On Behalf of Labor: Middle-Class Labor Activism in the 20th Century

by

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Introduction: Labor Organizing and the Middle Class

The buzz was undeniably there...It was a standing-room-only crowd. Another 500 people were packed into nearby rooms to watch on closed-circuit television. And outside stretched a 200-yard-long line of people who were turned away. It was not a Mike Tyson fight. Nor was it the latest Pearl Jam concert. The crowd was there for a panel discussion with professors of philosophy, law and religion, a feminist author and a labor leader.¹

At Columbia University, on October 3, 1996, over 1,700 people crowded into an auditorium to talk about the possibility of labor movement revival. These people, however, were not rank-and-file union members, low-wage workers, or unorganized immigrants. They were students, intellectuals, and mid-level union officials. And it was to them John Sweeney, then head of the AFL-CIO, spoke: “We need your help...”²

Since the early 1990s, Labor Unions have poured millions of dollars into recruiting college educated union organizers. In 1995 alone, the AFL-CIO Organizing Institute devoted over half of its $2.5 million budget to campus recruitment.³ Recent graduates of elite colleges, filled with energy, and committed to social justice, are going to work for national unions to recruit, train, and organize millions of workers. These organizers and staffers spend hours with workers, leading campaigns and organizing new members. Yet students enter the labor movement as outsiders. Their middle-class origins separate them from working class union members, further complicating the social and political dynamics surrounding union organizing. Despite this, the participation of middle-class intellectuals in the union

² Greenhouse.
movement has become so routine that it rarely attracts critical attention—articles and books written about new organizing strategies and internal union structures rarely dwell the position of new labor leaders as outsiders who are not members of the groups on behalf of whom these activists work.  

While middle-class involvement in union organizing in the United States has increased dramatically over the past several decades, middle-class participation in labor relations is nothing new. As this thesis will show, middle-class reformers, social workers, and activists have participated in envisioning, implementing, and managing labor organizing and reform since the turn of the 20th century. Middle-class activists and reformers’ actions and language did not, however, arise independently of their class position. Their position as a class between capital and labor informed activists’ vision for labor relations and affected the ways in which they related to workers and employers. Middle-class labor activists took up a mediating role in labor relations that would continue for the rest of the century. They brought to their activism middle-class assumptions of intellectual and cultural superiority as well as a dedication to rational order and participatory democracy.

At various points throughout the 20th century, middle-class labor activism has taken different shapes. In the early 1900s, reformers clearly promoted industrial order and working-class cultural development. Reform efforts were generally anchored in openly benevolent or empathetic discourse. During the 1960s, middle-

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class student activism, which developed in response to the legacies of Progressive Era reform, focused less on social and political stability and more on grass-roots organizing for democratic reform. Students often looked to the poor and unemployed to embody radical political action, idealizing the possibility of working-class power. Nonetheless, student activism maintained class hierarchies by emphasizing the student as the center of a large social movement, and in doing so established university-bred activists as an integral feature of a successful labor movement. Out of the 1960s came a flock of liberal minded labor professionals who maintained a grass-roots mindset, even if they let go of the more radical (and rambunctious) elements of the student movement. These middle-class activists now oversee the recruitment of college students to working-class labor organizations. Thus, the development of middle-class labor activism since the early 1900s becomes important for understanding the current state of cross-class labor organizations.

Because middle-class labor activists come to a largely working-class movement from outside the world of industrial or manual labor, the formation of cross-class alliances has always been a large component of their activism. These alliances, because they are situated within working-class movements (middle-class activists work on behalf of workers), positions middle-class activists as able political actors and workers as dependent on those activists. Class hierarchies that assume the middle class to be culturally and politically superior to the working class are then

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5 It should be noted, with regard to labor organizing, there are a number of unions with middle-class membership—teacher unions, for example. In these cases, rank-and-file members tend to be a part of the middle class—well-educated, well-trained. These unions tend to have different relationships with middle-class labor organizers than working-class unions. For the purpose of this paper, I focus mostly on middle-class activists’ involvement with working-class unions, only occasionally drawing attention to matters surrounding middle-class unions.
reproduced. This dynamic between middle-class activists and workers legitimizes the authority of middle-class activists within labor movements, allowing them to prioritize their own opinions and ideals within cross-class organizations. A close examination of the relationships between middle-class labor activists and working-class laborers illuminates how class relations and middle-class interests shape the vision, implementation, and language of middle-class labor activism.

**Between Capital and Labor**

Before examining cross-class alliances, it is important to contextualize and define the class position of activist outsiders. As capitalist relations matured within the United States, the web of class relations, as well as the analysis of these relations, became more complicated. From the middle of the nineteenth century, a “distinctly new and definable” American middle class began to emerge between capital and labor.\(^6\) Since then, the term middle class has become quite encompassing, articulating a range of different class concepts. The term is probably most pervasive in its political form, where it refers to an income bracket that represents individuals and families who do not fall under the federal/state poverty lines but who also do not share in the job security and financial stability of the upper-middle or upper class. Looked at from the standpoint of labor relations, however, the middle class is less about an income category and more about a position within the division of labor; members of the middle class came into being as a class that neither owned its own

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means of production nor fell under the traditional category of an unskilled (or low-skilled) working class. Members of this middle class tend to be well-educated and well-trained for professional or managerial positions that require mental work.

Here, Barbara and John Ehrenreich’s concept of a “Professional Managerial Class” (PMC) helps articulate some of the characteristics of the contemporary well-educated, well-trained middle-class strata. They define the PMC as “consisting of salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production and whose major function in the social division of labor may be described broadly as the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations.” These professionals and managers, because they function as the middle class, mediate between capital and labor. This mediation continues capitalist culture and class relations by maintaining order and reproducing certain ideologies. The PMC, then, is not tied together by financial standing, but rather by the social position of its members. Thus within the PMC members have a wide range of occupations, skills, income levels, power, and prestige, but are united through “a common relation to the economic foundations of society (foundations associated with access to means of production and appropriation of social surplus).” This common relation, the Ehrenreichs argue, gives rise to other

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7 As with all class categories, there is much ambiguity about what constitutes “middle class” and who falls into the defined category. For example, in the case of production there are some individuals who, because of their social relations and cultural ideologies can be appropriately categorized as “middle class,” but who own their own means of production—small business owners, etc… As clearly as possible, I will outline how I understand the term for the purpose of this essay, understanding that such a category will never perfectly and wholly describe a cohesive class category.

8 Barbara and John Ehrenreich, “The Professional-Managerial Class,” in Between Capital and Labor, ed. Pat Walker (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1979), 5-48; Blumin,
socially unifying characteristics, namely educational background, kinship networks, work habits, etc…

The Ehrenreichs trace the emergence of PMC ideologies and institutions back to the Progressive Era, a time when huge surpluses created by the expanding capitalist system allowed for the proliferation of a professional middle class. This, coupled with escalating conflicts between capital and labor, caused members of an older middle class to consciously grasp the mediating role it would have to play in order to survive with its privileges intact. Reproducing a rational social order became a top priority. During this period, regulation and management of civil society increased; public education expanded, charity became institutionalized, and public-health measures were written into law. Through these expansions, the rising PMC, which orchestrated such regulations, penetrated working-class community life, institutionalizing increasingly pervasive middle-class (and American) ideologies. In doing this, they also made permanent the roles of middle-class reformers and managers.

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9 Barbara and John Ehrenreich, 12.
10 Many scholars date the formation of the middle class back further, before the turn of the century (see Steward Blumin’s article “The Hypothesis of Middle Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century America: A Critique and Some Proposals”). The Ehrenreich’s however, claim that the PMC, a class defined through its position within capitalist labor relations, began to solidify during the Progressive Era. They argue that the concentration of surplus value in private foundations, the increase in government expenditures, and the development of a consumer-goods market all contributed to the rise of the PMC during the first decade of the 20th century. For further discussion see page 15 of their essay “The Professional-Managerial Class.” Richard Ohmann also traces the PMC back to the early 1900s, arguing that “the PMC did not exist as a recognizable or conscious formation in 1880, but was well organized and purposeful in 1910,” (Richard Ohmann, Selling Culture: Magazines Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century (New York, NY: Verso, 1996), 119.
11 Ehrenreichs, 15, 18.
Over the decades, the PMC, like any class formation, shifted to reflect changing needs, as well as new social and economic relations. Within an expanding PMC, subdivisions became apparent, making it more difficult to describe a single class identity. Rifts arose around “occupational subspecializations” and differing political orientations. One of the deepest divisions within the PMC exists between administrators/engineers and liberal arts/service professionals. “The material difference between the two groups,” the Ehrenreichs state, “[is] that those in the first category are directly tied to business and industry; their jobs are, not infrequently, way stations on the road to the ruling class itself.” This differs from liberal arts and service professionals who are “more likely to enjoy the relative shelter of the university or other sorts of non-profit agencies and to be firmly fixed within the PMC.”

Furthermore, to emphasize shifts within the PMC, it is important to acknowledge how understandings of different class terms have altered over time. For example, during the Progressive Era, members of the PMC (as articulated by the Ehrenreichs) were generally referred to as “middle class.” Over time, however, as the class between capital and labor continued to expand, the term “middle class” came to embody a much wider range of people and therefore took on new meaning. Many industrial workers said to be members of a “working class” became property owners and/or took low-level managerial jobs, and therefore moved into a low-middle class strata. This group, however, does not necessarily fit with the Ehrenreiches’ definition of well-educated, well-trained, salaried mental workers. Thus when the Ehrenreichs

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12 Ehrenreichs, 28. The Progressive Era is roughly defined by historians as the period between 1890 and 1920.
discuss the PMC in a contemporary setting, the more familiar term “upper-middle class” or intellectual middle class, rather than just “middle class,” might better denote the class group to which the Ehrenreichs refer, and to which the student organizers that were called to service at Columbia in 1996 belong.

That said, some theorists question the whole notion of a distinct Professional Managerial Class. Stanley Aronowitz, in his piece “The Professional-Managerial Class or Middle Strata,” argues that although professionals/managers have distinct functions within the capitalist mode of production (functions similar to those outlined by the Ehrenreichs), they are not inherently antagonistic to capital, and therefore do not constitute a class, but rather a “middle strata.” This is not to say that the middle strata and the ruling class don’t frequently clash, but rather that they are not truly antagonistic toward or independent of capitalists—their very function is to reproduce capitalist relations because they are dependent on capital production. This runs contrary to the Ehrenreichs’ argument, which asserts that the mediatory and regulatory role of professionals/managers means that the PMC, as a distinct class, is antagonistic to both the working class (because the PMC relies on labor to produce surplus value) and the capitalist class (because PMC regulations have the potential to decrease production). Aronowitz’s reasoning for using “strata” instead of “class” helps to clarify the ways in which the relationship between the professional/managerial middle class and the ruling class is not solely antagonistic. The relations that arise between the Professional Managerial Class/Middle Strata and
the other classes are neither simple nor homogenous. It is important to keep this in mind when contextualizing middle-class activism within social movements.\textsuperscript{13}

Drawing upon Aronowitz and the Ehrenreichs’ discussions of the PMC and the middle strata, I will use the term “middle class” to refer to a \textit{middle}, largely intellectual, well educated and well trained, class strata that exists between capital and labor. By and large, my usage of middle class will also focus on the liberal arts/service subdivision of the PMC because the activists on which this paper focuses function within this category. For consistency, I will utilize the term “middle class” throughout the paper, even when, for reasons outlined above, the group of which I write may be more precisely characterized as a current upper-middle class. I also refer to a “working class” while acknowledging that certain individuals within that category may not refer to themselves in those class terms. However, I utilize this category as a way to indicate wage laborers who are generally not educated at a fulltime four-year university and who do not occupy middle or upper level managerial or professional positions within the division of labor.

