjects, to develop a shared analysis of the organization, internal operations, strategy, class composition, and agency of VCORE. The research methodology is deeply informed by a specifically Latin American approach to participatory action research (PAR). In *Cowards Don't Make History: Orlando Fals Borda and the Origins of Participatory Action Research* (2020), Joanne Rappaport tells us that:

It would be too simple... to state that a project is participatory merely because local people engage in some way in it, since conventional ethnographers have for decades enlisted the participation of their informants. In contrast, PAR, as it has developed in Latin America, is also participatory because the researchers themselves espouse the aspirations of the organization with which they are collaborating, both by placing people's knowledge on an equal footing with academic knowledge and by embracing the political objectives of the group with which they are working. (Rappaport 2020, pg. xix; see also Brandão 2005, pg. 56)

Of the study sample, 8 interviewees identified as women, 1 identified as non-binary, 3 identified as men, 10 were white, and all were dues-paying members of a local union affiliated with the Virginia Education Association (VEA). 4 interviewees were ages 25–30, 2 were 30–35, 3 were 35–40, and 3 were 40–50. 3 interviewees were parents. 3 taught at the primary level (pre-k to 5th grade), and 9 taught at the secondary level (6th grade to 12th grade). All study participants taught at high-poverty, working-class schools with African-American and Latin American majority student bodies. All were active members of the Richmond chapter of VCORE, meaning they attended meetings, kept up on internal communications, participated in actions, and assisted with the formulation of caucus strategy and the selection and implementation of tactics.

The Virginia Caucus of Rank-and-file Educators

Origins and Initial Formation

In late October 2019, a group of around two dozen educators from across central Virginia packed into a small church basement on the outskirts of Richmond. The pastor of the church welcomed everyone as they walked inside. Awaiting them downstairs was a group of educators from around the country, all of whom were affiliated with the United Caucuses of Rank-and-file Educators (UCORE), a nationwide network of rank-and-file caucuses organizing inside public education unions. There were UCORE members from New York's Movement of Rank-and-file Educators, Philadelphia's Caucus of Working Educators, West Virginia's United Rank-and-file Caucus (composed of veterans of the 2018 mass strike that kicked off the Red for Ed wildcat movement), and, most notably, Chicago's Caucus of Rank-and-file Educators (CORE). CORE's presence was notable not only due to their reputation as the elected leadership of the Chicago Teachers' Union (CTU) and one of the first rank-and-file caucuses to be formed among education workers in the twenty-first century, but due to the timing of their presence: they were in the midst of their second mass strike in a decade, demanding smaller class sizes, wrap-around support services for students, staffing increases, and better pay. Why, of all places, did they come all the way to Richmond, Virginia to meet with education workers?

Unlike its neighbor West Virginia, public schools in Virginia did not experience a mass strike wave during the Red for Ed movement of 2018-2019. The state union, the Virginia Education Association (VEA), called for a mass rally at the state capitol in Richmond – which thousands of educators attended – but the energy was co-opted by local and state politicians, and most school districts remained open that day. As a teacher in the VEA myself, I heard many of

my colleagues lament that “we don’t have the right to strike.” However, that wasn’t stopping an illegal strike wave from erupting across the country: from West Virginia to Oklahoma, Kentucky to Arizona, educators were using unauthorized, wildcat strikes, which they often labeled as “walkouts” to navigate the anti-union “right to work” laws in their states. Even in cities where public sector strikes were legal (such as Los Angeles and Chicago), education workers were not relying on the range of actions permitted by the prevailing legal regime. Instead, their power seemed to be emerging from the political consciousness, capacity for self-organization, and will to act as a collective on the part of their grassroots membership bases (Inouye 2021; Sharkey 2022; Burns 2022, pg. 116). These lessons learned through struggle were being shared, discussed, and analyzed in that dimly-lit church basement outside Richmond, where the future founders of VCORE began to chart a new path for their approach to labor organizing in Virginia’s public education system.

What distinguished the approach of groups like CORE in Chicago was their commitment to the ‘rank-and-file strategy’ – a term first coined by Kim Moody in a 2000 pamphlet of the same name, but with deeper historical roots in socialist and communist movements of the twentieth century – specifically the historical experience of the Shop Stewards and Workers’ Committee Movement in Britain, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards in Germany, William Z. Foster’s Trade Union Educational League, the Minneapolis general strike of 1934, the Red International of Labor Unions, and a diverse range of ‘intermediate workers organizations’ built by groups such as the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, Revolutionary Union, October League, International Socialists, and Workers Viewpoint Organization during the New Communist Movement of the 1960s–1980s (Moody 2014, pgs. 106–113; Hoffrogge 2015;

Barrett 1999; Tosstorff 2018; Dobbs 2004; Georgakas & Surkin 2012; Melrod 2022; Elbaum 2018, pgs. 100, 113, 123–124; Waller 2002, pgs. 110–113, 146–150, 152–162, 168–169).

Grounded in the Marxist tradition, Moody argued that class struggle is an intrinsic and inescapable feature of capitalist society, that workers must organize themselves for a socialist revolution in order to achieve liberation from exploitation and oppression, and that this revolutionary process would require the construction of both grassroots mass organizations such as unions, as well as a revolutionary workers' party. However, following decades of repression, misleadership, crisis, and ultimately decline, Moody argued that the organic link between revolutionary socialists and the labor movement in the U.S. had been severed. In order to reestablish this connection, it would be necessary to construct 'transitional organizations' such as rank-and-file caucuses and union reform movements (Moody 2014, pg. 78–79). This was the strategic approach that helped animate the formation of groups like CORE in Chicago.

CORE was officially founded in 2008, winning leadership of the CTU in 2010. It originated in the struggle against public school closures in Chicago, which was framed by educators and communities as a movement against racism and gentrification. From this movement emerged a cadre of teachers who formed a study group, from which CORE would eventually arise (Bradbury et al. 2014, pg. 18). Despite their initially small size – having only 22 dues-paying members when it first launched (Ibid, pg. 50) – CORE was unafraid to challenge the passivity and bureaucracy which prevailed inside the CTU, mobilizing union members and supporters to attend school board meetings and rallies against school closures. According to Micah Uetricht, “The rise of CORE indicated not only a leftward shift in Chicago teacher unionism but also a rejection of a labor model that mandated progressivism from on high. CORE was born out of rank-and-file struggles against unresponsive, regressive leadership.” (Uetricht

2014, pg. 18) CORE sought to build a network of worksite leaders by providing systematic political education and organizational training for rank-and-file educators. A consistent theme across the literature is that CORE started by “doing the union’s job” even before it ran a slate for union office (Bradbury et al. 2014, pgs. 13-29; Uetrict 2014, pg. 29; McAlevey 2016, pg. 111). The caucus organized mass rallies against school closures, attended school board meetings, helped build a CORE-led united front of community organizations against school closures (called the Grassroots Education Movement, or GEM), and put forward a programmatic agenda for the union which included proposals for ending school closures, privatization, high-stakes testing, oversized classes, an unelected school board, and the exclusion of parents and students from decision making (Bradbury et al. 2014, 21). How would they achieve all this? The answer was simple: through democratic organization, militant workplace actions, and mass strikes.

Once elected to union office in the CTU, CORE used its position and the network it had patiently built in schools across the city to unleash the power of education workers throughout the district, leading mass strikes in 2012 and 2019. Distinct from those who have labeled this approach ‘social justice unionism’ or ‘social movement unionism’ (implying that the approach of CTU under CORE’s leadership is historically unique and relatively new), Joe Burns has classified this approach as ‘class struggle unionism’, a strategic orientation for labor organizing that stands in stark contrast not only to ‘business unionism’ but also what he calls ‘labor liberalism’. Burns explains:

Rather than just offering a change of leadership, Chicago Teachers Union offers a class struggle approach to the crisis in teacher unionism. The elements include a break with pro-corporate Democrats who have participated in defunding and privatizing public education for decades, a militant rank-and-file approach

that includes strike activity, and the adoption of broad class-based bargaining demands. (Burns 2022, pg. 134)

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the historical contradiction internal to the U.S. labor movement had been between the paradigms of business unionism and class struggle unionism. In alignment with the hegemonic ideology of U.S. capitalist-imperialism – which denies the institutionalization of class exploitation under the social domination of capital, as well as the global nature of class struggle – business unionism aimed to improve the lives of a specific substrata of workers (typically white, straight, male citizens born on U.S. soil, and often belonging to a specific trade or profession). Business unionism was and still is politically conservative, adopting a fiercely reactionary, anti-communist, and legalistic approach to labor organizing. Business unionists achieve their aims through direct collaboration with management, bureaucratized collective bargaining processes, and the pursuit of nationalistic, racist, sexist, jingoistic, and nepotistic policies in the political and economic realm (Moody 2014, 95–106). Business unions more closely resemble bureaucratic fiefdoms than democratic workers' organizations, and are closely connected to the legacy of former president of the American Federation of Labor, Samuel Gompers, who according to Fletcher & Gapasin (2008), “believed that the function of unions was not to organize unorganized workers but rather to preserve the privilege of union membership for a stratum of already organized skilled workers.” (Ibid, pg. 30) While willing at times to leverage collective power through the use of the strike tactic to win an improved working agreement for *their* membership (though even this could be a highly regimented and ritualized exercise for a business union), the union is not conceived as a broad-based class organization whose *raison d'être* is the unification and coordination of workers in a common struggle against their class enemy.

The business unionists were relatively successful in suppressing the left-wing of the U.S. labor movement. From the 1950s to the 1970s, if business unionists were to be found at all within the upsurge of progressive social movements arising from the freedom struggles of African-Americans, Chicanos, Indigenous peoples, Asian-Americans, women, LGBTQ+ people, and youth, it was often on the opposing side (Fletcher & Gapasin 2008, pg. 44). It was in this historical context that labor liberalism emerged as a third paradigm of U.S. trade unionism. Marketing itself as a progressive alternative to business unionism, labor liberalism turns its attention away from the workplace and towards lobbying for legislative changes. Labor liberalism is not so much a break with business unionism, as much as it is a deepening of its bureaucratic tendencies through the further institutionalization of a staff-driven approach. While progressive on a range of social questions (at least on paper), labor liberalism is often more conservative than business unionism on questions such as shop-floor organization, worker representation in union leadership, and the utilization of collective refusal as the primary means of wresting concessions from management (Burns 2022, pg. 44). “Labor liberals adopt the progressive political views of the middle-class social movements but reject the traditional workplace organization and concerns of both traditional unionism and class struggle unionism,” instead focusing their organizational energies outside the workplace and placing a premium on influencing Democratic Party politicians in order to improve working and living conditions (Ibid, pg. 42).