\textbf{20\textsuperscript{th} Century Middle-Class Labor Activism}

Outlining and clarifying these class categories provides a theoretical framework from which to talk about class positions within cross-class alliances and social movements. From here, it becomes possible to examine the current phenomenon of middle-class labor organizers within a historical context of middle-

class labor activism. Analyzing labor activism in juxtaposition to the development of a distinctly middle class strata sheds light on the tendencies of and reasons for such activism within a larger economic, social, and political system. The purpose of this paper is to explore, in greater detail, the terms of middle-class labor activism and the formation of cross-class alliances. To do this, I examine middle-class involvement with labor organizing during three distinct periods of the twentieth century—the Progressive Era, the 1960s, and the late 1900s. Both the reform movement during the Progressive Era and the student movement in the 1960s greatly influenced the trajectory of middle-class labor activism. Therefore, these periods in particular provide valuable information for understanding the current state of middle-class labor activism.14

I begin my analysis by discussing the rise of middle-class labor reformers during the Progressive Era. At the turn of the twentieth century, the middle class came together as a distinct group between capital and labor largely by inserting itself into labor relations through social reform organizations. Social workers and reformers, looking out for the “greater good” of society as well as the exploited working class, began to invest time and energy developing theories and practices of industrial democracy. Industrial democracy was the product of a middle-class vision for labor relations that would embody values such as peace, discipline, and order through bureaucratic structures of arbitration and negotiation. Reformers’ often carried with them assumptions, made clear by their language and action, about their

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14 This is not to say that other time periods are unimportant for understanding the development of labor organizing within the United States. Rather, the explosion of specifically middle-class activism during early and mid century makes those time periods especially important for examining the recent growth in middle class labor organizers.
own cultural and educational superiority. They also assumed a position of expertise. Their role, as they saw it, was to regulate and manage volatile industrial relations. It was during this time that the formation of social reform organizations institutionalized middle-class involvement with labor. These social organizations set the way for a continuation of middle-class labor activism for the two later periods that I examine.

Next, in Chapter 2, I study the rise of a younger generation of middle-class activists through the organization Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Beginning in the early 1960s, middle-class activism took on new forms as students began waging political and social warfare on multiple fronts. I focus primarily on the early years of SDS, before internal factions due to intensified anti-war activism and identification with the Black Power movement began splitting the organization. During its early years, SDS was still unarguably a middle-class organization made up mostly of students from four-year colleges with middle-class backgrounds. Moving away from their Progressive Era predecessors, students dropped, by and large, explicit references to their own cultural and educational superiority. They advocated for direct action and highlighted the need to form solidarity with the poor and unemployed in order to build a mass movement of social change. Middle-class values and assumptions, however, were not so much destroyed as disguised. Student activists still took on the position of “expert.” Since certain rank-and-file sentiments and actions remained contrary to middle-class hopes for a large social movement, activists struggled to organize unemployed workers into groups that could carry out their goals of participatory democracy.
Out of the 1960s student movement grew a cadre of liberal activists committed to social justice and looking towards liberal reform. Many of these activists took union jobs as a way to continue their social work and some are still involved with labor organizing to this day. Chapter 3 investigates present day methods of union recruitment, internal union relations, and rank-and-file training while focusing on the role of middle-class organizers within union structures. Middle-class union staffers shape many of the practices and goals of working-class unions and are responsible for increasing the number of organizers employed from outside the rank and file. They have developed new union strategies, such as recruitment through a Union Summer intern program, and prioritized a new “organizing model” that hires outside organizers to recruit and train rank-and-file committee members. Contextualizing these changes within the historical context of middle-class participation in labor movements shows the ways in which these new organizing tactics and strategies connect to activists’ class identity and the development of middle-class social activism.

While middle-class activists have not simply placed their own structures, strategies, and visions for labor upon worker subjects, middle-class presence in labor relations has effectively altered the nature of labor movements. A critical examination of cross-class alliances surrounding labor activism, which focuses on middle-class activists as classed subjects, illuminates fundamental tendencies of middle-class reformers, activists, and staffers that often go unnoticed within the context of economic, political and social activism. Middle-class labor activism has never been just about securing more for workers, but is the result of much more
complex relationships between labor, the middle class, and capital. As I will argue in this essay, middle-class labor activism functions to support existing class hierarchies and the supremacy of middle-class culture. This is possible because middle-class labor activists continue to work *on behalf of* labor. Understanding how this dynamic of middle-class labor activism reproduces class hierarchies and promotes middle-class social/cultural understandings for working-class organizations provides motivation for exploring new possibilities for middle-class labor activism that do not rely on members of the middle-class working *on behalf of* labor.
Chapter 1: Reformers and the Progressive Era

By the start of the twentieth century, middle-class reformers, reacting to national concerns about relations between business and labor, began to take active interest in industrial relations. Some reformers acted out of a humanitarian impulse to amend the brutal exploitation of workers, while others spoke openly about the fear that capitalism, left to its own devices, would push workers toward revolution.\textsuperscript{15} Labor reformers argued that if workers were properly educated and trained to take part in a rational democratic system of industrial relations, industrial exploitation would ease, order would prevail, and production would continue uninterrupted. Thus middle-class labor activists began envisioning a new system of industrial relations, a system based on bureaucracy, democracy, discipline and cooperation, and not, as they saw it, on the undisciplined and unruly action of the rank-and-file masses or the inhumane domination of employers. Reformers joined unions and other labor organizations to promote a new industrial order. They also worked through social organizations such as settlement houses and social reform organizations to promote cultural education and training to go along with industrial reorganization.

As mentioned earlier, the call for industrial reform came at a time when the American middle class was solidifying as a defined group around order, self-discipline, civic duty, and enlightenment ideas of rationality.\textsuperscript{16} Industrial reformers, typically members of the middle class, joined temperance advocates, missionaries,\textsuperscript{15} Richard Greenwald, \textit{The Triangle Fire, the Protocols of Peace, and Industrial Democracy in Progressive Era New York} (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005), 7.\textsuperscript{16} Blumin; Paul Boyer, \textit{Urban Masses and Moral Order in America 1820-1920} (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).
and family reformers to advocate for a world where force, barbarism, and unrestrained passion were replaced with Christian self-control, modesty, and sobriety. Advocating certain social reforms became one way for the middle class to simultaneously distinguish itself from the working class (needing protection and uplift) and from upper-class capitalists (needing discipline and restraint). Paul Boyer goes so far as to claim, “the decision to participate in an urban moral-reform society might reflect less the wish to control others than an impulse toward self-definition, a need to avow publicly one’s own class aspiration.” While cultural self-definition was certainly not the only reason for social reform, the quest for industrial order and the rise of middle-class Progressive Era reform must be situated within a larger context of middle-class ways of life and the pursuit of cultural hegemony. As Nan Enstad puts it in her book *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*, “the middle class set the standard it promoted as dominant, creating class ideology under the guise of democracy…That is, the middle class largely defined itself through ideals of individualism and classlessness, even as it promoted class-based ideals as universal truths.”

With regard to labor, promoting middle-class ideals meant encouraging certain behaviors for workers as well as developing rational and cooperative systems of industrial democracy. Industrial democracy, in an attempt to bring industrial order, arranged labors relations in a way that spread workplace authority between employers, workers, and third-party regulatory committees. Within this system,

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17 Blumin, 299.
18 Boyer, 61.
middle-class reforms ideally played a mediating role within industrial relations. This allowed them to further advance their own vision for a positive social system as well as monitor both workers and employers. By 1914, however, reform efforts shifted away from industrial structures that systematically divided industrial authority, and moved toward legislative action that would supposedly orchestrate a well-functioning and just system of industrial relations. In other words, reformers turned to transforming the state into a regulatory structure that enforced reform ideals. Legislative reform, however, also valorized middle-class notions of morality and familial structures. For middle-class reformers, labor reform became an avenue by which to advance their own interests and cultural values.

Reforming Culture

For middle-class reformers, many of whom were women, labor organizing was part of a larger goal of social transformation. Therefore, reform efforts were not just about supporting workers unconditionally, but also about encouraging workers to embrace middle-class ways of being. As reformers allied themselves with workers, they often adopted language that criticized and admonished certain working-class behaviors. By doing this, middle-class reform women reproduced class hierarchies that recognized the middle class as morally and culturally superior. While cultural reform may or may not have been the intention of all reformers, the consequence of their language and actions was the promotion of certain subjectivities for laborers as well as the prioritization of certain concepts of an adequate social order.
Many Progressive Era reformers portrayed the working class as exploited and underdeveloped and, in doing so, called for middle-class protection, education, and training of industrial workers. Ideas of justice and solidarity, combined with rhetoric of the “underdeveloped” worker, set the way for middle-class involvement in labor relations based on a supposed moral duty. Some, like Jane Addams, one of the most prominent middle-class reformers, dedicated their lives to helping exploited workers. Ideas of “social justice” and “human brotherhood” pushed Addams and her colleagues to work toward a new system of industrial relations. She believed that working people were “underdeveloped,” “untrained,” “unused,” and lacked “social organization of any kind.”

This rhetoric was typical among reformers, one of whom declared that working with workers was “like handling a vast kindergarten.” Notions of workers as “underdeveloped,” “untrained,” and “unused” implied that working people needed to be developed, trained, and used. This created a situation that both warranted and required help from outside “parents” who could nurture, teach, and organize the “child-like” workers.

Yet, there was also a sense that workers could develop, both intellectually and culturally, but only with the guidance of elite reformers. The ability to develop culturally meant that reformers foresaw a time when their participation in labor relations would give rise to a lasting system of bureaucratic labor relations—better for all—that was structurally implemented and socially upheld through the “voluntary discipline” of those workers who learned to let go of their “temperamental

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21 Greenwald, 41.
bitterness.”22 Thus, for reformers like Addams, assisting exploited workers did not just mean taking care of forever dependent “children,” it meant helping the working class function on their own within particular industrial structures.

Helping workers meant, among other things, encouraging values of cooperation, discussion, and order among working-class people. Louise Knight, a biographer of Jane Addams, writes that Addams’s philosophy was based on the “ethics of cooperation and nonresistance.” Like many members of the middle-class, she felt that “reasonable conversation and discussion ought to make confrontations over power unnecessary.”23 In a piece titled “The Settlement as a Factor in the Labor Movement,” Addams expressed her hope that unions would “perceive the larger solidarity which includes labor and capital, and [act] upon the notion of universal kinship.”24 Through her language, as well as her actions, she encouraged peaceful negotiations for labor relations (which usually relied on middle-class mediation of employer/employee relations) and admonished aggressive collective bargaining strategies.25 By structuring a system of ethics around cooperation and nonresistance, reformers could legitimize governmental and industrial structures that prioritized social order and peace. If conversation could replace confrontations over power, then reformers could justifiably insert themselves into industrial relations in order to

23 Knight, 184, 208.
24 Addams, 57.
25 For more of Addams’s own language around labor relations see her work “The Settlement as a Factor in the Labor Movement.” For information regarding her labor activism see Knight’s Citizen.
facilitate this conversation. Furthermore, since confrontations over power were seen as destructive to the social fabric, those people who engaged in such confrontations could be reprimanded, disciplined, and steered toward communication deemed “reasonable” by middle-class reformers.

This did not mean, however, that female reformers steered away from supporting industrial unionization for women. Middle-class women often supported female strikers and industrial unions. In 1903, The Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) formed as a way for middle-class reform women to support the organizing efforts of female industrial workers. In 1909, when 20,000 shirtwaist workers (85% of them women) walked out of their New York factory jobs, the WTUL quickly joined the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) in their struggle against the New York ladies garment companies. For the next several months, a heated battle ensued between employers and workers over wages, union recognition, and working conditions, a battle affected by middle-class reform women as well as public media and governmental bodies.  

Cross-class alliances formed between the WTUL and strikers, however, were not without class tension. The WTUL offered support, but not unconditionally. They sought alliances with working-class women around concepts of maternalism and sisterhood. These concepts, however, were only understood within the realm of middle-class culture and social structures. While reformers emphasized connectivity with female workers and expressed empathy for working women, cross-class alliances and reform efforts remained within the structural and moral discourses of

the middle class. For this reason, when middle-class reformers stepped into the fray of the shirtwaist strike they began, subtly and not so subtly, to promote certain middle-class subjectivities for female strikers as well as certain subjectivities for those working-class leaders who themselves became WTUL members. Reformers’ representation of the striking women as exploited but rational subjects, as well as their actions and language around reform work, monitored, consciously or otherwise, the behavior of strikers with whom reformers attempted to ally themselves.

Appealing to middle-class notions of femininity and female vulnerability, articles written by reformers and union leaders painted the picture of the “frail” working woman with “insufficient clothing.” Historian Pamela Gaddy points out the WTUL especially portrayed women as “romantically honorable—but also naively childlike—in need of pity, protection, maternal guidance and uplift.” This representation, however, was not consistent with other representations of those same women. Public media representations of the 1909 strike portrayed female strikers as irrational hell-raisers, violent on the picket line, and overly absorbed with fashion and leisure. Enstad quotes reporter Sarah Comstock, who wrote about the 1909 strike:

This was a scene of gaiety and flirtation. My preconceived idea of a strike was a somber meeting where somber resolutions were made, and there was always a background of mothers wiping their eyes with their aprons vowing that they would endure the Great Cause, and of babes who wept bitterly for a soup bone to suck…But they don’t look as if they had any grievance.

27 Elizabeth Spelman, as referenced by Enstad, argues that “when feminism, lacking a race or class critique, asked a diversity of women to think or act ‘as women,’” it unwittingly replaced the cultural norm of ‘man’ (white and middle class) with a norm of white middle-class women.” In terms of workers in the early 1900s, the assumption or promotion of female strikers as “rational,” (valued highly by the middle class), normalized and valorized middle-class values through the utilization of ‘womanhood’ as a common category. (Enstad, 3).

28 Enstad, 103.

29 Pamela Gaddy as quoted in Enstad, 112; Orleck.

30 Sarah Comstock as quoted by Enstad, 84.
These differing representations established a dichotomy between “thinly clad,” but rational, female workers and irrational frivolous working girls. The oppositional representations are important, not for determining which one holds greater substantial truth, but rather for understanding how such representations formed and promoted certain subjectivities for striking women and what those subjectivities convey about those who represented strikers.

Both middle-class publications and middle-class reformers linked the legitimacy of strikers’ claims with certain perceptions and representations of striker’s behavior. Enstad points out that to Comstock, the “well-dressed and smiling strikers did not have the seriousness of rational, political actors, nor the visible poverty that would justify their claims of low wages”—they did not “look as if they had any grievance.”31 Mothers, in the background of a strike where somber resolutions were discussed rationally, would warrant action on behalf of working women, but striking “girls” who gossiped, wore make-up, and acted aggressively deserved no sympathy. Women reformers, however, who sympathized with strikers’ situations, portrayed workers as serious mothers in need. The conflicting depiction of female strikers draws attention to the ways in which the sympathy that was or was not felt for women workers depended on the representation of strikers’ dress, demeanor, and desires—all of which are valued subjectively and influenced by class. Labor leaders would have had difficulty maintaining their demands for workers while accepting striking “girls” as irrational gossipers who were merely in pursuit of leisure time.

31 Enstad, 84.
Historical accounts of the 1909 strike largely dismiss the popular press as bias, portraying strikers as labor leaders and reformers did, namely as serious, thinly clad, nonviolent subjects. This dismissal overlooks the ways in which reformers’ portrayal of strikers comes from a particular cultural location and does not signify some “truth” of strikers’ identity. Annelise Orleck, for example, in her book *Common Sense and a Little Fire*, reinforces the connection between rationality, disciplined action, and political legitimacy. When writing about Clara Lemlich, a working-class labor leader who played an integral role in the 1909 garment workers strike, Orleck describes the “mythology of the waistmakers’ uprising” that characterized Lemlich in the media as a fiery, Jewish, working-class girl who “[rose] up spontaneously to interrupt the cautious speeches of her labor movement elders.” This characterization, Orleck asserts, supported the “stereotype” that working girls “lacked the cool heads and foresight needed for rational planning.” “In truth,” Orleck counters, “[Lemlich’s] discipline as an organizer and ability to channel her outrage into a vision of social change had already won her a reputation among fellow workers.”

Historical accounts that insist upon representations of strikers as rational subjects without complicating or contextualizing those representations continue to promote middle-class subjectivities of female strikers. In the passage quoted above, Orleck writes off “fiery” and “spontaneous” representations of Lemlich as “stereotype” and “mythology,” instead insisting on the “truth” of Lemlich’s discipline and “channeled outrage.” By doing this, Orleck counters, not the notion that fiery

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32 Enstad, 88-89.
33 Orleck, 60-61.
spontaneous girls cannot be legitimate political actors, but rather that Lemlich was such a fiery girl. For Orleck, then, “discipline” and “channeled outrage” still connect to the “foresight needed for rational planning.” Thus “legitimate” political action continues to be equated with middle-class social values, furthering the cultural hegemony of middle-class attitudes.

Most of the time, the language strikers used to represent themselves was largely kept out of public representations of female workers; reformers rarely quoted strikers directly in publications. That middle-class labor leaders and reformers did not directly represent working women through those workers’ own words shows reformers’ reluctance to recognize strikers as able political actors. Even reformer women, who themselves were struggling for political recognition, assumed that they were better able to argue on behalf of striking “girls” than those women were in arguing for themselves. As Enstad notes, most of the time the political agency of strikers was completely overlooked as middle-class columnists’ positioned strikers as “charity cases who needed only philanthropy and pity, rather than as political actors who deserved to participate in workplace decisions.” This mentality did not go

34 It is interesting to note that Lemlich rejected any alliance with middle and upper class reformers. Secondly, it is also important to note the ways in which Orleck’s writing at times reinforces notions of middle-class cultural superiority. When writing about working-class labor leaders, she claims that political activism exposed those women to “more interesting people than they would have met had they stayed on the shop floor: writers artists, professors, people with ideas.” This statement, without any bibliographical reference, defines “people on the shop floor” in opposition to “people with ideas.” Moreover, Orleck counters this very notion later in the chapter by pointing out that Pauline Newman (one of working-class labor leaders Orleck writes about) likened her time with mine workers to her time at a university: “[Newman] had gotten her undergraduate degree, she liked to say, at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory.” (Orleck, 55, 64).

35 Enstad.
unnoticed by working-class labor leaders who demonstrated frustration with the patronizing benevolence of their middle-class allies.\(^{36}\)

By representing female strikers as defenseless but rational mothers struggling for justice, without recognizing those strikers as able political agents, reformers created a way for the middle class to challenge industrial relations without calling into question middle-class values or class structure itself. Individuals outside labor could now justifiably manage strikes, unions, and industrial relations on behalf of those workers who could not help themselves. Strikers became “clients” instead of political agents. Enstad writes:

> Working women who claimed political subjectivities profoundly challenged class, gender and race hierarchies; but as clients striking women’s political claims directly threatened shop owners’ interests without appearing to threaten the class position of those who pitied them or took up their cause. Casting striking women as supplicants, leaders tacitly placed middle-class observers in the powerful position of judge and, potentially, benefactor.\(^{37}\)

Middle-class reformers’ position of “judge” or “benefactor” provided them with an opportunity to promote certain attitudes, values, and behaviors through industrial activism.

When female strikers didn’t embody the representation middle-class reformers gave them, those reformers attempted to transform workers into the rational, modest, and sober subjects their representations sought to create. Leaders reprimanded working women who dressed “above their station” and who read dime novels, arguing that these practices would keep women from attaining the ability for rational thinking.\(^{38}\) The perceived clash between ability for rational thought and working-

\(^{36}\) Enstad, 87-88, 109; Orleck, 43, 57.
\(^{37}\) Enstad, 108.
\(^{38}\) Enstad.
class behaviors, such as dime novel reading and “foolish” consumption, again demonstrates that, for reformers, political agency depended on embracing certain middle-class values.

Some reformers argued for actively enforcing middle-class values. One such reformer, Charlotte Barnum, suggested that the union should set a maximum to the amount of money working women union members could spend each week on dress. She also suggested that “experts” in fabrics and the art of shopping should counsel workers in “tasteful” dress. Soon workers would “realize the importance of studying durability and of avoiding extreme and transient styles and colors.” Reform measures also sought to enforce middle-class gender structures. Activists argued that “a woman’s wage” should be just enough for individual subsistence, so as not to encourage women to live independently of their families. This notion of “a women’s wage” did not threaten men’s position in the workplace or the “purity” of women who, morally, should not flaunt material excess or frivolous consumption.39 Thus, for middle-class reform women, union activism included policing the behavior and attitude of the “lower classes” with the hope that they would soon take on a more “moral” (middle-class) way of life. In order to take part in their own union, workers were asked to change certain behaviors and embrace the ideal of a modest, sometimes feminine, but always rational subject, considered by middle-class reformers to be necessary for sustained political participation.40

39 Enstad, 111-113.
40 Some working-class leaders resented the ways reformers attempted to promote certain standards of acceptable feminine behavior. As Orleck puts it, workers were not “blind to the class-determined limits of sisterhood.” (Orleck, 62, 134; Enstad, 98-99, 111).
Despite the attitudes of middle-class reform women, some working-class women decided to ally themselves with the WTUL. Even within the alliance, however, support from middle-class reform women came at a price. Wealthy WTUL members often provided working-class leaders with a salary so that they could dedicate their time fully to organizing female workers. This allowed working-class leaders to cover much more ground than they otherwise would have been able to do. In return, however, the wealthy financial backers required working-class labor leaders to distance themselves from radical working-class activism and embrace a more general agenda of the WTUL that emphasized patience and moderation. Pauline Newman, a working-class labor organizer who worked with the WTUL, learned to appear refined in order to mingle with wealthier WTUL members. Over the years, Newman herself reprimanded working-class culture, adopting middle-class attitudes toward leisure activities like dime-novel reading. In her magazine column, “Woman’s Sphere,” she warned young women to stay away from romance novels and instead learn to appreciate mature literature. “The didactic tone of her columns,” Orleck writes, “reflected the gap that had opened up between her and the average shop floor worker.” For working-class leaders, forming alliances with the WTUL and middle-class reform women meant reforming behavior and activism in order to fit the values and vision of middle-class allies.41

While middle-class reform women wanted workers to mature into rational subjects, they overlooked the seriousness of strikers’ demands for union recognition. Striking women were adamant about union recognition being part of any 1909

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41 Orleck, 44-5, 64-66, 74.
garment strike settlement. In January of 1910, a compromise was offered that would have met strikers’ demands concerning wages, hours, and conditions. The only thing that was missing from the settlement was that it would not recognize the union, and would therefore not grant workers a voice in grievance procedures or future contracts. The strikers unanimously rejected the settlement. This shocked reformers and ultimately caused a split in the alliance between strikers and their middle-class supporters. Over the next five years, the WTUL moved away from working directly with working-class women and many working-class members left the organization for an extended period of time. The class position of reform women, which informed the nature of the movement as well as the language surrounding it, made it difficult for working women to ally themselves with reformers without sacrificing certain aspects of their working-class identity.