Labor liberalism markets itself as an alternative to business unionism, but this rupture is more rhetorical than material. To the extent that labor liberals genuinely fight for social justice, the problem is what they exclude from their project: the horizon of workers’ self-emancipation, the inevitability of class struggle between workers and bosses (and thus the impossibility of

achieving peace between classes), the imperative for workers to build and self-manage democratic fighting organizations in their workplaces, the struggle for hegemony and power on the shop floor, and the need to reform the organizational structures and culture of the labor movement (Burns 2022, pg. 47).

CORE emerged from a struggle at the crossroads of these tendencies within the union movement. Indeed, in its bid for leadership of the CTU, it had to challenge and overturn the United Progressive Caucus (UPC), “formed in the 1970s as an amalgamation of racial justice caucuses in an effort to push a conservative union leadership unconcerned about the widespread racist treatment of both students and teachers.” (Uetricht 2014, pgs. 9-10) Following a wildcat strike led by Black educators in 1968, a coalition was formed between African-American substitute teachers and Irish-American staff teachers, and from this coalition the UPC was born (McAlevey 2016, pg. 103). While it led multiple strikes throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, following the death of CTU president and UPC leader Jackie Vaughn in 1994 and subsequent ascension of Tom Reece to the presidency, the UPC had lost all traces of its progressive roots.

Under Reece’s leadership, the CTU turned towards an increasingly economic, passive, and ineffective business unionism. While the history of the UPC was in the grassroots social movements which brought it to power, it had governed the union for nearly 40 consecutive years and grew conservative in its old age, leaving the organizational structures and style of work inherited from business unionism largely unchallenged throughout its tenure. Indeed, the UPC had acquiesced to the balance of power in the neoliberal age, having “accepted that the tide of privatization was unstoppable and the best the union could do was manage its members’ layoffs.” (Bradbury et al. 2014, pg. 31) To add insult to injury, the one-time “progressive” caucus now “saw the union’s role simply as defending members on bread-and-butter issues – not as fighting

for a brighter vision of public schools.” (Ibid, pg. 31) This posture and position was adopted by the UPC as a wave of corporate privatization was sweeping Chicago Public Schools, disproportionately affecting working-class communities of color through numerous school closures.

In contrast, CORE had “emphasized member engagement, direct action, partnership with community groups and other unions, and put forward its own progressive education reform agenda.” (Uetrict 2014, pg. 10) Indeed, its victory has been attributed to “one-third inspiring vision,” “one-third activist pluck,” and “one-third good old-fashioned organizing know-how.” (Bradbury et al. 2014, pg. 31) Micah Uetrict explains:

The UPC had relied on a top-down campaigning model for decades; it entailed simply sending members of a leadership slate to a small number of the nearly 700 schools in the CPS. But CORE created a decentralized field campaign with more than a dozen trained members giving presentations simultaneously throughout the city. [...] Recognizing the insurgent caucus’s vastly superior ground game, the UPC actually turned to CPS officials to try to prevent CORE and other caucus challengers from organizing, colluding with principals to stop caucuses from campaigning on school grounds. (Uetrict 2014, pg. 36)

In accordance with Moody’s perspective outlined in his pamphlet on the rank-and-file strategy, socialists and communists were at the center of CORE’s founding and development, and through these radicals the nucleus of CORE had established connections to other rank-and-file caucuses such as the Teamsters for a Democratic Union and Progressive Educators for Action in Los Angeles, as well as to the union reform movement inside the Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico (Barlett 2013; Bradbury et al. 2014, pgs. 20–21). It was this historical legacy in all its aspects – from the challenges CORE faced, to the vision and program they advanced – which

appealed to the founders of VCORE. Indeed, as one interviewee explained, VCORE's connection to this legacy was a major motivating factor for those who later joined the Richmond chapter of the organization: "What inspired me was hearing about what a union should be, and hearing from VCORE members about organizations like the Chicago Teachers Union and something clicked, where I saw the dysfunction in our own union [and] the limits of lobbying."

In attendance at the 2019 UCORE meeting outside Richmond were members of the VEA, the Richmond Education Association (REA), and a group called Virginia Educators United (VEU). VEU was a loose network that arose from the Red for Ed upsurge, and was a leading force in organizing the 2019 Red for Ed mobilization in Richmond. It was members of VEU who called for and organized the gathering. In addition, the future founders of VCORE were present – all members of the VEU network, as well as local unions of the VEA – which included rank-and-file teachers from Richmond, Henrico, Chesterfield, Gloucester, and Prince George. During the meeting, a tripartite division already began to emerge that broadly mapped onto the main strategic divisions within the U.S. labor movement: the first camp was aligned with the status quo of business unionism and saw no problem with it; the second shared a critique of business unionism, but didn't see a way to change the union organization, and therefore saw no reason to work inside the union, proposing instead to anchor efforts at a distance from the workplace and dedicate substantial energy to lobbying efforts; and the third were the radicals who saw the UCORE strategy as a viable alternative not just in terms of what issues were selected for struggle, but in their approach to building workers' power in a way that was both democratic and militant.²

² Divisions between these last two categories were present within VEU from the outset, and once VCORE emerged, VEU members more aligned with the new group's class struggle unionist approach began to shift energy from one organization to the other, ultimately splitting from VEU when VCORE was officially founded. It's worth noting that in Richmond, all but a few of those who fell into the second category later joined VCORE at one point or another, and are now counted among the ranks of its cadre. One interviewee, Rosa, was an early member of both VEU and VCORE, who stated that "VEU was larger geographically, but not necessarily in terms of membership numbers. It

As will become clear through this analysis, one of my main goals is to map out the differences between the two main progressive groups that emerged within the VEA, and specifically within the REA: VEU and VCORE. The former roughly maps on to Burns' conception of labor liberalism, whereas the latter – VCORE – has explicitly pursued a strategy of class struggle unionism.³ Not only here, but in the labor movement more broadly, these differences can be difficult to decipher, especially when both tendencies embrace a critique of neoliberal restructuring and advance social justice issues, and when both tendencies see themselves as the left-wing of the labor movement. Based on her impressions, Rosa told me that “VEU was more progressive than the VEA.” In contrast to the VEA, “in VEU we wanted to actually talk with people, and get people organized. Let’s push for better working conditions for teachers, though not necessarily in a grassroots way.” According to Rosa, VEU was largely based on Facebook, which served as the main communications platform for the network, and lacked a clearly articulated analysis, strategy, and program as well as an organizational network rooted in the workplace.

One interviewee, Jennifer, framed the tension between VEU and the nucleus of VCORE as a struggle between an *organizing model* and *mobilizing model* of political activity. Jennifer attended the UCORE meeting in 2019, and had previously joined VEU. However, she was

never really had a very clear organizational structure in terms of who was leading the organization. I think that’s one of the reasons it fizzled out, because there was no clear vision, leadership, or direction, and that makes it really hard for a group like that to continue.”

³According to VCORE’s ‘Points of Unity’ document: “Public education workers – including classroom teachers, counselors, paraprofessionals, office workers, nurses, cafeteria staff, bus drivers, and janitors – are part of a global working class. As members of this class, we have a common interest in uniting with all workers through the organized labor movement in the struggle to win material improvements in our working and living conditions. In the course of this struggle, we must organize to overcome social divisions within the working class by struggling against all manifestations of racism (including but not limited to white supremacy, anti-Blackness, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism), sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism among our fellow workers, while simultaneously expanding workers’ capacities to democratically govern society. We support all efforts to promote the growth, development, and unity of a fighting labor movement at the local, state, national, and global level through networks and federations of workers’ organizations, and stand in solidarity with the struggles of all working people. An injury to one is an injury to all!”

convinced that the approach advanced by UCORE affiliates was the appropriate strategy for education workers in Virginia. For Jennifer, VEU was stuck in an outdated mobilizing model:

They could get hundreds of people to come to a march for Red for Ed. They could get people to come to a city council meeting and hold signs outside. They mobilized a network, they got them to show up. But when it came time to truly organize—as in, build power among the workers in a workplace, making educators feel empowered so they could take collective action to improve education—there were no efforts around that.

Initially, VEU agreed to establish a committee to research rank-and-file caucuses and to come back to the group with a proposal, “but when it was presented, there was pushback from VEU leaders who thought it was wrong to operate primarily within the union, and disagreed with prioritizing workplace organization and class struggle over lobbying.” This corresponds with the assessment put forward by Burns, which asserts that labor liberalism seeks to chart a middle course between class struggle unionism and business unionism (e.g., use protest tactics but not leverage the power of collective refusal), as well as moving the locus of struggle away from the workplace to the halls of government, such that militant shop-floor organization is replaced by public social advocacy and the exertion of public pressure on the Democratic Party (Burns 2022, pgs. 41, 43). In response to the resistance they faced, Jennifer and her comrades soon decided to start their own rank-and-file caucus. “It was a messy process,” she explains, “the VEU leadership thought we were stealing their group.” However, the emerging caucus was clear that they would be taking nothing from VEU other than themselves. Among the VEU leadership, there appeared to be a presumption of ownership; a mandate to be in charge and set the terms of progressive action for rank-and-file workers, as opposed to with them. According to several interviewees this

was a major source of tension. Having read Burns' work themselves, multiple VCORE members identified the VEU approach explicitly as 'labor liberalism'. By contrast, for the founders of VCORE, the basis of their movement had to be the workplace: it was only upon that foundation that they could build meaningful labor and community alliances, and exert their collective power as education workers in order to transform both their working conditions and the learning conditions of their students.