Discipline and Structure

The investment reformers had in maintaining a specific social order not only influenced the nature of cross-class interactions, but also the structure and implementation of industrial reforms themselves. Rationality, efficiency, production, and order—all valued highly by the middle class—became the backbone of an imagined modern industrial system. Although reform efforts were meant to protect

42 Enstad, 108; Greenwald; Orleck, 129. After 1917, working-class women came back to dominate the WTUL, especially its New York branch. During that period, cross-class alliances were less troubled and close personal friendships between working-class and middle-class members formed in ways they hadn’t before. These alliances, however, arose partly because the League’s working-class leaders were no longer “working-class girls” (Orleck, 129).
workers, they also worked to provide middle-class reformers with increased authority within regulatory industrial structures.

Putting forward ideas for a positive, modern, and rational system of worker/employer relations depended on depicting “pre-modern” worker/employer relationships as irrational and negative. In historical analyses of the Progressive Era, scholars differentiate between “rational” and “irrational” industrial structures and practices. 43 Steven Fraser, in his essay “Dress Rehearsal for the New Deal,” writes that the men’s clothing industry in the early 1900s was characterized by shops in which the relationships between entrepreneurs and workers were “entirely arbitrary” and “rested on archaic structures of domination and docility.” 44 The use of “arbitrary” implies that there is some logical relationship between entrepreneurs and workers that has not yet been implemented. In Fraser’s terms, these “arbitrary” structures were based upon “domination” (by the employer) and “docility” (of the worker). This positions “non-arbitrary” or “logical” industrial structures in opposition to the structures of “domination and docility” that exploited workers, thereby justifying reformers’ efforts to bring about industrial reform. By claiming to protect the “docile” workers from the “dominant” employers, reformers legitimized industrial re-organization as a benevolent act.

And yet, Fraser calls into question the notion of the “docile” worker and the “dominant” employer by acknowledging the resistance middle-class reformers faced from workers. He writes about the “unwarranted rebellions” of workers, the “hostile”

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43 For this type of language, see Fraser, Dress Rehearsal, 214. Progressive Era Reformers also used this sort of language. See Jane Addams’s “The Settlement as a Factor in the Labor Movement.”
44 Fraser, Dress Rehearsal, 214.
ranks, the “resistance to industrial democracy” of various rank-and-file groups. In doing so, he reverses the image of “docile” workers who welcomed reform from outsiders. In many cases, reformers ended up disciplining “hostile” workers. Fraser writes that the Amalgamated Clothes Workers Union spent a good deal of energy “[disciplining] those portions of the membership who sought to take undue advantage by inducing employers to bid against each other for the diminished supply of skilled labor.” Here “undisciplined” rank-and-file workers are seen as threats to employers because they have the ability to utilize the diminished supply of labor (due to World War I) to their own advantage. In this instance, the need for “order” and “discipline” is not about protecting workers from greedy employers, but rather about protecting employers from workers who are looking to “take advantage” of employers. Furthermore, words such as “undue” imply that “inducing employers to bid against each other for the diminished supply of labor” is unjustified. By inserting adjectives like “undue,” Fraser sympathizes with the reformers who worked to discipline union members. This disciplining occurred in other unions as well. For example, the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union began acting as a “police force for regulating workers’ militancy.” In effect, reformers were admonishing the very people they were claiming to be fighting for and working with.

Disciplining workers, policing militancy, and establishing order within industrial relations was connected with a desire to increase efficiency and production. It was crucial, reformers argued, for “employers and workers to harmonize democratic ideals of freedom with the voluntary self-discipline essential to efficient

45 Fraser, *Dress Rehearsal*, 227.
46 Fraser, *Dress Rehearsal*, 219.
47 Greenwald, 47.
production.” Here, “efficient production” becomes the grounds for cooperation between business and labor. “Self-discipline” for “efficient production” meant that workers were to obey a set of industrial rules because of the understanding that increased production was necessary for progressive reform. Clothes workers who developed a “social conscience” and “self-imposed discipline” due to “a practical sense of the industry’s needs” were applauded by industrial reformers. It is not clear, however, that efficiency and production were valued highly by low-wage workers. The fact that workers had to “develop” these characteristics and that workers “transformed,” implies that, in the past, workers had not been overly sympathetic to industry needs.

Fraser points out how Progressive Era arrangements for industrial relations required workers’ “patience, deliberation and a willingness to accept decisions arrived at by men removed from the fray.” “Men removed from the fray,” meant people outside of business and labor, namely middle-class reformers, lawyers, or professional arbiters who were trained to view conflict “objectively.” For example, investigative committees, such as the New York State Factory Investigating Committee (FIC), gave outsiders the authority to determine the adequacy of shop floor conditions. Workers did not directly determine what working conditions were acceptable. Rules that called for workers to be “patient” in order for “efficient production” were designed without direct input from the rank-and-file; workers “only indirectly participated” in shop investigations and the formulation of settlements and protocols.

48 Fraser, Dress Rehearsal, 223.
49 Fraser, Dress Rehearsal, 217.
50 Fraser, Dress Rehearsal, 225.
Moreover, this “patience,” “self-discipline,” and “social conscience” was not structured to be fully voluntary. While industrial democracy was said to depend on workers’ “willingness” to honor industrial protocols, performance standards, disciplinary procedures, and new codes for shop-floor behavior, structures were put in place to ensure worker compliance. 51 Discipline was institutionalized through arbitration procedures. Many of the settlements that arose during the Progressive Era set up “impartial” arbitration boards. These boards typically included union and management representation as well as “impartial” arbiters and lawyers who oversaw procedures. The idea was that autonomous labor organizations would register and sustain “voluntarily internalized discipline.” 52 The problem with impartial arbitration is that it relies on the existence of some body, either an individual or group, that can objectively mediate between two subjective parties—labor and business. Reformers and lawyers, the people who generally served as “impartial” parties did not lack prejudice—they too came with their own subjective opinions (“docile” workers deserved protection, “unruly” workers needed discipline). A guise of neutrality meant middle-class reformers could create arbitration boards in which they became the regulating authority, thus institutionalizing the opinions of middle-class arbiters.

Since the priority of middle-class reformers tended to be peace and production, it is no wonder then that Progressive Era industrial settlements and arbitration boards banned strikes, work stoppages, and other actions that got in the way of production. The Protocols of Peace for example, a set of Progressive Era industrial settlements made to end the general garment uprising of 1910, banned all

51 Fraser, *Dress Rehearsal*, 223-225.
52 Greenwald; Fraser, *Dress Rehearsal*, 221.
strikes and lockouts. Richard Greenwald, in his book *Triangle Fire, the Protocols of Peace, and Industrial Democracy in Progressive Era New York*, writes, “A central aspect of the Protocol, and one most often missed by scholars was the attempt to rationalize, standardize, and Taylorize the garment industry. All work stoppages would be eliminated. Work would continue as grievances were arbitrated.”53 Arbitration often sought to eliminate certain tools labor manipulated to its own advantage in the past. These arbitration boards also punished workers who refused to “voluntarily internalize discipline.” One board in Chicago, for example, held disciplinary hearings for workers accused of “insubordination,” “improper language and conduct” and “refusal to do work as directed.”54

Reformers claimed that arbitration boards and investigative committees increased the possibility for democratic solutions to industrial problems. Yet, seen a different way, these organizations quickly became tools that helped outside reformers take control of industrial relations. Greenwald notes that the whole premise of industrial democracy had in it an inherent contradiction, because “the more self-involved workers became, the more democracy they demanded, and the more unruly the system became.”55 Thus reformers began to develop a top-down system of bureaucracy in industrial relations. They oversaw both industrial structures and working-class uprisings. This meant taking an increasing role in investigating factories, mediating grievances, and disciplining workers’ behavior, as well as negotiating at the bargaining table, controlling and collecting strike funds, and timing the strike call. Workers were “pushed to the side by a team of union leaders,  

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53 Greenwald, 74.  
54 Fraser, *Dress Rehearsal*, 227.  
55 Greenwald, 57.
professional advisers, and reformers” within the movements that they themselves created.\textsuperscript{56}

This shift had significant consequences for the structure of industrial bargaining. More and more unions began negotiating their position internally with oversight from governmental or other regulatory bodies. As Dan Clawson points out in his book \textit{The Next Upsurge}, tests of strength that did occur “took place within carefully prescribed bounds…and regulatory agencies and courts swiftly intervened if any attempt were made to step outside those bounds.”\textsuperscript{57}

\textbf{Protection Through the State}

It wasn’t long before reformers and industrial democrats shifted away from industrial reform as it connected to unions and arbitration boards, and moved toward state regulation of labor. From the start, many reformers envisioned active state involvement in labor relations as one of the main components of industrial democracy.\textsuperscript{58} State intervention was viewed as another way to “[revise] the antagonistic premises of labor relations while preserving discipline within a framework of democratic negotiation.”\textsuperscript{59} By 1914, the FIC, which originally worked with both unions and middle-class reform organizations, began to focus almost entirely on state legislation, and in doing so abandoned its union allies. Similarly, the

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\textsuperscript{56} Greenwald, 42.  \\
\textsuperscript{59} Fraser, \textit{Dress Rehearsal}, 221.
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WTUL turned away from labor organizing, focusing instead on legislative action. It joined with the FIC to recommend legislative reform that would regulate workers’ wages, hours, and working conditions as they saw fit. Other middle-class organizations joined the struggle as well. The National Consumers’ League, made up primarily of middle-class women, also worked hard to pass protective legislation for women and children. Reformers felt that state intervention was a more immediate way to “protect” workers, even if it meant abandoning former union allies.

State intervention, instead of collaboration with unions, also gave reformers more freedom to follow independent strategies of their own devising; they were no longer bound by the specific concerns of unions. Legislation promoted middle-class visions for social relations. Legal reform surrounding wages, hours, and working conditions were tied to middle-class ideals of femininity, motherhood, work, and production. Through these reforms, Greenwald notes, “workers [became] clients of the state and constituents of a new political elite: liberals.”

Liberal reformers claimed that state intervention in labor relations was necessary for “protecting” workers, namely women and children. Support for government regulation of wages, hours, and work conditions for women and children was given on the premise that working women and children needed protection from employers who were eager to take advantage of their weak position. It was argued that women and children had no power to alter their position or bargain with employers. They could not safeguard their own interests through their own

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organizations; they were “pitifully helplessly ignorant.” This mentality gave reformers the opportunity to act in order to “safeguard” women’s interest and, in the process, construct their own conceptions of what those women’s interests were.