The first VCORE meetings were held with educators from across the state. At first, it was just three former members of VEU – all of whom were members of VEA union locals – who first discussed the official founding of VCORE. They discussed past and present examples of rank-and-file caucuses and union reform movements, what a caucus might look like in Virginia, and how a rank-and-file caucus would relate to – but remain autonomous from – the VEA. The decision was made to reach out to a contact from the UCORE meeting to solicit guidance on first steps. Jennifer recalls:

It was bittersweet, because as we were establishing the caucus, we were still facing a lot of pushback and animosity from our VEU comrades. But we were hopeful, because UCORE gave us hope, encouragement, and guidance. That summer we decided we would run a series of organizer trainings to introduce our project's philosophy and practice, build the membership base of the caucus, and provide our initial core with a political and strategic framework to guide them when organizing their workplaces.

According to several interviewees, the greatest hurdle faced was convincing their coworkers that the local organizations of the VEA were, in fact, unions. "There was this narrative that because collective bargaining was illegal, we couldn't form a union. And a lot of people's interactions with the union were limited to promotions and insurance discounts and

lobbying. You know, classic business unionism.” But according to Rachel, the organizer trainings served as a corrective to the prevailing union culture: “People were excited [during the organizer trainings]. They were animated by the possibility of having more autonomy on the job, and there were a lot of questions about what the union could and should be, and how we’d get that. And there was some pushback from the VEA old guard who felt that things were fine, and nothing needed to change.” When we turn our attention to the study of the Richmond chapter of VCORE, the contradictions between these three approaches – business unionism, labor liberalism, and class struggle unionism – will be brought into sharp relief.

The Formation of Richmond VCORE

The initial group that would go on to found the Richmond chapter of VCORE and lead caucus work inside the REA had been regularly attending statewide VCORE meetings. According to Christopher – a participant in the Oklahoma wildcat strike who had moved to Richmond and joined VCORE – his first VCORE meeting was attended by leading members of VEA locals from around the state who were both aware and critical of the union’s limitations. “It was all these people who were super active in the union – who were leading the union – but who also wanted to reform its practice.” A majority of interviewees who had been in this early space expressed that they appreciated how VCORE members not only criticized the conservative business unionism of the VEA, but were able to articulate and actualize an alternative. “In thinking about a workers’ space, there wasn’t one being provided by the union to talk about workplace issues and the challenges of being an educator today,” Christopher said. “VCORE was filling a void that could have been filled by the union, but wasn’t. They were taking the initiative.” Multiple interviewees reported that they were inspired by VCORE’s project of

building a union that was worker-led, democratically governed by the membership, rooted in the class struggle and movements for social justice, and guided by a vision of public schools which serve the people. According to Christopher: “The beef with the VEA was about disagreement concerning the organizational model our union should follow. The VEA is like a service model. You got a problem? You go to them, and the union staff will fix it for you. It’s not about encouraging members to get involved, that is, for workers to try to fix their working conditions themselves as a collective.”

While founded as a statewide caucus, members of VCORE were clear that from its inception, the intention was to seed strong local chapters that would function as rank-and-file caucuses within their union locals. The task would be for these local chapters to raise the political consciousness of education workers in their district, build a shop steward system in every workplace, transform the organizational culture and leadership style of the union, build a mass base, and eventually contend for the official leadership of the union. “Whether rural or urban, each school district comes with its own contradictions and corresponding struggles,” Jennifer told me. “For example, in Prince George – a rural school district – the majority of its residents are Republicans. Organizing there is gonna look a lot different than in Richmond, which is why we can’t just fight at the state level, we have to organize in our locals.”

Interviewees consistently stated that the power shared by education workers was not primarily a moral or symbolic power, but a *structural power* rooted in the processes of social reproduction and the provisioning of an important social service. They believed that the potential to engage in collective refusals of work with the organized support of school communities, would in turn have the potential to expand their struggle on a wider basis (Bhattacharya 2017, pgs. 92-93). Eliza asserted in an interview that “Educators have power in numbers. Every single child in the United

States is required to get some form of education.” But to tap into this potential power, educators first needed collective organization rooted in every worksite across every district.

The group of educators in Richmond who were attending statewide meetings decided that they would start meeting as a Richmond chapter of VCORE, and focus their attention on transforming the REA into a fighting labor union. At first, they would do this by replicating the statewide VCORE meeting model – convening a monthly meeting whose first half would be dedicated to political education (usually based on a short reading, film, or member-led presentation), and the second half dedicated to troubleshooting challenges in the workplace – with the long-term aim of training a growing layer of worksite union leaders, formulating a program for reforming the union and public education, and running a slate for the union’s executive board. Christopher explained that when talking with the initial leadership of Richmond VCORE, they shared a common vision of a democratic, worker-led union movement, in addition to creating an “alternative professional development space” by collectively reading texts such as Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. An opportunity would soon arise for Richmond VCORE members to test their strategy, as they dove head-first into the union’s campaign to reinstate collective bargaining rights in the district.

This campaign was initiated by the REA with VEA support following the lifting of the statewide ban on collective bargaining rights in 2020. To VCORE members in Richmond, this presented a unique opportunity: as most REA committees were relatively closed, this campaign would call for the formation of an organizing committee more open to membership. If VCORE members could join this committee, they could demonstrate to their fellow workers what a more democratic and militant approach to unionism looked like in practice. Through the campaign to agitate and educate their coworkers, sign authorization cards, and rally the employees of the

district to pressure the school board to pass a collective bargaining resolution, VCORE members believed they could construct a network of union stewards, using the REA's system of worksite representatives and authorization card leads.

Beyond the initial core who attended the 2019 UCORE meeting or who came out of VEU, several interviewees were recruited by VCORE members who also participated in the group POWER (People Organizing With Educators in Richmond), as well as through graduates of the Richmond Teacher Residency (RTR). POWER was a diverse mixture of both educators and supporters of public education who came out of the community organizing model of Saul Alinsky, but had largely ceased to function with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. RTR is a graduate teacher residency and retention program with an explicit commitment to social justice and "teaching for change." It was through the recruitment of POWER members and RTR graduates that the Richmond chapter of VCORE would experience its first growth spurt. Initially Richmond chapter meetings were small, with only 5-10 participants. According to Christopher, "It was a social space, a space for us to talk about our experiences, which was especially important because we had been so isolated that year because of the pandemic." But with an influx of new members with larger networks in the district, Richmond VCORE was able to begin its next phase of development, with an average meeting attendance between 10-20.

One such recruit was Jonathan, an RTR graduate who expressed that he knew about VCORE before becoming a teacher, having previously conducted sociological research on the Red for Ed movement. He said that while he was previously involved in industrial unions before making the switch to public education, that VCORE was unique: "VCORE is much more serious than other labor projects I've been involved in previously. It's very serious, and very principled, with a clear vision and strategy for what unionism should be and what our union should look like

at different levels, from the worksite to statewide. It feels like a pretty holistic and well put together project in every aspect.”

Another recruit from these first few months of Richmond VCORE’s existence in the fall of 2020 was Sara, who was previously connected with POWER and was a member of the REA, and who would go on to play a central role in Richmond VCORE’s work during the REA’s campaign to reinstate collective bargaining rights. Following a challenging experience with the REA’s Political Action Committee, she was ready to leave the union for good, turned off by toxic interpersonal dynamics, lack of communication, and its inability to come to a decision: “We didn’t actually end up endorsing anyone. The whole experience really pissed me off and I was like, this is such a waste of time, why am I even paying dues? And I was about to cancel my membership and I swear, within a couple of weeks or days, a friend and mentor of mine—who was a member of POWER and VCORE—connected me with a coworker who was also in the caucus.” She joined shortly thereafter.

Class Consciousness and Contradictory Class Positions

Like CORE in Chicago, several VCORE members reported that they were members of socialist or communist political organizations, such as CounterPower and the Democratic Socialists of America, as well as members of broader progressive organizations such as Southerners on New Ground and Richmond For All. All interviewees made explicit their support for a “progressive” and typically “radical” or “revolutionary” worldview, spanning the left-wing ideological spectrum from social-democracy to anarcho-communism to Marxism. Jonathan told me, “I’m a member of a political organization, CounterPower, which is a communist cadre organization.” He explained that his group has a specific approach to labor organizing, rooted in “the rank-and-file strategy” and a “mass line method of leadership development,” derived from the Marxist organizing tradition and the dialogic pedagogy of Paulo Freire (Freire 2006). “We have several militants in VCORE, and we’ve played a role in trying to advance the strategic thinking of the caucus... It’s not about deciding what objectives the group should pursue, but about dissuading people from just talking shit or jumping on whatever thing happens to be moving at a certain moment. Instead, we try to think about our long-term goals and how we’re going to attain them, keeping us grounded in the vision and strategy of VCORE.” He elaborated further on the intrinsic limitations of the liberal approach, and the need to consciously struggle against liberalism: “There’s this mode of liberal politics where there’s an injustice that’s seen, and it’s assumed that if we don’t act immediately to address it, then we’re failing to address it at all. But there’s no strategic component to that thinking! There’s no analysis of what really is the issue and what’s the cause, and no one’s asking: how could we actually remedy that?” Other VCORE members who also belonged to CounterPower similarly explained their approach to

political work as rooted in a historical materialist analysis, and grounded in the principles of “leading by listening” and “proposing, but not imposing.”

Before examining in detail the organizational strategy and tactics pursued by members of Richmond VCORE, we should theorize alongside them the role of K-12 education workers in the capitalist system, including the nature of their work, their objective position within the processes of social production and reproduction, their self-assessment of their class position, and the material conditions that shape their working lives, daily struggles, and social movement. As we shall see, based on the data collected this group of education workers see themselves as members of the working class (albeit a contradictory middle strata within it), and grasp their structural position as being situated within the social reproduction process. It is upon this consciousness that education workers have been able to act as skilled care and cultural workers. Attempts to deskill, automate, and micromanage education workers comes into direct contradiction with the viability of their labor – you simply cannot completely deskill educational work, given its affective and pedagogical dimensions, yet this is precisely what education workers are experiencing.

Emerging from this matrix of social relations, the subject of the educator occupies a position within a contradictory middle strata, with an implicit political choice: to align with the ideology and practice of the semi-autonomous professional-managerial sector, or to conceptualize themselves as producers of the commodity human labor-power. The categories of ‘production’ and ‘the producer’ pose a number of questions relevant for education workers, including the nature of the rationalization and deskilling processes which capital subjects them to, and the subversive potential of this position. If educators are producers, it begs the question: *what do they produce?* The answer, of course, is people. Thus within public education, the

question should be posed: *what types of people are we producing, and why are we producing them?* As my evidence will reveal, these are all challenges VCORE members struggle with in a dialectical fashion, recognizing that in the case of the educator, profession and production are indissolubly linked. The complexities of this class position is not lost upon VCORE members, as indicated by their nuanced analysis of the socio-technical organization of the public education system, and the political potential latent within it.

Class Consciousness

Joe Burns argues that class struggle unionism is impossible without a class struggle analysis, or what he terms “shop floor economics.” He argues that the articulation of such an analysis is “the starting point of class struggle unionism,” and the embrace of such a worldview has radical implications for working-class organization and activity (Burns 2022, pg. 12, 14). His argument is straightforward, and draws from the Marxist tradition: capitalism is a mode of social organization divided into two major classes, the working class and capitalist class. The working class constitute the vast majority of the global and national population. The capitalist class (or owning class) are those who own and control the means of social production and reproduction.

Who is the working class? According to Burns, “The defining feature of the working class is that members must sell their labor to others to survive... Although workers may own some personal property such as cars or even houses, working-class people hold little in the way of income-producing property like factories, businesses, stocks, and commercial real estate.” (Burns 2022, pgs. 4-5) Members of this working-class majority do not own and control the means of production and reproduction, both skilled and unskilled workers are to be found in their ranks (with workers often performing a complex combination of both manual and intellectual

labor on the job), and in addition to having to sell their capacity to work in exchange for a wage, they have little or no control over the production process itself. It is upon the basis of a shared consciousness of this class relation that workers establish economic and political organizations for the defense and advancement of their collective class interests.

Where does this leave educators? Within the Marxist tradition, there have been debates concerning the productivity versus non-productivity of workers concentrated in the sphere of social reproduction, including public sector workers, and thus whether they can be classified as members of the working class in accordance with Marxian criteria (Harvie 2006). However, Burns intervenes in this debate concisely:

Government workers provide the infrastructure for the economy in which the billionaires make their wealth, in addition to educating a workforce who can then be exploited, among other functions. The billionaires try to drive down the cost of public workers, so they can pay less in taxes, so they can pocket more of the social surplus. (Burns, pgs. 12-13)

As indicated above, Burns has no qualms with the inclusion of educators – who occupy positions in the sphere of social reproduction – as members of the working class. While most interviewees self-identified as members of the working class – and the vast majority expressed a certain antinomy concerning their position within the matrix of capitalist class relations – *all* interviewees described their work explicitly in terms of a fundamental antagonism between public education and the social forces which currently dominate it (namely, vested profit-seeking corporate interests and their political lackeys), the necessity for waging a conscious struggle against these forces, and the general trend towards the devaluation, deskilling, deprofessionalization, and intensified exploitation of education workers. Those teachers with

greater professional experience all emphasized a change in the nature of educational work during the course of their careers – connected with technical changes in the workplace, as exemplified in the form of increased bureaucratization, surveillance, and authoritarian management systems, the entry of third-party corporate vendors into the educational space of professional development and teacher evaluation, and a general decrease in teacher autonomy and available school resources – a trend which only intensified with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Rosa, who was present at the 2019 UCORE gathering, explained this dynamic in the following terms:

How do you kill a frog? You know, one degree at a time. And I feel like it's been like that with education. It just keeps getting progressively worse. And I look back and I was like, 'Oh wow, things really weren't *that* bad back then [in 2019].' Like, they were clearly bad, but if you compared it to where things are now [in 2022], and you're like, 'It really wasn't *that* bad.' And we were ready to talk about [striking]. Again, we weren't ready to strike, but we were ready to start talking about it.

A recurring statement I encountered was “*I want to teach,*” “*I love to teach,*” or “*I love the students, but...*”, followed by an identification of institutional barriers to the sustainability of a career in public education when such a career was increasingly undignified, exploitative, and subjected to control from above by administrators, politicians, and corporations. The root of this internal contradiction is perhaps found in education workers’ position as what Jane McAlevey terms ‘mission-driven workers’ (McAlevey 2016, pg. 102). According to McAlevey, such workers aim to not only secure material well-being from their job, but view their work as “something deeply purposeful; they are called to their labor.” (Ibid) For Jonathan, while the question of material self-interest was an important one, it was secondary to issues concerning the

profession's long-term sustainability and the school system's respect for the creative initiative and professional expertise of educators:

Our work is unnecessarily stressful. We are treated like shit by our administration. There's also all these bread-and-butter, material issues, like pay. But I think a lot of the time the biggest issue is a lack of respect, a lack of autonomy, and it's all these policy issues that we could really push back on, and it takes a real political vision to be able to identify these issues as systemic, and then elaborate an alternative. I think that's the winning combination.

Eleanor's analysis was similar to Jonathan's:

We're burned out and tired and overworked and it's not fair. And I think that's been increasing. It starts off as, well, teachers sometimes work outside contract hours. And I used to work outside contract hours all the time. All the time, every day, and I liked it. I liked doing my job. But then there just became this expectation from administration that it's just what you do. No, that's not what I want to do. Don't make me feel like I have to do it, because then I'm not gonna wanna do it. Or in our contracts, there's that line about 'additional duties as deemed necessary by a supervisor'. What the hell is that?! And then looking at your contract, and it's like class struggle unionism teaches us, if you don't have a say in those things, you're just beholden to your bosses.

The question of autonomy in education extends beyond the classroom, to the level of the school system itself. Regarding the forces contenting for control of public education, Eleanor, made a connection between neoliberal restructuring and authoritarian governance:

The mayor [Levar Stoney] had established a compact that connected my school with the city in a way that, in my opinion, was an overreach of power for him to put his tendrils into the functioning of a

democratically elected school board. I also felt like the way [superintendent] Jason Kamras was hired was without community input. I felt like it was very corporate – you know, corporate Democrats, all these white guys like Tom Farrell [CEO of Dominion Energy] making decisions for the school board, and they chose this guy.

In all interviews, VCORE members expressed that their personal desire for respect, dignity, autonomy, and will to serve the people was undermined by the deployment of authoritarian management and performance evaluation systems, steadily growing workloads, standardized testing regimes, and the creeping privatization of public education by profit-seeking corporations. The general consensus was, isolated in their classrooms, educators were relatively powerless to halt this regressive trend; however, organized as a political collective, radical changes could be achieved.

Class Composition

In true dialectical fashion, Marx identified the dual character of class relations: a “class in itself,” meaning the objective existence of a specific class of people, who are organized as such as a part of a production process; and a “class *for* itself,” meaning the subjective existence of a class, that is, the autonomous political organization of a class fighting for its emancipation (Marx 1992, pg. 125). While this distinction can be useful – and it can help explain why certain sectors and strata of a class in fact identify with class interests other than their own – we require a more sophisticated conceptual toolbox for the theorization of classes as dynamic, that is to say, as social collectivities in motion, always shaping and being shaped by the class struggle.

According to their seminal 1977 text *Schooling in Capitalist America*, Bowles and Gintis argue that the capitalist public education system produces an important product:

The economy produces people. The production of commodities may be considered of quite minor importance except as a necessary input into people production. Our critique of the capitalist economy is simple enough: the people production process – in the workplace and in schools – is dominated by the imperatives of profit and domination rather than by human need. (Bowles and Gintis 1977, pg. 54)

However, Bowles and Gintis fail to adopt a sufficiently dialectical approach, and thus overlook the extent to which this ‘people production process’ is, in fact, traversed by class struggle and thus contested. A more dynamic approach can be attained if we utilize the framework of class composition analysis.

From the left-wing of the Italian communist movement in the aftermath of WWII emerged a political tendency known as *operaismo*, or “workerism.” This tendency developed a sophisticated practice of workers’ inquiry, known as ‘class composition analysis’ (Wright 2017). This conceptual framework assumed that the technical organization of the processes of social production and reproduction were, in fact, a reflection of the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat. Thus attempts at capitalist mechanization, rationalization, and automation were more than attempts to achieve greater efficiency in the extraction of surplus value, but were also fundamentally about exercising socio-political control over workers. Furthermore, this analysis indicates that working-class political organization and agency does not achieve a universal form, but exists in dialectical relation to the technical organization of the work process within a determinate historical conjuncture.

More recently, the UK-based journal *Notes From Below* has added ‘social composition’ as a third analytical category to better understand the dialectical interplay of the technical, social, and political aspects operational in the process of class formation:

Class composition is a material relation with three parts: the first is the organization of labor-power into a working class (technical composition); the second is the organization of the working class into a class society (social composition); the third is the self-organization of the working class into a force for class struggle (political composition). [...] In all three parts, class composition is both product and producer of struggle over the social relations of the capitalist mode of production. The transition between technical/social and political composition occurs as a leap that defines the working class political viewpoint. (Notes From Below 2018)

This conceptual framework is especially important for understanding VCORE's project, for education workers play a key role in the social composition of other sections of the class through the institutions of public education, a process which is itself a result of the technical composition of educational workers (that is, the organization of the school day, including curriculum, bell schedules, planning time, class time, prerequisite training, professional development; the criteria for assessing the product, which is to say, the student, including formative and summative assessments, standardized testing, and acceptable pedagogical approaches; and the apparatuses for discipline and control, including classroom management systems, detention, suspension, expulsion, and policing). Finally, it is important to emphasize that, when education workers actualize a specific political composition, successfully transforming the technical organization of education, then this technical recomposition in turn leads to a new social composition for workers: it is precisely for this reason that Antonio Gramsci identified educational institutions as trenches of a 'war of position' and potential sites for the production of a counter-hegemonic ideology that would foster a transformation in class consciousness for a large segment of the class, as well as the development of proletarian organic intellectuals (Gramsci 1971).

Chris, a secondary English teacher, explained the extent of deskilling and attempts to achieve a technical recomposition:

The district purchased a curriculum from a non-profit outside of our school district, and outside our state. It's workbooks, with texts we read as a class, and then they'll send in people to come to our class – consultants – to give us feedback on how well we're teaching their curriculum. We have a coach whose job isn't really to coach teachers, but to make sure we're teaching the curriculum.