Reformers attempted to encourage and police working peoples’ moral conduct (as understood by the middle class) by setting legal wage minimums and work restrictions. Establishing a legal minimum wage for working women became one of the first wage regulations for which reformers advocated. Called a “women’s living wage,” the bylaw would ensure working women had the means to feed, cloth, and house themselves in “normal health, in elementary comfort, and in an environment suitable for the protection of morality and religion.” Reformers argued that women’s low wages led to drinking and sexual promiscuity. Therefore, advocating for a living wage was tied to middle-class desires to condemn drinking and sexual promiscuity. For reformers, minimum wages were never just about providing workers with more money, more leisure, and better work spaces, rather, it was always attached to middle-class notions of morality. As Boyer points out in his book *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America*, “Almost every Progressive cause had its moral dimension...Child labor and the exploitation of women workers were evil not only because they were physically harmful, but also because they stunted the moral and spiritual development of their victims.” The FIC also sought to restrict women from

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63 Paul Boyer, 196.
night work. Reformers disliked night work for women because it meant women were out on the street at all hours when they should have been home taking care of husbands and children. Moreover, night-working women found it hard to find “responsible” boarding houses that didn’t restrict the hours they were allowed to be out. By calling on the state to legislate a minimum wage and set work restrictions for women because of the claim that helpless and exploited women did not have the means to uphold themselves morally, middle-class reformers institutionalized their views of sobriety, modesty, and the helplessness of working women.\footnote{Greenwald, 196; Boyer, 197. Some reform women, such as Florence Kelly, even rejected the equal rights struggle for women on the grounds that it would deter protective legislation (Susan Ware, Partner and I: Molly Dewson, Feminism, and New Deal Politics (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 95).}

Reformers also argued that state legislation regulating women’s hours, wages, and working conditions was needed to protect the nation’s “natural resources,” referring to the ability of women to reproduce. Scientific claims about the ways in which industrial work strained women’s reproductive capacity were used to advocate for reducing women’s work hours and preventing them from working certain jobs: “Standing at work for long hours, for instance, put undue stress on a woman’s reproductive organs.”\footnote{Greenwald, 190-191; Kessler-Harris.} Legislation to improve women’s working conditions positioned reproduction and childcare as the primary role for women. Interpreted from a Marxist standpoint, this type of legislation ensured the reproduction of an industrial army that would continue the system of production that currently existed as well as strengthen patriarchal authority in the home. For middle-class women and men, the notion of “proper” childrearing was particularly important since the masses of urban immigrants threatened middle-class social order and familial structures. If
mothers were not home to watch children, middle-class activists feared they would reproduce adults lacking in discipline, independence, and impulse control. 

Restrictive legislation regarding women’s hours and occupation reinforced notions of motherhood and womanhood that were central to middle-class, not working-class, identity.

Before long, “protective” legislation around wages, hours, and working conditions was demanded for both men and women. Developing minimum-wage floors became a matter of “uplifting” the human race and promoting production and efficiency. One reformer argued that protecting workers was about “maintain[ing] a race that is to be made up of capable, efficient, and independent individuals.”

“Capable,” “efficient,” and “independent” all deal with the ability of individuals to function productively. Minimum wage legislation was not just about providing workers with more money and leisure, but was also a part of a larger movement to produce productively functioning workers. Henry Seager wrote an article in 1913 called “The Minimum Wage as Part of a Program For Social Reform,” which argued that minimum wage legislation “may serve…as a means of marking off sharply from the rest of the industrial army the individuals and classes who cannot earn living

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66 Gordon, 43; Seager.
67 Labor reform came at the same time as a number of other welfare reforms and social campaigns that were advocated for by the middle class. There were campaigns against prostitution and drinking as well as reforms for educating immigrants on childrearing and providing women with mother’s aid. Like many welfare programs that exist today, many reforms had provisions attached that refused aid to those women who did not meet “suitable home” and other standards that were made and implemented by social workers. (See chapter titled “State Caretakers” in Gordon’s Pitted But Not Entitled.) Providing women with aid was a way to indoctrinate women into American middle-class ways of life, sometimes to the point of resisting what the women wanted themselves. Gordon shows that poor women concentrated on asking for financial help while middle-class women favored education as the most urgent need of those women.
68 Greenwald, 205.
wages because their work is not worth a living return to their employers.” Seager suggested that enforcing a minimum wage would not only demand that workers be paid more, but also demand that workers be “worth” that living wage, or else face elimination from the labor market. Minimum wages, it was argued, would make industries more efficient. Seager asserted, “Starvation wages are due frequently to exploitation, frequently to physical, mental and moral defects in the workers, but most commonly to the fact that the untrained, unambitious and inefficient recipients are not worth living wages to their employers.” Thus, he argued that decent public education must accompany wage legislation “to enable boys and girls actually to earn living wages.”

Higher wages and education for the sake of “training” individuals to be more ambitious and efficient workers positions middle-class values of work, production, and efficiency at the heart of legislative labor reform.

Putting these ideas into state-level industrial codes gave reformers and politicians greater authority with regard to industrial relations and the market in general. Many liberal reformers and government officials saw labor legislations as a way to “rationalize” the economy through a welfare state. The idea was that if workers were paid more, manufacturers would be pressured to become more competitive through efficiencies and technologies.

Ryan, in “The Right to an Individual Living Wage,” outlines Sidney and Beatrice Webb’s assertion that by

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69 Seager, 4.
70 Seager, 9-10. Seager went so far as to claim: “If we are to maintain a race that is to be made up of capable, efficient and independent individuals and family groups we must courageously cut off lines of heredity that have been proved to be undesirable by isolation or sterilization of the congenitally defective.” Seager’s reform was centered around furthering efficient production, to the point of policing the reproductive rights of those deemed (by the middle class) incapable of the work necessary for efficient production. (Seager, 10).
71 Greenwald, 206.
providing workers with enough money to healthily sustain themselves “the community would rid itself of the industrial evil called ‘parasitism,’ that is, the existence of trades or businesses in which the wages paid are too low to maintain the workers in industrial efficiency, and to enable them to reproduce and rear a sufficient number to take their place.”

Paying workers higher wages was motivated by an attempt to increase capital production through government oversight of industrial relations.

Middle-class reformers pursued legislation even when it went against union wishes. At the time, many unions and labor leaders did not support government regulations of wages and hours. Greenwald points out that by doing this, “[reformers] further removed a critical issue facing workers, wages, from the shop floor, disempowering workers in the process.”

Government regulation of labor relations, when created and supported by primarily middle-class reformers and political elites, further distanced labor from the means of controlling their own conditions. It was the government, through middle-class activists, that gained the authority needed to control and determine “proper” wages, conditions, and hours. This authority was then used to promote certain middle-class values and structures—female domesticity, sobriety, modesty, ambition, efficiency, and hard work—for the working class. As Lawrence Glickman points out in *A Living Wage: American*

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73 Greenwald, 212.
Workers and the Making of Consumer Society, “Most reformers expressed little enthusiasm for arguments that tied living wages to workers’ wants and desires.”74

Industrial democracy, with its focus on arbitration, state intervention, and bureaucracy, was said to promote the interest of workers. One could, as many historians have done, point to examples of increased wages, shorter hours, and better contracts that came out of the Progressive Era in order to prove that reformers really were acting for the benefit of workers. However, these benefits were embedded within a larger structure of industrial relations and they did not, on their own, represent a reorganization of the power relations to unequivocally favor labor. Reformers took greater control and authority within unions and labor movements, setting up structures that would keep industrial order and promote efficiency while repressing workers who would not voluntarily discipline themselves within those structures. As the Progressive Era came to a close, many reformers took over government positions, thereby institutionalizing middle-class reform values and setting the foundations for the expansion of a welfare state.75

75 Ware, xiv.
Chapter 2: Student Activists in the 1960s

During the 1960s, middle-class investments in labor organizing altered as a younger, more socialist, more invigorated group of college youth began involving themselves with working-class struggles. Beginning in the late 1950s, college students began organizing in greater numbers around, not only labor issues, but also poverty, civil rights, war, free speech, and university reform. Cross-issue alliances gained immense popularity, a strategy that positioned students as the connecting glue between various political (or at least potentially political) factions. Democratic ideological frameworks coupled with legacies of industrial democracy, produced a new wave of middle-class social activists who plunged into social and political reform.

The link between industrial democracy and the radical student movement of the 1960s often becomes obscured by memories of anti-war protests, civil rights marches, and the general upheaval of the cold war period. Yet Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the most famous, and arguably the most successful, student organization of the 1960s, descended directly from one of the centers of industrial democratic thought, namely the League for Industrial Democracy (LID), and more specifically its youth group, the Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID). The LID, formerly known as the Intercollegiate Socialist Society, was a group of intellectual social reformers who came together with the purpose of educating Americans about the need to extend democratic practices and principles. Members, which included, Clarence Darrow, Jack London, William English Walling,
Upton Sinclair, Florence Kelley, and Norman Thomas, nearly all came from the upper end of the socioeconomic spectrum. They were well educated and involved in some way with social reform. True to its name, the LID embodied many of the attitudes and visions of Progressive Era social reform. Participatory democracy was a founding principle of the organization and discussion and theory were promoted over industrial strife.\footnote{Kirkpatrick Sale, \textit{SDS} (New York, NY: Random House, 1973), 680.}

Later, as the LID membership grew to include younger students, an Intercollegiate Council of the LID, which in 1928 became the Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID), formed to continue educational work on college campuses. Over the next several decades, SLID became more and more independent from its mother organization, eventually splitting from the LID altogether and renaming itself Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).\footnote{Sale, Appendix. Through the early 1960s, the old left, represented by the LID, and the new left, emerging out of SDS, maintained close ties despite their disagreements. Members of SDS and unions officials also maintained personal ties. For more detail about the interconnectedness of unions, the LID, and SDS, see Peter Levy, “The New Left and Labor: The Early Years (1960-1963),” in \textit{Labor History}, vol. 31 no. 3 (Summer 1990): 294-321.} During the organization’s early years, members came almost exclusively from middle and upper-middle-class urban homes, and many activists had parents who had been connected to the left during the 1930s. While not all SDS members came from a financially middle-class background, Kirkpatrick Sale, in his book \textit{SDS}, points out that, “most did come from middle and upper-middle-class environments…and those who did not usually came from ‘upwardly mobile’ homes where they drank deeply of the middle-class ethic and moved…along a familiar enough middle-class path.”\footnote{Sale, 89.} Furthermore, virtually all
SDS members came from universities. Early SDSers were almost always diligent readers, impressive writers, and successful academics.

Yet despite their privilege and intellectual success, SDS members displayed disappointment with the United States’ current political, social, and economic situation. It was students, focused around SDS, who began to work toward an action-oriented, ideologically based, mass mobilization for the restructuring and democratizing of the entire nation. In doing this, students continued the tradition of middle-class involvement in labor relations. While SDS did not devote its energy entirely to labor issues, the notion that unorganized workers and the unemployed had the potential, if mobilized by students, to bring about significant social change, was an integral part of SDS’s vision for social reform. Therefore, student activists looked to cross-class alliances as a way to instigate social change. These alliances, however, proved to be difficult and ineffective, if not impossible to forge, due to the ways in which students’ position as middle-class intellectuals informed their vision and actions. Students focused on ideology and intellectual development, both valued highly by the educated middle class, as the basis for social change. Focusing on theory within social movements located students as the center of a new social movement, allowing them to oversee a general social movement that covered a variety of issues and included many groups, but that also promoted student values and visions.
The Port Huron Statement

In June of 1962, fifty-nine members of SDS put forth a manifesto, known as the “Port Huron Statement,” outlining their values, grievances, and political agenda. The document, like much of the writing that came from SDS, was verbose and idealistic, representative of SDS’s intellectual orientation.\(^\text{79}\) It put forward grievances with the current economic, political, and social situations in the U.S and advocated for a national restructuring that promoted participatory democracy and action over apathy. While the statement was extensive in the material it covered, its focus on theory, student action, and psychological alienation demonstrates how students positioned themselves and their concerns as the center of a broad movement for social change. The Port Huron Statement, Sale argues, reveals that SDS was concerned with “poverty of vision rather than poverty of life, with apathy rather than poverty, with the world of the white student rather than the world of the blacks, the poor, or the workers.”\(^\text{80}\)

\(^{79}\) Sale, 125; Wini Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962-1968: The Great Refusal* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989). For the purpose of this chapter, “SDS” refers to the early years of the organization, which used the Port Huron Statement as their manifesto. In 1965, a new cadre of youth joined the ranks of SDS. These college students were generally from mediocre colleges, non-urban, non-intellectual, non-Jewish, from the nonprofessional class. They were more violent, less ideological and theoretical. They smoked marijuana at SDS meetings and were largely dismissed by the Old Left. Al Haber, the first full time national officer of SDS, wrote of these new activists: “The force of their energy and the enthusiasm for action [ends up] preempting organizational resources and allowing no time for educational work.” (Sale 204/5). Thus, it was worry about lack of discipline (“enthusiasm for action”), dismissal of educational work, and disruption of SDS order (“preempting organizational resources”) that caused the older intellectual cadre of SDS organizers to resist this new blood.