In one particularly notable instance, Chris was threatened by his “coach” for teaching cross-curricular materials aligned with the state standards, but not aligned with the curriculum the district purchased. The coach then threatened to have a meeting with the principal – a threat made in front of students and staff, with the seeming intent to embarrass Chris – thus signaling who had the real power in the classroom.

Chris explained that while he has maintained a professional and cordial relationship with his administration, conflict was stoked because of actions he initiated in his building and throughout the district against the scripted curriculum, and an earlier rebellion he helped organize against CT3, a private professional development and teacher training company hired by the district, and responsible for the “No Nonsense Nurturer”® classroom management system. “There was a presentation done that was led by a literacy coach... in the meeting, a lot of people were groaning about [CT3]. And so then, in the chat, some people were like ‘Join the union!’.” After that, Chris helped organize an initial meeting of six educators – including three VCORE members – to discuss CT3, and how to fight back. This was in a context of monthly union meetings being co-organized by VCORE members in the building. “And so we had our October union meeting, and we were bringing up concerns about CT3. Our union president happened to

come to part of that meeting and listened to us, and after she met with the superintendent, and several of us wrote letters to members of the school board, CT3 was squashed.”

Regarding the alternative to deskilling, outsourcing, and privatization, Chris made his position clear: “I generally disagree with the idea of privatizing public education. I think things like classroom management could be provided through our own community, through teachers leading trainings and receiving compensation for that, or by partnering with public institutions like Virginia Commonwealth University.” Like Chris, multiple interviewees reported the possibility of a more autonomous, self-managed education system, and nearly all interviewees reported frustration with the constant micromanagement and draconian oversight of their labor. Why is it that, despite the proliferation of such management systems at nearly all levels of capitalist society, resistance is so intense among educators? It appears that, in accordance with Sergio Bologna’s historical analysis (Bologna 1972), the capacity to envision and actualize workers’ control is closely related to the prevailing technical composition of the class segment in question. In the case of public education, administrators appear to many teachers as increasingly superfluous – or indeed an obstacle – to realizing a system of education whose aim is the all-round development of the individual. In such a context, workers’ self-management is posed as a concrete possibility.

What makes this situation potentially explosive is that educators increasingly understand their structural power. As Sara explained:

In terms of strategically important sectors of the working class, everyone has some interaction with a teacher. Everyone for the most part has had some interaction with schooling and the concept of an educator. And so I do think it's something that everyone can relate to, and I think that's huge. When you have, say, a

strike and you have parent and community support for it, it is something that everyone can connect to in some way. And so I think in that sense, educators have a lot of potential to be this unifying force.

Education workers thus have the potential to socialize the class struggle, serving as a catalyst for the self-organization and collective action of other class segments. Jonathan's assessment was along similar lines:

Educators have a great deal of structural power, in that our collective refusal of work interrupts society in a significant way. So I think we have a great deal of power to wield because of that, but it's a power you need to be careful with. We've seen in teacher strikes that because part of our job is that we provide childcare to working parents... other than maybe logistics workers, we have one of the greatest powers to leverage in terms of our refusal of labor. But it's something we need to be responsible with, because there are real impacts on students and families if you use that power.

This was a theme which arose anytime the question of collective refusal was broached. Across all interviews, VCORE members stated clearly that they wanted to use their structural power to “win the schools our students deserve” and “to create a public education system that serves the people.” Jonathan made this quite explicit when he told me: “I joined VCORE for a specific reason, and part of my motivation for becoming an educator was to become part of a movement – a union movement – that has some serious leverage in society. I wanted to be part of a movement that could use that leverage to improve our society.”

Contradictory Class Positions

Across a majority of interviews, respondents articulated an awareness that as education workers, they occupy what Erik Olin Wright termed “objectively contradictory locations within

class relations” (Wright 1979, pg. 61). For Wright, “Rather than eradicating these contradictions by artificially classifying every position within the social division of labor unambiguously into one class or another, contradictory locations need to be studied in their own right.” (Ibid, pgs. 61-62) This is a perspective complementary to the class composition analysis advanced previously, which also asserted the centrality of studying class formation and class struggle as dynamic socio-historical processes.

While technical and social composition co-determine the political composition assumed by a segment of the class, there is a high-degree of agency involved in this process, particularly for workers occupying a contradictory class location:

Depending upon the conditions of class struggle, for example, semi-autonomous employees may be formed into petty bourgeois class organizations (professional associations) or into working class organizations (trade unions) or, for that matter, they may remain completely unformed into classes altogether. Because contradictory locations have contradictory class interests, they are objectively torn between class forces within the class struggle and can potentially be organized into more than one class capacity. Class struggle itself therefore determines to a large extent the degree to which the complexities of the class structure are reproduced at the level of class formation. (Wright 1979, pg. 108)

However, while it may be tempting to place educators into the category of ‘semi-autonomous employee’ based on the passage above (and at a previous historical conjuncture, this may have been a correct analysis), Wright’s definition of this class category should first be examined: “In their immediate work environment, [semi-autonomous employees] maintain the work process of the independent artisan while still being employed by capital as wage laborers. They control *how* they do their work, and have at least some control over *what* they produce.” (Wright 1979, 81) Using this criteria, it is rather obvious that public education

workers – at least in the state of Virginia – simply do not control how they do their work, as interviews revealed the application of a range of authoritarian management and performance review systems which control the order, pacing, and pedagogy at various levels, as well as the product – which in the case of public education is the commodity human labor-power itself – which is a collective social product. The product – a human being socialized as exploitable labor-power – is expected to study a specific series of subjects, complete a specific set of courses, demonstrate “learning” through the passing of the state-mandated Standards of Learning examinations, and is subjected to a range of racialized forms of disciplinary violence (a social process all interviewees found to be abhorrent, and a prime factor motivating their political awakening).

Psychologically, however, educators self-identify as occupying a contradictory class location. The question then becomes: with what other class do education workers identify? Based on data collected, it is clearly not the capitalist class (with whom most interviewees shared a general animosity). It could be the petite bourgeoisie (which in the U.S. context includes small business owners and the self-employed), yet no respondents identified with an entrepreneurial spirit nor desire for proprietorship (again, when broached interviewees displayed a certain antipathy towards this class). The answer would appear to be the professional-managerial class, or what Albert and Hahnel termed the ‘coordinator class’, which they define in the following way:

In our understanding, the coordinator class is characterized by their psychology of personal achievement and initiative, by their elitism and paternalism toward workers, and by their potential antagonism toward capitalists, all stemming from their economic position and reinforced by their cultural situation.

Coordinators have significant *control* over their own labor and frequently over that of other people as well, generally *conceptualize* their work in advance and/or develop concepts which must be adopted by others, and finally have *authoritative* relations with traditional workers who are either their workplace subordinates or their clients. In short, the coordinators occupy economic positions which continually generate feelings of self-worth and capability, habits of command and also specifically anti-worker conceptions such as “workers are intellectually incapable or psychologically ill-equipped to administer their own lives without our compassionate aid.” (Albert & Hahnel 1979, pgs. 261-262)

It would appear that, despite being subjected to the processes of devaluation, deskilling, and proletarianization, educators occupy a ‘contradictory middle strata’ between the working class and coordinator class, stemming from working conditions which generate the internalization of a “psychology of personal achievement and initiative,” allows for educators to “conceptualize their work in advance” (at least to a certain degree), and which can produce “elitism and paternalism toward workers” (as in the case of teachers’ potential relations with custodial, clerical, security, and cafeteria workers, which is often a relation of authority). One might also say that, in the case of the teacher-student relation, the educator has a degree of control over the labor of others (i.e., students). However, we have also seen that the structural position of educators within the capitalist economic system militates against feelings of self-worth and capability, habits of command, and the control over their own labor.

One interviewee, Rosa, described themselves as both middle class and working class: “I would consider myself solidly middle class in that I’m able to pay my bills. I’m able to have three meals a day. But I can’t make extra purchases without a considerable amount of planning.” When prompted if she identified as a member of the working class, she answered: “I would say yes because I don’t have investments that allow me to live off just those. I have to go to work every day, and I can’t take unpaid time off. I have to be working in order to survive.” Here, the

second-half of Rosa's self-assessment aligns with the definition of the working class put forward by Joe Burns cited earlier, which is in tension with her initial self-identification as middle class. Anthony displayed a similar ambiguity: "I consider myself pretty darn working class. But honestly, in terms of how we're paid, we're definitely middle class." Shortly after, however, Anthony said: "Our pay is crap, and we're deprofessionalized." When pushed on this contradictory position, Anthony explained that relative to other jobs he worked prior to entering education, he was paid well enough to lead a relatively comfortable life.

When I asked Eleanor what class she identified with, she said "solidly middle class." However, when asked to define what being 'middle class' meant, things became substantially more complicated:

It means I can pay my bills. I can pay my mortgage. I can maybe send a kid to college. I could go on a vacation... And right now, as an educator, I can't do all those things. I'm worried about sending my daughter to college because, you know, I'm a single mother. I didn't choose to be a single mother, but that's how shit rolled. And I'm gonna have to pay for her to go to college. Someone said to me, "Oh, you should've done a 529 [investment plan]!" And I was thinking, "With what fucking money?" I didn't have anything to put in there, after almost 25 years of teaching with a master's degree."

Eleanor continued, providing historical context for her personal situation and self-assessment of her class position: "At one point I feel like educators fit into a firm middle class position. Like, women who were teachers over the summer didn't have to work second jobs, they could be with their kids, and that was one of the attractive features of the job. You could have a work life and a home life. And I feel like you cannot do that anymore in education. I work all summer and I tutor. So we're definitely lower middle class, we're not middle class."

When asked how she felt about using “working class” as a self-identifier, Eleanor responded promptly and intensely, interrupting me before I finished the question:

I’m okay with working class. Absolutely. Working class is everybody who is on the grind 40 hours or more a week, and who needs that grind to survive, who doesn’t get to have boundaries about time and space that say when you’re free and when you’re not free. Basically anyone who is not Jeff Bezos. I would maybe say that there’s a working class that’s blue collar, and a working class that’s white collar, but you’re still working class, you’re still ruled by a corporate system.

I initially understood Eleanor’s comment to mean that education workers were part of the ‘white collar’ strata of the working class she identified. However, later in the interview she stated: “There are different sectors [of the working class]. Some of those sectors get more leisure time, and can afford more leisurely things. Like I might get a week off, but I’m at home. Versus the white collar worker, they might get a week off and go to Europe or whatever.” I was surprised, and prompted Eleanor to clarify: “Oh no, educators are blue collar. Teachers are educated, they’re professionals. But when the plumber’s making more than me, we’re working class. I keep telling my daughter: ‘HVAC! HVAC! Get trained to work in HVAC!’”

Union Democracy and Workers' Power

How does a group of workers make the jump from class consciousness to class organization?

How are class struggle unionist ideas translated into practice? In this chapter, I examine how

Richmond VCORE attempted to do this in the context of the REA campaign to reinstate

collective bargaining rights. Specifically, I look at how VCORE members organized their

coworkers, and the roles played by VCORE members. This will require an examination of the

ways 'leadership' was interpreted as well as the empowering organizational dynamics within the

group that resisted the disempowering dynamics that often give rise to or emerge from labor

liberalism. I shall then examine how the ways in which VCORE members fostered and

developed relationships were essential to their organizing strategy of inoculating their constituent

base from the perils of both labor liberalism and business unionism.

Empowering Leadership

If business unionism operates in a top-down, and bureaucratic fashion, the goal of VCORE was to reconceptualize what leadership meant in a more bottom-up, democratic, and participatory fashion. They did this by intentionally teaching and rotating responsibilities for facilitation, note taking, and political education; through the adoption of simplified democratic decision-making procedures; by opening working committees to all who wanted to contribute; by holding space that was open to both providing collective support, healing, and mutual aid and troubleshooting challenges encountered in organizing their workplaces; all while encouraging the widest possible initiative of individual members. In the words of one interviewee, "VCORE gets the job done." Jonathan told me, "In any group, there are dynamics of power, whether informal

or formal. We're getting to the point where we need to have a formal elected leadership that could serve as an obvious locus of power." But I wanted to know more about what VCORE members mean by 'leadership', and what this looked like in practice. Jonathan continued, "I see a leader as someone who helps to enact the will of a group. So if we make a democratic decision about something we want to do, a leader is someone who clears the way to achieve that goal... having conversations, writing documents, whatever the task is that needs to happen, I think leaders are the people that do that work and help the group progress towards its goal."

Jonathan identified a leadership cadre of around 10-15 members. When asked if they lead in different ways, Jonathan identified the figure of 'the visionary', "That's the person who has a deep understanding of unionism, of different kinds of unionism, of the history of struggle among education workers. They're able to lead because they have a deep understanding of how these issues and organizations work." He then elaborated the role of 'the communicator', or someone "who can lead because they're effective communicators, they manage interpersonal relationships effectively. They're the people with all the connections to all the people in a school or in the district, and they're able to rally those people." The third role he identified was 'the evangelist', or someone who can preach beyond the choir. "There's also the people who are good at executing tasks. They're the people who always come through, they finish the document, they pull the meeting together, they write the press release, they organize whatever meeting for collective bargaining. That to me is a form of leadership: making shit happen." Lastly, there is the figure of 'the militant', who according to Jonathan "[is the person] willing to take public action against the administration, the person willing to stick their neck out, whether that's at a school board meeting or in a meeting with an administrator or whatever. It's the person that's gonna really try to move their coworkers into action by example."

As I listened to Jonathan explain his leadership typology, it became apparent that I had heard it before. Eric Mann, a veteran of the civil rights, student, anti-war, and labor movements, elaborated a similar typology in his 2011 book *Playbook for Progressives: 16 Qualities of the Successful Organizer*. In Part One of his book, Mann identifies 12 roles in the “job description” of a successful organizer: The Foot Soldier, The Evangelist, The Recruiter, The Group Builder, The Strategist, The Tactician, The Communicator, The Political Educator, The Agitator, The Fund-Raiser, The Comrade and Confidante, and The Cadre (Mann 2006, pgs. 5–74). Aspects from each of these roles could be found in the personalities and practice of each interviewee. But rarely did interviewees self-identify as the role that each of them performed as VCORE members: The Cadre. According to Mann, there are three elements of the cadre’s role: “1) being willing to do whatever the organization asks; 2) bringing tremendous volunteerism to the job; 3) being capable of building a base and evolving a project, campaign, or organization.” (Ibid, pg. 71) Mann elaborates further:

If there is to be a left turn in the future of the United States, it will require a geometric expansion of the number of dedicated cadre. In every successful mass movement, cadre have been the motor force of history rooted in actual struggles. In a movement of thousands, cadre will number in the hundreds. In a movement of millions, cadres will number in the tens of thousands. They wake up in the morning knowing they are in charge and ready to go into battle. They are responsible, respected, and have been given the moral authority by others to lead. They have been intensely trained and mentored, and they have developed skills and abilities through years of practice. As leaders, they work with less-developed or less-committed people in order to expand their development and commitment. In a democratic organization, the cadre ensure the participation of all. (Mann 2011, pg. 72)

As Jonathan made explicit, “Ultimately, VCORE’s goal is to build a democratic union where rank-and-file educators have control. And we do want to win leadership in the long-run, and we do want our vision of unionism to prevail, but not in the interests of ourselves so we have all the power, no.” What Jonathan is saying is similar to the Zapatista slogan, *Todo Para Todos, Nada Para Nosotros*, or “Everything for Everyone, Nothing for Ourselves.” He then further clarified what the ultimate goal is for VCORE cadre: “We want our union to be powerful, and we want the rank-and-file membership to be able to make the union into what they want it to be.” One finds resonance with the perspective of Paulo Freire, who argued that collective liberation presupposes political power being in the hands of the oppressed and exploited, which requires a ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ which begins with “*educational projects*, which should be carried out *with* the oppressed in the process of organizing them.” (Freire 2006, pg. 54) For Freire, to actualize a pedagogy of the oppressed, “it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason. Whoever lacks this trust will fail to initiate (or will abandon) dialogue, reflection, and communication, and will fall into using slogans, communiqués, monologues, and instructions. Superficial conversions to the cause of liberation carry this danger.” (Ibid, pg. 66)

In contrast to an organizing pedagogy rooted in authentic dialogue – which VCORE members tended to view as the first step towards fostering an organizational culture rooted in mass participatory democracy – the REA tended to favor a relational and communicative style rooted in what Freire terms ‘the “banking” concept of education’ (Freire 2006, pg. 72). According to Freire, “apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.” (Ibid, pg. 72) Freire’s conception of education is fundamentally

socio-historical, not limited to the sphere of formal, state-sanctioned education. Thus Freire's critique is equally applicable to the pedagogical philosophies and praxis of the REA, which tended to – like the capitalist public education system itself – rely upon a conception of education as “an act of depositing,” in which the union members are the depositories and the union leader is the depositor (Ibid).

There were multiple instances reported of education workers who had first gone to the REA with a concern – such as the need to organize resistance to standardized testing mania, to fight for the district to provide personal protective equipment at their worksites throughout the pandemic, to struggle against the push to close the Richmond Virtual Academy (which would endanger immunocompromised families), and to pushback against authoritarian bosses – only to find that the official union leadership was often disinterested in hearing the opinions and learning from the experiences of its members, and resistant to mobilizing its mass base to take action on an issue. If the issue was to be broached at all, it would be done so through bureaucratic and “respectable” channels.

However, these concerned workers found a receptive audience with VCORE, as in the case of Anita who received support in the fight back against WIDA testing, and subsequently joined the caucus. According to Sara, the WIDA test, or World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment, is a federally mandated test that measures an English language learner's proficiency level in English. “It's a four-part test that is usually administered in February. During the virtual [pandemic] year, many families chose not to test,” Sara explained. “However, our specialist forced us to test all remaining students immediately upon their return to in-person learning, even though it wasn't required or mandated.” It was in this context that Anita made contact with VCORE members. She stated that VCORE members were immediately responsive to the call for

a fight back against WIDA, helping to spread the word, distribute information, and mobilize their network to sign petitions and take action:

VCORE felt very much like a hands-on approach to organizing. We knew everybody, we had regular meetings, it felt like we were really taking action. We would talk about different issues and talk about things that could lift up other people's issues... The REA kind of felt like it was just an organization but I didn't know how to be involved. But now I'm a lot more involved because I'm on the Collective Bargaining Committee and I know a lot of people in the REA, but I think the REA becoming more hands-on itself was the direct result of VCORE people forcing them to do things, like having all-member meetings.

When it comes to leadership, the relationship between the rank-and-file union members and paid union staff is important. Indeed, this distinguishes class struggle unionism from both business unionism and labor liberalism. While in no way diminishing the importance and role of union staff, class struggle unionists recognize that leadership must come "from below and to the left," and be developed as a capacity amongst the rank and file. Whereas labor liberals structure their organizations around the expertise of paid staff leading and directing the membership, the VCORE model aimed to make the center of strategic decision making non-exclusive spaces for the rank and file to participate in democratic deliberation and ultimately select their own course of action, careful not to simply replace the expertise of the staffer with the expertise of an unaccountable elite within the ranks of the caucus or union.

Most interview subjects had a positive assessment of the union's staffer, known as a UniServ Director (UD), but negative assessment of the union's official leadership (composed of both elected and appointed officers). Multiple interviewees reported that they believed the UD had their back in conflicts with administrators, whereas the union leadership's mantra was, "Your

problems at work are probably your fault. Build a positive working relationship with your administrative team, and you won't have problems." According to interviewees, a group of three or four people constitute the de facto leadership core of the union. Among this leadership group and their supporters, there appears to be a certain distrust for free speech, press, and association within the union, as well as for rank-and-file caucuses specifically. Sara told me that, "Within the leadership group, there are people who don't want to share power, and don't want to see the union change. They see the union as a social club which collaborates with management and lobbies politicians." She told me that while the official leadership claim that the divide is "generational," it's not: "There are newcomers and old-timers on both sides: it's a political divide, not a generational one." Jonathan told me, "The reality is that their activity is confined to lobbying. And that's where the vast majority of our union resources go, and I think our time would be better spent actually organizing workers to wield their power through collective refusal."