\(^{80}\) Sale, 50.
Through their manifesto, SDS highlighted the importance of personal and intellectual growth as well as theoretical understanding of political, economic, and social systems. The Port Huron Statement asserts, “A first task of any social movement is to convince people that the search for orienting theories and the creation of human values is complex but worthwhile.” For early SDSers, a desire for “orienting theories,” first and foremost (instead of, for example, a desire to be paid more, work less) drove social change. While SDS acknowledged that “concrete conditions of social order” must also be analyzed, the direction of this analysis, in their view, came from principled understanding. One of the key complaints presented in the Port Huron Statement was that current economic and political institutions stunted intellectual development and self-growth:

Men have unrealized potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity. It is this potential that we regard as crucial and to which we appeal, not to the human potentiality for violence, unreason, and submission to authority. The goal of man and society should be...finding a meaning in life that is personally authentic; a quality of mind not compulsively driven by a sense of powerlessness.

Here, reasoning for social action revolved around the desire to “find meaning in life” and “a quality of mind,” and to allow everyone the opportunity for personal and intellectual cultivation. Values of “self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding and creativity” became a foundation for visions of social change. These values, however, were not divorced from the social milieu that most students came from.

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81 SDS, “The Port Huron Statement”, (New York, 1962), 6. The first 1962 printing was mimographed. The second printing, used for this paper, came out in 1964 and was set in type.
They connected to students’ middle-class experience, which prioritized the mind and mental development as the basis for superior being.\textsuperscript{83}

Focusing on ideology and intellectual growth also meant students could position themselves as the central link within a new social movement. One of the novel aspects of SDS, and one of the main reasons it moved away from the LID, was that SDS wanted to network with a wide array of political and social organizations, instead of just focusing on labor and industrial democracy. Members claimed that all social ills were interconnected and that students should form a united front in order to accomplish significant social change. This claim, coupled with the notion that theoretical understanding was the “first task” in any social movement, made it possible for SDS to view themselves as an organization based in ideology and general social change that linked together other social and political groups.

The Port Huron Statement embodied this concept, providing theoretical approaches to a wide variety of social ills. It criticized the crumbling state of labor unions and welfare programs as well as the increasing income gap and escalating arms race.\textsuperscript{84} Sale points out that SDS members wanted to abandon the “ideological line-toeing that had characterized SLID, work with any groups that were genuinely involved in seeking social change, and content itself with giving them a nonsectarian vision of the totality of the American system and the connections between various

\textsuperscript{83} This is not to say that all middle-class institutions prioritized cultivation of the mind in the way students desired. On the contrary, student activists lamented the ways universities neglected real intellectual work for the purpose of personal development. Nonetheless, working toward “self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity” has been a foundational principle of universities and is highly valued by intellectuals.

\textsuperscript{84} Sale, 50-51.
single-issue maladies.” By claiming to be nonsectarian, while also locating SDS as the ideological center for a massive social movement, students could promote their understanding of social ills and a new social movement as universal, thus obscuring the ways in which their opinions connected to their personal experiences and concerns.

While students expressed concerns about the American system as general issues, the “student” section at the beginning of the document shows the ways in which the call for “orienting theories” as well as “real” intellectual and creative cultivation represented their personal concerns:

[The campus] is a place of commitment to business-as-usual, getting ahead, playing it cool…Rules are accepted as “inevitable,” bureaucracy as “just circumstances,” irrelevance as “scholarship,”…There is not much willingness to take risks (not even in business), no setting of dangerous goals, no real conception of personal identity except one manufactured in the image of others, no real urge for personal fulfillment except to be almost as successful as the very successful people. Attention is being paid to social status (the quality of shirt collars, meeting people, getting wives or husbands, making solid contacts for later on); much too, is paid to academic status (grades, honors, the med school rat-race). But neglected generally is real intellectual status, the personal cultivation of the mind.

Campus bureaucracy, university rules, academic ranking, and social status are all specifically student grievances.

Student activists, despite their position of privilege, expressed a sense of powerlessness: “[T]he cumbersome academic bureaucracy extending throughout the academic as well as extracurricular structures, contribut[es] to the sense of outer complexity and inner powerlessness that transforms so many students from honest searching to ratification of convention[.]” Therefore, the Port Huron Statement,

85 Sale, 25.
which uses rhetoric around alienation, powerlessness, and restriction of intellectual cultivation to outline generally the condition of American citizens, comes, at least in part, from students’ own frustrations with their personal position and immediate surroundings. SDS often assumed these grievances for the entire population. The Port Huron Statement reads, “Loneliness, estrangement, isolation describe the vast distance between man and man today.” 88 This statement makes general the grievances SDSers themselves felt within their own lives and in doing so makes assumptions about the lives of individuals with whom SDS activists had little personal contact.

Yet, SDS purposely outlined concerns in a general way, so as to include a wide range of people. SDS thought of student ideas and visions as the core of a larger new left. They argued that the university must be at the heart of major social change. The Port Huron Statement claims that a new left “must be…a left with real intellectual skills” and that it “cannot rely on only aching stomachs to be the engine force of social reform.” 89 These assertions came from SDS’s presumed ability to articulate the “real” grievances of the entire nation and map out the ideological framework from which to combat those issues. Through the Port Huron Statement, SDS claimed that universities were needed as the “engine force” for a real movement of social change. The Statement called on students to mobilize marginalized groups (those with “aching stomachs”) who could pick-up on students’ momentum to participate in a large social movement.

89 Sale, 53; SDS, “The Port Huron Statement”, 62. For a complete list of why SDS thought the new left would have to come from universities, see the last section of the Port Huron Statement—The University and Social Change (p61).
SDS’s Economic Research and Action Project

Since SDS considered itself in many ways to be the agent behind real social change, students felt it was up to them to be proactive in organizing impoverished members of society. In 1963, SDSers began moving from “theory to action.” They left the classrooms and ventured into the slums to register voters, educate poor youth, and organize unemployed and un-unionized workers. The Economic Research and Action Project, also known as ERAP, sent students into poor urban ghettos in order to create community organizations that addressed local problems—problems like irregular garbage pick up, lack of lunch food assistance for poor children, lead poisoning from unkempt homes. ERAP activists lived within these poor communities, eating next to nothing and working all day for no pay. They went door-to-door, organized community meetings, and hung out at bars in order to form alliances with community members. This sort of direct action spawned controversy at the time and met resistance from the LID and a few of the early SLID/SDS leaders who felt that students’ place was at the university. Yet the majority of SDSers agreed with SDS leader Tom Hayden who argued “the poor” needed students for

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91 Sale 95, 176; Breines; James Miller, *Democracy in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1987). The reasons for the LID’s disapproval was not so much that SDS was forging alliances with those people they were attempting to help, but more the ways in which they were renouncing the University and embracing life in the slum. Instead of pulling the poor classes up, they were actually critiquing their own privileged life and moving into “real” America. This, however, was not the only point of tension with the LID. The LID remained deeply anti-communist. Therefore, SDS’s increasing willingness to ally itself with communist leaning groups infuriated the LID.
ideological direction and that ideologically oriented students needed to leave the university world to organize the poor.\textsuperscript{92}

Many activists concluded that shedding their privileged status was the only way to become legitimate and effective political actors.\textsuperscript{93} So, while the move to the ghetto was about empowering the poor and unemployed in order to encourage a massive movement, it was also a way for SDS activists, trapped by the university system, to find an economic base around which to organize for desired change.\textsuperscript{94} Student activists argued that they \textit{needed} a poor unemployed base to instigate widespread change; orienting theories alone would not do the trick. The poor, they believed, had the numbers and geographical distribution, which, combined with the ideology and organizational skills of students, could make for radical change. When a vote was put before members in 1963 whether to follow SDS leader Al Habor, who wanted to avoid the “cult of the ghetto” and stay within the realm of the university, or Hayden, who wanted to break out of the intellectual world and organize in poor communities, Hayden won the vote twenty to six.\textsuperscript{95} Arguing that student activists needed to leave their own elite world in order to find a base to organize gave students a way to escape from the institutions that they felt confined them. Some scholars point out the ways in which working with marginalized groups, away from the “cage” of the university, became one way to escape the “real and palpable grievances” students had with their own situations.\textsuperscript{96} Activism, fueled by the idea that Americans,

\textsuperscript{92} Sale, 107.
\textsuperscript{93} Sale, 100; Evans 96. Of course the ability to “shed” their identity as middle-class intellectuals did not materialize in any complete way, as this section will show.
\textsuperscript{94} Breines, 57.
\textsuperscript{95} Sale, 107.
\textsuperscript{96} Sale, 143.
especially those who were most exploited, “needed” students for their ideology and vision, was one way for students to feel needed and real within a world where they felt increasingly alienated.

Student activists assumed the poor and unemployed needed students to help transform their discontent into unified political action, to make visible the local community activism that was working at the grass-roots level. Hayden argued that SDS needed a way “to transform these invisible rebellions into a politics of responsible insurgence rooted in community after community.”

The term “invisible rebellions” referred to projects carried on by “nearly invisible actors” from local communities rather than by university students around the country. Hayden linked “invisible rebellion” with local (and non middle-class student) driven movements and a “responsible insurgence” with SDS’s transformation of those projects. By naming community rebellions “invisible” and SDS insurgence “responsible,” Hayden tied local activists (considered invisible by Haden) to insufficient rebellions, while connecting SDS with legitimate political action. This attitude positioned SDS (well-versed in intellectual and theoretical ideas) as an organization able to manage rebellions that took place in local communities. By articulating the relationship between SDS and poor communities in this way, Hayden legitimized SDS’s role as the motivating force behind mass mobilization.

At the same time, ERAP organizers adamantly promoted participatory democracy within community organizations as a way to empower poor community members. Within community projects, SDS activists emphasized shared competence

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97 Tom Hayden as quoted in Sale, 97.
and responsibility, which, according to student activists, provided formerly powerless individuals with a means of authority over their own lives. Projects had no leaders and, rather than developing an agenda that the community would follow, ERAP activists attempted to follow concerns voiced by the people they attempted to organize. Yet some scholars, including former ERAP organizers, argue that participatory democratic structures within ERAP created elitism among organizers that countered non-hierarchical claims. Wini Breines, in her book *Community and Organization in the New Left*, highlights the ways in which participatory democracy within ERAP created an invisible hierarchical order where ERAP organizers maintained leadership roles. Breines outlines Richard Rothsein’s (a former ERAP activist) claim that participatory democracy did not eliminate leadership, but rather made leadership inaccessible to the membership. Because ERAP activists had experience with leadership skills involved with traditional community organizing, and because there was no leadership skills training (as the organization was supposed to be leaderless), ERAP organizers became informal directors of community-based projects. Furthermore, Rothstein argues, since official leadership did not exist, informal ERAP leaders were not formally responsible to members. Despite rhetoric about participatory democracy, there was the underlying assumption that ERAP members were the organizers, the leaders in a leaderless social movement.