Relationships

Of central importance to VCORE's growth and development was the intentional building of relationships among coworkers, rooted in trust, empathy, solidarity, cooperation, and a willingness to listen. The main organizational tool VCORE members used is known in labor and community organizing as a 'one-on-one'. According to Sara, "VCORE functions, and we've been able to accomplish as much as we have, because relationships come first. We're not just colleagues, we're friends. We check on each other, we spend time together, we hang out socially, a lot of us work together and have built friendships through work. I think that's the core of it, and that's the most important part." With the caucus serving as the focal point for this process of

relationship building, many VCORE members expressed how they have built relationships with workers from socio-cultural backgrounds and age groups they otherwise might not have socialized with.

Leading VCORE members explained that they were in constant communication with their coworkers and comrades at work, whether meeting in-person or hopping on a call after school, or via Signal. Through this process, many VCORE members expressed the honing of their capacities. “I don’t think I’ve always been like this,” Sara told me. “I think I’ve had this capability, but I think I got in touch with it through organizing.” VCORE members expressed the contagious nature of this communicative dynamic, and how its spread helped them build an organizational culture of sustainable growth.

Intentionally building relationships goes hand in hand with VCORE’s democratic leadership style – and efforts to resist any “third partying” of decision making (as I was often reminded by interviewees: “We are the union!”) – by keeping open lines of communication as well as an open invitation to increased participation for members, such that leadership capacities are developed and generalized at all levels. Within the union, VCORE achieved this by convincing the REA to hold participatory workers’ assemblies open to all employees – both union and non-union – to solicit worker input, and scaffold mass democratic practices within the organization.

Despite familiarity with and often being guided by particular social scientific and political theories, rigid adherence to ideological dogma was actively discouraged by interviewees, who emphasized the dialectical character of organizational praxis, and the centrality of “meeting people where they’re at” in order to raise the general level of political consciousness, collective organization, and capacity for collective action. Rosa told me that there

are “ideological differences between people who just join the REA, and people who also join VCORE.” She continued: “I’m in both. I’m in REA because I fundamentally believe in unions, but honestly I can’t say I believe in the REA. But it’s currently the only option available. I feel like the people who join VCORE believe we need to change the REA... People join VCORE because they have a voice and through VCORE they can ensure that their voice is actually heard.” There is a difference between having a voice, and actually feeling that your voice is heard and respected by your peers. VCORE’s relationship building is essential for realizing the latter; creating a means for the collective voice of the union’s rank and file to become the voice of the union.

Lastly, in my interview with Sara, she pointed out that she recently learned from a former REA president – who is also now a VCORE member – that the REA once had a different style of leadership, “Around 15 years ago things were much more organized, the union had bigger committees and more member participation and did more interesting actions. But now there’s this handful of personalities that are distrustful of new people, and want to keep everything under their personal control.” Indeed, this lack of dialogue with and trust in the membership, as well as the gatekeeping of information, was cited by all interviewees as a source of dissatisfaction with the union, and one of their main reasons for joining VCORE.

Communication

All interviewees stated strongly that one of the central problems of the REA was its lack of an organized communications system. “All they want to do is send out a few emails via Action Network, which just goes to everyone’s spam folder,” Sara told me. The absence of an organized communications system and established practice of two-way communication between

members and leaders was also identified as a source of inaction within the union. Tania informed me that, “Whenever action needs to be taken, whenever something needs to be done, it feels like it’s a big push to get the REA to even release a statement about it, or to even acknowledge what’s going on or that something’s happening. There’s not much communication in our union.”

Anita identified the source of the REA’s communication breakdown as the absence of an elected union representative, or steward, in every worksite. “Teachers are inundated with emails, there are constant emails about things,” she explained. “So I think that’s the problem, that all the information is being communicated via email, and people just don’t pay attention to their emails. I honestly think most people just delete the REA emails as they come in.” She stated that the solution is face-to-face communication between members and an elected union representative: “I think having a building rep at the school who you could go to and who could communicate specifically with members would be a lot more helpful, or like... have a building meeting.”

In accordance with the doctrine of class struggle unionism, VCORE advocates a ‘steward system’ as the main mechanism for organizing collective action, communication, and community at the worksite. While business unionism tolerates a severely curtailed, but nonetheless real, role for the union steward, labor liberals aim to eliminate or prevent the emergence of such systems. The absence of a shop steward system has been identified by both Steve Early (2011) and Joe Burns (2022) as one of the defining features of labor liberalism’s bureaucratic and authoritarian trappings, and a precipitating factor in the development of undemocratic organizational practices within unions. In reflecting on the rise of labor liberalism within the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Burns recalls: “Workplace grievances were downplayed in favor of broader objectives. The traditional shop steward approach involved stewards going toe-to-toe with supervisors to defend union members from discipline. But in the SEIU organizing approach,

individual grievances were deemed unimportant. In some locals, shop stewards were replaced with a 1-800 number where folks who had no direct experience would handle grievances.”

(Burns 2022, pg. 57)

The Collective Bargaining Campaign

The trial-by-fire for Richmond VCORE members was their participation in and leadership of the REA’s campaign to reinstate collective bargaining rights for public education employees in Richmond, and to subsequently win a union authorization vote and negotiate the district’s first union contract since 1977. Anita, a VCORE member who served as an authorization card lead during the campaign, recalls: “When it comes to collective bargaining, most of the people pushing for us to start the collective bargaining campaign were from VCORE.” VCORE members who participated in this campaign had a range of understandings as to what the goal of collective bargaining meant from a class struggle unionist perspective.

In many worksites, despite having a concentration of active REA members, no elections were held for building reps. In general, building reps were selected by presidential appointment rather than popular vote of the union members. In Anita’s school, the absence of a building rep sowed a degree of confusion among her colleagues after the school board finally passed the collective bargaining resolution: “The REA was doing stuff at the time, I think it just wasn’t communicated well to the membership. So I remember having to go around and talk with people like, ‘Okay, this is what we’re doing. This is what’s happening next. This is how it’s gonna work’.” In other words, Anita began to perform the role of de facto building rep or union steward in her worksite.

Indeed, VCORE members soon discovered that by taking on the role of authorization card lead – a person responsible for talking with their coworkers about collective bargaining and getting them to sign a card authorizing the union as exclusive bargaining representative – they could build relationships with their fellow workers, inquire as to what issues they were facing and how they would like those issues to be addressed during the negotiation of the tentative working agreement, identify organic leaders, and seize this historic moment to rebuild the union’s declining membership base. It was not long before VCORE members had succeeded in organizing their buildings through the authorization card stage of the union’s campaign, which helped the REA obtain signed cards from a majority of workers in multiple bargaining units (including employees on the teacher’s pay scale, instructional assistants, care and safety associates, and school nutrition staff). VCORE members had now positioned the REA to move into the next stage of its campaign for collective bargaining rights.

With mass support for collective bargaining rights, VCORE members helped the REA to organize militant rallies at multiple school board meetings. “We organized a bunch of rallies at the school board meetings and had people come out and speak,” Sara explained. Through VCORE and the REA’s Collective Bargaining Committee, education workers, students, and community supporters were encouraged to share testimonials during public comment at the school board meeting. I was in attendance for all of these meetings, and a range of issues was broached by union members and supporters, including staff retention, school infrastructure, classroom resources, teacher workload, pay and the rising cost of living in the city, educator demoralization, and the general lack of respect and autonomy afforded to staff by the administration. Through a combination of mass mobilization, lobbying school board members, and building community coalitions, the REA was able to pressure the school board to take a vote

on the resolution to authorize collective bargaining rights for public education employees in the district, which won by an 8–1 vote. As Maria told me, “Let’s be honest: in terms of actually getting our members out there and collecting signatures [for authorization cards], that was our folks on the ground. It was the folks who are in the classroom every single day and looking around and seeing their coworkers quitting left and right... being like, something has got to give. And that was people in VCORE.”

In summarizing the progress of the campaign, Sara told me that “through both lobbying and public pressure, we got the school board to pass the resolution, and then we said, ‘Okay, now we have all these authorization cards, these people qualify for collective bargaining, let’s have an election [to authorize the union as the exclusive bargaining representative].’ And now we’re working on a contract.” While in their capacity as rank-and-file members of the REA, Richmond VCORE members were able to build up the REA’s Collective Bargaining Committee as a bona fide union organizing committee – with a network of building reps and authorization card leads acting as union stewards who could activate the rank and file, mobilize this mass base to exert political pressure on the school board to pass the resolution legalizing collective bargaining, and organize mass turnout for the union authorization vote (which resulted in 99% ‘yes’ vote certifying the REA as exclusive bargaining representative for the district) – as well as successfully run candidates for election to the REA’s first contract negotiation team for all subcategories of the bargaining unit for employees on the teacher pay scale, many interviewees nonetheless voiced their continued frustration with the union. Several VCORE members expressed that the lack of willingness to open the REA’s working committees to the general membership, the extremely limited and vague communication during the collective bargaining process, and the general absence of democratic procedure in the internal affairs of the REA

placed serious limitations upon what could be won from the negotiating table. In particular, when it came to the question of contract negotiations, several interviewees identified the decision of the REA to not pursue a more open, democratic, and participatory process as a major source of a growing divide between the rank-and-file rebels and the official union leadership. However, Richmond VCORE members were clear as to what would need to come next. Sara told me that “the next step is to run a slate [for union leadership]. We want to take over.” However, in accordance with VCORE’s organizing philosophy, strategy, and style of leadership development, she clarified that this should not just be a self-selected slate of VCORE members: “A recommendation we received from a VEA staffer who is also involved in Labor Notes and UCORE is that we shouldn’t run a slate that’s just our core group. We should run a slate that brings in new people and builds an even bigger coalition.”

Conclusion

The history of education shows that every class which has sought to take power has prepared itself for power by an autonomous education. The first step in emancipating oneself from political and social slavery is that of freeing the mind. I put forward this new idea: popular schooling should be placed under the control of the great workers' unions. The problem of education is the most important class problem (Antonio Gramsci in Davidson, 2017, pg. 86).

On December 12, 2022, members of the REA assembled at Thomas Jefferson High School to ratify their first union contract since 1977. According to VCORE members, it was a rebellious affair, with many union members asking the questions: “Where has the union been? Why has there not been more communication? Why is this the first time we’ve been invited to a union meeting to discuss the contract? Why wasn’t the tentative working agreement shared with members in advance?” Members were in revolt about the tentative working agreement – in some cases, due to the inadequacies of its specific provisions, but primarily due to the lack of communication and solicitation of mass member participation in the collective bargaining process. The meeting revealed the main contradictions internal to the REA, which have been explicitly identified by VCORE members since its founding in 2019, and brought to light in this study.

Two days later, on December 14th, the Richmond chapter of VCORE published *The Union RPS Workers Deserve: A Program to Transform the Richmond Education Association* (Richmond VCORE 2022). Representing a deepening of the group’s attempt to organize for class struggle unionism, they asked the questions: “1. How might this round of negotiations have been different if our union leadership had allowed for more meetings like this and prioritized

organizing members around the contract issues? 2. How can we make the energy that was present in the Thomas Jefferson High School auditorium that night the normal culture of our union?” (Ibid) This program outlined six categories for union reform, including communications and membership, democracy and member empowerment, open bargaining, mass action, union solidarity and social justice, and a brief legislative agenda (Ibid). At the end of the document, Richmond VCORE summarized its aims:

- 1.) Improve member communication with regards to all union affairs, especially contract negotiations, through our union newsletter, website, and other mediums;
- 2.) Rebuild our membership base through a recruitment drive and consistent member events;
- 3.) Establish a new style of leadership, in which REA officers “lead by listening” and delegate responsibilities equitably;
- 4.) Democratize union decision-making procedures through clear and consistent communication, transparent elections of union officers at all levels, simplified rules of order, regular membership meetings, and by creating new opportunities for rank and file participation in union governance at all levels;
- 5.) Develop a new cadre of union leaders through regular member education and organizer training programs;
- 6.) Pursue a progressive political agenda of class struggle and social justice; and
- 7.) Organize and coordinate bold, mass actions to defend the rights and dignity of our fellow workers, enforce our contracts, and transform Richmond Public Schools into a public education system that serves the people. (Richmond VCORE 2022)

It is clear that despite all challenges encountered by VCORE members who participated in the collective bargaining process, the negotiation of a working agreement was neither the beginning nor end of their project. To the contrary, if this most recent statement is any indicator, they will

continue to fight – now with a more battle-hardened cadre – to win the union and public education system they believe Richmonders deserve.

In the preceding chapters, I have established class struggle unionism as a relevant paradigm and living practice among education workers in Richmond, as well as a collective self-awareness of their contradictory class position, the nature of class struggle in public education, and the organizational, strategic, and tactical tools necessary to improve their material conditions as workers and to build a fighting labor union. I shall conclude this study with a simple provocation: we need communists in the labor movement. You can call them whatever you want – “radicals,” “socialists,” “leftists,” or “reds” – but their political enemies will always recognize them for what they really are, and their potential supporters need to hear what they have to say without slander or censorship.

If we accept the central theses of Joe Burns, then we can conclude that the labor movement requires a cadre of people who have a thorough critique of capitalism as it plays out in their particular industrial sector, a vision of an emancipatory alternative, and a strategic, tactical, and organizational toolbox, thereby enabling them to undermine the hegemony of both business unionism and labor liberalism while building support for a class struggle workers’ movement. In the absence of an organized communist current within the labor movement – if only as a voice of opposition and a political force pulling unions leftward – it is likely that organized labor will continue to reproduce bureaucratic and ineffective organizational forms and campaigns under the guise of economic democracy and social justice. This is the path to the further immiseration and intensified exploitation of workers, and may in fact rob working people of one of the most powerful self-defense weapons they have in the new era of robber barons and resurgent right-wing populism.

I am not unique in reaching such a conclusion. For example, Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin go so far as to argue that there is an empirical connection between union democracy and a communist presence in the labor movement. Indeed, they discovered that communist-led industrial unions affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) were more democratic, more racially integrated, more open to women's leadership, and won greater material gains and better contracts for the rank and file, in contrast to unions that had effectively eliminated such communist groupings. How did communists achieve this feat?

Communists and their radical allies in the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] won responsibility and trust in America's industrial unions not by 'infiltration' or 'colonization' but by an insurgent political strategy [...] These same insurgent practices, paradoxically, though not in exactly the same way, by producing political variety and organizational diversity, also tended to vitalize the union's inner life and increase the likelihood both that opposition factions would emerge in an international union and that it would be democratic. (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003, pg. 266)

To revive such a political insurgency, Stanley Aronowitz argues in *The Death and Life of American Labor* (2015) for the creation of a nationwide network of radical unionists, akin to the twentieth century's Trade Union Educational League (pgs. 165–167). The necessity of such a project is rooted in the recognition that the labor movement won't do its job if it's not forced to by the rank and file. Indeed, as VCORE members have taught us: "We are the union!" We could add to this that "We are the labor movement," and "we" bring with us the full range of ideas and perspectives present within the working class. The ultimate triumph of class struggle unionism will entail an ideological struggle within the labor movement.

As this study shows, the class struggle unionist approach is a highly effective option available for the reconstruction of a fighting labor movement. CORE demonstrated its effectiveness and, in a similar vein though on a smaller scale, so too has VCORE. What makes this approach so powerful? The collective refusal of work. However, an organized collective refusal requires the commitment of participants, which presupposes a certain degree of class consciousness and self-organization. This political recomposition of the working class will not happen spontaneously, but must be consciously cultivated by radicals at work. And today there are plenty of radicals in the labor movement and U.S. working class, but they must be nurtured, supported, educated, and brought into a community of struggle where they can develop their capacities to free themselves.

This is the power of the class struggle unionist approach: it locates the source of transformative power within the working class itself. As Eugène Pottier’s revolutionary anthem “The Internationale” made clear in 1871:

We want no condescending saviors,
To rule us from their judgment hall
We workers ask not for their favors,
Let us consult for all.

It is my conviction that most workers agree with this sentiment, and would likely include many union staffers, officers, and politicians among those “condescending saviors” who claim to know what’s best for the workers. “Go back to work, we’ll take care of it for you.” In contrast, the class struggle unionist approach contains within it a critical theory of power, which asserts that ordinary people – the masses of working people in their millions and billions – have the capacity

to comprehend their circumstances, organize themselves, and engage in a collective struggle to transform the society in which they live. Educators will be a part of this world-historic struggle, as the working class fights to take control of the processes of social production *and* reproduction, and to establish a system of education whose ultimate aim is to assist the full and free development of humanity.

Appendix A. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Demographics:

- How old are you?
- Who do you live with (family status and structure)?
- What is your gender identity?
- What is your racial identity?
- What is your role-description as an education worker (teacher, nurse, counselor, etc.)?
 - What grade level students do you work with?
 - Is there a specific subject area you work in?
 - Do you have a full-time or provisional license?
 - What level of formal education have you obtained (undergraduate, graduate, etc.)?
 - How many years of experience do you have working in public education?
 - How many years of experience do you have working in this district?
- Are you a dues-paying member of a local union of the Virginia Education Association (VEA)?
- Are you a member of a committee or leadership body of the VEA at the local and/or state level?

Virginia Caucus of Rank-and-file Educators (VCORE) Demographics:

- How many VCORE meetings have you attended?
- Have you been a member of other educator and/or labor organizations?
 - If so, which organizations?

- How would you compare/contrast your experience with VCORE?
- When did you join VCORE?
- How did you hear about VCORE? Was it from a colleague?
 - Could you describe the relationship you had with the person who recruited or on-boarded you?

General Motivations:

- Why did you join VCORE?
 - Probe: Were the motivations social? Political? Cultural? Based on a specific theory, strategy, or tactic?
- How would you describe the mission of VCORE?
 - What about VCORE's mission appeals to you?
- Could you describe the working and learning conditions in Richmond Public Schools?
What are some of the issues and challenges facing the school district?

Group Dynamics:

- How do VCORE members organize?
- Could you describe interactions among VCORE members at meetings?
- How does VCORE on-board new members?
 - Probe: How were you on-boarded to VCORE?

Richmond Education Association (REA):

- Could you describe the day-to-day work of the REA?

- Could you describe the organizational structure of the REA?
- Could you describe the internal group dynamics of the REA?
- What is the nature of the REA's relationship with RPS employees? Administration?
- Could you describe the role of the union's staff (such as the REA's UniServ Director) and your relationship with them?
- Could you describe the leadership style of the REA?
- What is the nature of the REA's relationship with its parent unions, the Virginia Education Association (VEA) and National Education Association (NEA)?
- How do you understand VCORE's role inside the REA?
- How would you describe VCORE's style of leadership and work in the REA?

Collective Bargaining and Union Authorization:

- Were you involved in the campaign to reinstate collective bargaining and authorize (certify) the REA as the exclusive bargaining unit for RPS employees? If so, could you describe your role in the campaign?
- What challenges did the REA face during this campaign?
- What was VCORE's role in the campaign to reinstate collective bargaining rights?
- What was VCORE's role in the union authorization process?
- Could you describe the role of the rank-and-file union membership in the campaign?
 - Probe: The role of staff? Elected leadership? Building representatives (stewards)? Non-union supporters? Community members?

COVID-19 Pandemic:

- How has the pandemic affected public education work?
 - How has the pandemic affected relationships between education workers and students? Parents? Principals? Central office staff?
- How has the pandemic affected the work of VCORE?
- How has the pandemic affected the work of the REA?

Class Politics and Power:

- How do you understand social class in the United States?
 - Probe: Do you view social class as distinct from income bracket (socioeconomic status)?
- As an educator, what class do you consider yourself to be a member of?
 - Probe: How does this affect your view of the world?
- What's your thinking about unions? Has that perspective changed during your time working with VCORE? If so, how?
- What structural power or leverage do educators have in society?
 - Probe: How has this power been leveraged by educators in Richmond?

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