98 Breines, 57.
99 Breines, 60.
100 Moreover, within these “leaderless” organizations, gender hierarchies also existed—even among ERAP activists. Evans notes that men in ERAP, as well as SDS as a whole, claimed “intellectual hegemony” over the organization (This happened despite the reality that women generally made more successful community organizers because they had a better time relating to and interacting with welfare mothers) (Evans, 149). SDS as a whole was an extremely male-centric organization. Evans writes: “From the beginning, it was clear in SDS
Despite the huge effort on the part of organizers, ERAP never successfully mobilized the men and women of the ghetto in the way Hayden and others had hoped. Few, if any, community members (other than ERAP organizers) congregated at community meetings. Students could not get through to people and communication was difficult. People were not behaving in the ways ERAP activists wanted them to. One by one, the projects shut down and students fled back to the university. Yet even then, SDS activists, by pronouncing on the reasons for failure, assumed they had the knowledge to understand, correctly analyze, and report on the behavior of individuals in poor communities. Hayden, after it was clear that ERAP projects were continuing to fail, argued:

Poor people know they are victimized from every direction...This kind of knowledge, however, is kept underdeveloped and unused because of another knowledge imposed on the poor, a keen sense of dependence on the oppressor. This is the source of that universal fear which leads poor people to act and even to think subserviently. Seeing themselves to blame for their situation, they rule out the possibility that they might be qualified to govern themselves and their own organizations. Besides fear, it is their sense of inadequacy and embarrassment which destroys the possibility of revolt.

that the intellectual work was primarily a male task.” As SDS member Steve Max put it women “were always there and were respected but it was always the guys who did the writing and position formulating” (Evans, 109). It often proved difficult for women to combat this sexism because SDS, as an organization, focused on outside causes and the oppression of others. Thus, feminist discourses within the organization ran counter to many of the male-outlined positions of SDS that revolved around notions of “other.” Nonetheless, many women resisted sexism, from either within SDS or from outside of it. Evans argues that SDS “created the conditions for the feminist revolt” (Evans, 109). This was a revolt, not on behalf of others, but on behalf of SDS feminists themselves. For more information about women within SDS, see Evans’s book Personal Politics. Casey Hayden and Mary King, two SDS activists also wrote a memo in 1965 about women’s issues in SDS: Casey Hayden and Mary King, “Sex and Caste: A Kind of Memo,” in Takin’ it to the Streets: A Sixties Reader, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 47-51. For a personal account of a women’s experience in SDS, see Cathy Wilkerson, Flying Close to the Sun: My Life and Times as a Weatherman (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2007).

101 Sale, 140; Evans; Breines.
102 Tom Hayden as quoted in Sale, 144.
Here, Hayden assumes he has the ability to correctly understand why “the poor” did not embrace ERAP projects. He implies that “poor people” do not understand their oppression in totality because other knowledge imposed on the poor keeps comprehension of victimization “underdeveloped and unused.” This view does not accept poor individuals as already knowledgeable agents with accurate self-understanding. Rather, the opinion maintains that “the poor” need to develop certain qualities and get rid of others before revolt or self-government is possible.

While much of SDS’s work relies on an assumption that humans have the ability to govern themselves, there is still the notion that it is a potential to govern themselves—a potential that can only be realized after SDS helps those groups develop the self-knowledge rendered “underdeveloped and unused” by oppression and fear. Furthermore, Hayden’s assumption that “seeing themselves to blame for their situation, they rule out the possibility that they might be qualified to govern themselves and their own organizations,” does not acknowledge the ways in which ERAP’s attempt to transform “invisible rebellions” into “responsible insurgence” interfered with the independent leadership of local community groups. Attributing ERAP’s failure to “the poor’s” lack of self-organization, fear, and sense of inadequacy, showed the inability of SDS leaders like Hayden to acknowledge “the poor” as legitimate political actors. In Hayden’s opinion, when poor communities chose not to welcome SDS projects, it was not because they acted as knowledgeable
agents, but rather because they lacked the self-knowledge or self-understanding to act properly on their own behalf.\textsuperscript{103}

Although SDS’s ERAP missions attempted to move away from the intellectual orientation of the LID, early SDS activists never fully abandoned the notion that they were the ones with the vision, knowledge, and skills needed for leading a sweeping movement of social change. Their actions in impoverished communities were based on the notion that students would provide the ideology, the organizational skills, and the big picture behind mass mobilization (namely the brains behind the endeavor) while the mass of unemployed and un-unionized workers would provide the base (the bodies) through which action would be forced on capitalists and the state. During the span of the projects, many ERAP activists questioned their role as middle-class organizers as well as the entire concept of a cross-class alliance. Problems with projects were so glaring that it became impossible for students not to raise eyebrows: Didn’t the decision to move into poor communities imply that students had superior knowledge? Isn’t leading without being a leader its own form of manipulation? Weren’t we pushing for \textit{our} kind of movement?\textsuperscript{104} While much of the information outlined above indicates that the answer to all these questions is “yes,” few students let go of the idea of organizing poor and working-class people. Thus, attempts at organizing unemployed workers and the poor continued.

\textsuperscript{103} Attributing ERAP failure to problems with the “the poor” (their organization and collective consciousness) leaves unexplored the possibility that ERAP projects and leaders lacked certain understandings that stifled revolt.

\textsuperscript{104} Sale, 137; Breines, 141.
Organized Labor and the United Auto Workers

Early SDS projects, especially ERAP were financed almost entirely by labor Unions like the United Auto Workers (UAW) and International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). Many members of the LID had become ILGWU and UAW officials, and therefore networks between unions, LID reformers, and young SDS members were quite extensive. During the late 1950s, the LID organized frequent SLID field trips to union halls and work sites, which helped to provide future SDS members with personal ties to the industrial labor movement. The UAW in particular was a union with which SLID/SDS came into frequent contact. Walter Reuther, then head of the United Auto Workers (UAW) and lifelong patron (and former member) of the LID, offered a significant amount of money and support to SDS. He gladly offered his services to SDS even when their projects were not directly connected to unionization. Nelson Lichtenstein, in his book *Walter Reuther: The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, writes that Reuther saw SDS as “as a bridge through which the labor movement could rewin the loyalty and appreciation of young intellectuals.” For Reuther, and labor leaders like him who came out of the LID and Progressive Era Reform, the “loyalty and appreciation of young intellectuals” was crucial for a successful union movement. This marked the

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105 Sale, 684.
106 Levy, 297.
107 Not all unions welcomed SDS support in the way Reuther did. The AFL-CIO actually denounced SDS efforts to go work in factories, sending out a warning to unions to lookout for “infiltrators.” (Clawson, 43).
beginning of organized labor actively encouraging activists outside the rank and file to take part in labor organizing as a way to connect unions to a broader social movement.

Between 1960 and 1963, SDS received over $15,000 from the UAW for SDS’s national office and ERAP funding, even though the projects did not connect directly to organizing industrial workers (as SDS leader Tom Hayden put it, there were “no strings attached.”109 By providing multiple grants for ERAP activities, Reuther gave students the freedom to lead the projects however they saw fit, as long as it was within the broad parameters of “economic and educational” work. In doing so, Reuther connected the role of unions with broader social and economic goals.110 As Kevin Boyle puts it, “From the mid 1940s onward, the UAW leadership put its political muscle at the disposal of an array of liberal organizations and causes.”111 Reuther wrote letters on behalf of SDS to other unions, encouraged locals across the country to “cooperate” with SDS organizing projects, and even adopted the Port Huron Statement for the 1962 UAW summer education center in Detroit.112 The word “cooperate” implies that not only did Reuther ask unions to allow for student help, but he encouraged unions to actively work with SDS projects, and therefore SDS’s vision. It is not clear whether this word is Lichtenstein’s or Reuther’s. But, either

109 Sale, 96, 101; Lichtenstein, 391; Hayden as quoted in Levy, 298-9. The financial ties between SDS and labor unions is quite extensive. For more information see Levy on “The New Left and Labor: The Early Years (1960-1963)”
110 Reuther also chose to ally himself (and the UAW) with the Democratic Party, which inevitably tied UAW goals with the goals of a broad party base. This meant, for example, that UAW money often went to election campaigns. By the 1950s, the UAW contributed more money and personnel to election campaigns than any other union (Boyle, 3). This connection to the Democratic Party was also an attempt by Reuther to expand notions of American unionism.
111 Boyle, 4.
112 Lichtenstein, 391; Levy, 299.
way, it demonstrates the notion that student activism wasn’t (or isn’t) treated as simple aid, but rather that students came with their own ideas that unions should embrace. As Peter Levy puts it, “Personal ties and connections helped create bonds between the New Left and unions, but continued cooperation depended on mutual goals, shared action, and regular demonstrations of sympathy.”

The attention and finances that Reuther paid to SDS ushered in an era, one that would continue for many decades, in which unions increasingly looked to activists outside the rank and file for union leadership and direction. Furthermore, by supporting organizations like SDS, which were not tied directly to labor, Reuther began to broaden the role of unions in social and political life.

Walter Reuther himself was very much a product of the LID and Progressive Era ideas of social reform. While Reuther began his career as a labor leader supporting the rauco
marks 1949 as the “ideological turning point” for union leaders at the UAW. It was during that year that General Motors (GM) cut wages by three cents an hour, leading to a discontented rank and file. Instead of standing behind the workers and pressuring GM to raise wages, Reuther mobilized the executive board to defend the adjustments GM had made.\textsuperscript{116} Thus, as Frederick Harbison puts it, Reuther’s collective bargaining style called for “intelligent trading rather than table-pounding, for diplomacy rather than belligerency, and for internal union discipline rather than grass roots rank and file activity.”\textsuperscript{117} For Walter Reuther, who came out of the intellectual middle-class LID, Progressive Era ideas of industrial cooperation and order, even at the expense of disciplining rank-and-file action, were still heavily valued.\textsuperscript{118}

Like his Progressive predecessors, Walter Reuther prioritized industrial production, arguing that an “economy of abundance” was more rewarding for all. Even though automation threatened jobs, Reuther favored new technology arguing that in the long run it would bring numerous benefits to workers. And yet, he did not support a movement to shorten the work week—a reform that turns technological advancement into benefits for workers.\textsuperscript{119} Reuther rejected the idea of a “30 hour week for 40 hours pay,” a campaign that many traditional labor leaders favored as a solution to automation and job loss, arguing that it subverted production efforts. Thus, for Reuther increasing production was not just about securing benefits for

\begin{itemize}
\item Lichtenstein, 279.
\item Frederick Harbison as quoted in Lichtenstein, 292.
\item Kevin Boyle points out that Reuther looked to the State for labor reform, promoting an expanded welfare state. Like Progressive Era labor reformers who began advocating for state intervention on behalf of the lower classes, Reuther saw the state as a good ally for labor.
\end{itemize}
workers. Kevin Boyle argues in his book *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism* that the UAW appealed to middle-class liberals “by appropriating two of the issues most dear to them: economic growth and anticommunism.”[^120] Under Reuther’s leadership, the UAW concerned itself with not only pleasing rank-and-file members, but also a larger middle and upper-middle class public constituency. While Reuther claimed not to like GM’s attempts to speed-up autoworkers in 1948, he did not move to lead a fight against this effort. Lichtenstein argues this was because Reuther’s “capacity” to lead such a fight was inhibited by his support of an annual improvement factor (AIF). The AIF linked company productivity to increased wages for workers. Reuther’s support for such a measure defended a “cooperative attitude” between unions and companies as beneficial to both workers and employers.

Yet Lichtenstein mentions that the 2 percent AIF increase represented only a fraction of GM’s total production increase, meaning that increased production may not have been, and probably was not, as beneficial for workers as a speed-up was detrimental. Reuther had the “capacity” to lead the fight, but decided not to, valuing production even when it seemed contrary to workers’ needs and wants.[^121] Workers did not let Reuther’s decision pass unnoticed. Wildcat strikes increased at all of the big automaker companies between 1950 and 1955 and worker grievance filings rose more than five times for GM in the 1950s. During the 1960s a UAW survey indicated that workers approved strikes over workloads “to a greater degree than those called over the national contract.” Thus, much of the rank and file did not embrace the “cooperative” attitude Reuther promoted.

[^120]: Boyle, 5.
[^121]: Lichtenstein, 279, 289-90.
Reuther’s focus on production, cooperation, and order as well as his attempt, through connections with SDS, to broaden the role of the union, had significant consequences for rank-and-file members. Reuther himself told a Ford Council meeting in 1955 that local problems “‘close to the Ford workers’ daily needs might well ‘get lost in the shuffle.’” Rank-and-file members, however, resisted this outcome. Only months after Reuther made this statement, one hundred thousand workers shut down factories in the hours immediately after Reuther and Ford executive John Bugas signed a settlement that left hundreds of shop issues unresolved.122 Labor leader John Lewis, in response to Reuther’s disciplining of an aggressive local, asserted that “These profoundly intellectual union leaders should stop dreaming dreams and start paying attention to the bread and butter problems of the members.”123 Instead of paying attention to the “bread and butter” issues of the rank and file, Reuther emphasized Progressive Era ideals of cooperation, order, and production. Reuther’s intellectualizing and broadening of UAW’s realm of action (through his support of SDS) coincided with emphasizing cooperation, order, and production. In doing this, UAW leadership distanced itself from the material concerns of its membership.

SDS often showed disdain for this type of “corporate unionism.” Students reprimanded current unions for being too “bureaucratic” and “self-interested” even as they maintained that a revitalized labor movement was the “best candidate for the synthesis of the civil rights, peace, and economic reform movements.”124 Nonetheless, like Walter Reuther, SDS called for a bridge between students and

122 Walter Reuther as quoted in Lichtenstein, 294.
123 Lichtenstein, 315.
labor, arguing that students needed to open up to labor unions (like the UAW) while labor must open its house to students. Thus, while some of the disciplining and bargaining tactics of Walter Reuther were not perfectly aligned with SDS’s hopes for a non-hierarchical and more democratic union structure, their desire to build a more cooperative and less “self-interested” (on the part of labor) relationship with unions fit well with Reuther’s agenda.

Furthermore, it was not only the “middle-class bureaucratic” leadership of unions that SDS disliked, but also the apathetic rank-and-file who were “lulled to comfort by the accessibility of luxury and the opportunity of long-term contracts.” Yet, one of the fundamental tenets of unionization is precisely about workers accessing luxury and gaining desirable long-term contracts. Thus by reprimanding such “apathetic” workers for being content with “luxury” and “long-term contracts,” SDS members moved away from a fundamental purpose of unionization (namely securing benefits for workers) and instead focused on the mental state (apathetic and in need of reform) of those workers. For SDS, activism was not just about reforming union leaders who had become complacent in the system, but also workers who were not functioning in ways SDS felt were important.

125 SDS, “The Port Huron Statement”, 22. That SDS members simultaneously expressed distain for “corporate unionism” and frustration with apathetic workers, supports the Ehrenreichs’ claim that, “[t]he Port Huron statement (1962) expresses both elements of traditional PMC class consciousness: scorn for the capitalist class and elitism toward the working class” (The Ehrenreichs, 31).
Free Speech, Anti-War, and a New Working Class

In the beginning, SLID’s program revolved specifically around student grievances and students mobilized around issues that were closest to them. SLID promoted “studies of student houses, employment opportunities, responsible and honest participation in student government, the development of student cooperatives, and the extension of student rights to participate in making college policy.” Later, when students left campus and ventured into low-income neighborhoods, many of the concerns that they sought to address were not dissimilar from those they had been trying to rectify in their own university communities. While the particular grievances were not the same, the underlying issues of social and political alienation, work that did not promote self-growth, and institutions that restricted freedom, were discussed in both contexts.

While ERAP failed to mobilize poor and unemployed people around these issues, action that took place on college campuses was overwhelmingly successful. In 1964, students at the University of California, Berkeley, as part of the Free Speech Movement (FSM), staged a demonstration protesting the University’s ban on organizing and soliciting for off-campus political action. Student held multiple sit-ins, the largest of which included over 1,000 people. Undergraduates, joined by graduate students and some faculty, boycotted classes and over 800 students were arrested. In this case, students were acting politically as students. FSM

126 Sale, 686.
127 Sale 162; Breines.
128 Evans notes that this happened as whites were being pushed out of the black movement. In this case, organizations such as the Black Panthers, forced whites out of black power.
supporter Michael Rossman wrote that “For the first time, we acted collectively on a condition of our immediate life, acted on behalf of ourselves as a class whose responsibility is the future, rather than on behalf of oppressed minorities, or of humanity in the abstract.” The characteristics of mass-mobilization that students so desperately wanted marginalized groups to embrace suddenly ignited at the site of students’ own grievances. Collective action, empowerment, social thinking—it was all there. And it was these types of actions, closest to students’ personal desires, which garnered the greatest support over the next couple of years. In the case of Berkeley, it worked. After almost four months, the University finally backed down, saying they would allow students to organize and solicit funds for off-campus political action.

During its peak, anti-war activism also centered around universities. While students had protested since the war began, it was not until Johnson’s draft personalized the war issue that they mobilized on a massive scale. In February of 1965, President Johnson launched a major military response to guerilla fighters of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam. The response included a draft that would increase American troops by 800 percent before the end of the year.

129 Michael Rossman as quoted in Breines, 31. Women within SDS also began moving toward an independent women’s liberation movement. By breaking out of the bounds of benevolent and paternalistic discourses that surrounded activism on behalf of others, female members of SDS could organize around their own position and oppression as women. Even as male SDS activists argued for political action around their own personal position, many of these activists were reluctant and even hostile to women organizing around personal gender issues. See Evans, in particular her chapter on “The Failure of Success—Women in the Movement.”
Overnight, campuses organized and nearly every major campus across the country led some kind of demonstration within the next few days.\textsuperscript{130} During the next three years, SDS membership swelled and demonstrations grew to over 10,000, becoming the largest student protests the United States had ever seen. Again, students protested something that directly and immediately affected them. This is not to say that other, less explicitly self-oriented reasons for protesting the war were not articulated as part of the protest. For example, many protesters claimed to act on behalf of the women and children in Vietnam. And yet, substantial action only came when the (assumed) interests of those women and children intersected with the personal interests of draft-age students.\textsuperscript{131}

It was during these years that the student movement really “came of age.”\textsuperscript{132}

Theory and discussion about students as legitimate political actors with significant grievances and potential power began to take form around the FSM and anti-war movement. For a moment, students began to reevaluate the ways in which they themselves were pinched within a large capitalist and bureaucratic network. They began articulating a “new-working-class” theory that folded students into a revolutionary proletariat. This theory argued that universities were “knowledge factories,” which produced labor power for capitals use; the university trained and

\textsuperscript{130} Sale, 173; Evans, 157-8. 
\textsuperscript{131} Sale, 187. When speaking at an anti-war protest, SDS member Staughton Lynd held that, “Above all we are here on behalf of the women and children of that land which we have turned into a fiery furnace, whose eyes, as they look out at us from the pictures and posters, ask us, Why?” (Sale, 187). The words “pictures” and “posters” help illuminate the ways in which representations of Vietnamese people by United States citizens, a majority of whom were across the world from those people, were largely two dimensional. And therefore, the interests that Lynd and other anti-war protesters assume from the “eyes” of the Vietnamese people were largely based on the extension of those two-dimensional representations. 
\textsuperscript{132} Breines, 97.
indoctrinated future personnel for the national system. Students were workers. And therefore, while they were subject to many of the same constraints that affected industrial workers—restrictive behavioral regulations, grades and disciplinary procedures that enforced docile compliance—they also had the ability to mobilize. Students themselves could provide, and did provide, not just the ideological impetus for their own social movement, but also the bodily base through which action came.

The moment, however, didn’t last long. The notion that students could legitimately resist capitalist relations on their own behalf dwindled as SDS became increasingly factionalized. Some students put more energy into either the civil rights or anti-war movements, while other, more radical activists joined orthodox Marxist or Maoist organizations. By 1968, new-working-class theorists had lost what small currency they had.

Out of the 1960s

A plethora of leftist activists came out of the 1960s, who were, even after they left college, dedicated to working toward liberal social, economic, and political reform. For labor, this meant an increasing number of well-educated middle-class activists looking to involve themselves with labor organizing. These activists became

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133 Breines, 100-102; Evans, 174.
134 Breines, 96-122. There have been a variety of different reasons cited for the unpopularity of the new-working-class theory. For one, the Progressive Labor Party began gaining popularity within SDS, advocating, once again, for the primacy of the working-class in movements for social change. Secondly, Breines argues that during the late 1960s, anti-war politics and civil rights rebellions dominated the consciousness of the entire nation in a way that made it difficult for students to unify around more personal experimental politics. Either way, students never managed to fully acknowledge their position as wage laborers. This will be discussed at greater length later in the essay.
labor leaders, lawyers, organizers, and scholars. While they maintained liberal sensibilities and a dedication to democratic change, they abandoned the new-working-class theory and the concept of students organizing on their own behalf.\footnote{These labor professionals did not usually come from the radical factions of SDS that emerged in the late 1960s. Some SDS students formed or joined more rebellious factions like Weatherman or the Industrial Workers of the World, but those who became lawyers and union leaders typically moved away from openly combative activism during the 1970s and 1980s. (Breines, 116-120).}

Labor professionals coming out of the 1960s combined some of the basic characteristics of early SDS activism with some of the union techniques of labor leaders like Walter Reuther. Worker empowerment was idealized, but so was the notion of a well-structured union led by middle-class professionals. Thomas Geoghegan, a labor lawyer and activist who came out of the 1960s, wrote a book about his own experiences as a labor lawyer during the 1970s and 1980s. The book, titled \textit{Which Side Are You On}, helps to outline some of the contradictions that arose as middle-class labor professionals struggled to embrace SDS ideals of solidarity and worker empowerment while maintaining Reuther-like union order that prioritized union structures and industrial protocols even when it meant disciplining workers.

Geoghegan, like SDS ERAP activists, maintained a deep attachment to grass-roots organizing and forming real relationships with workers. He writes, quite humorously, about the desire among middle-class activists like himself to forge “solidarity” with workers. He longed to be called “buddy” by the rank-and-file, to chew tobacco, and to be known, not as “the lawyer,” but by his name.\footnote{Thomas Geoghegan, \textit{Which Side Are You On?: Trying to Be for Labor When It’s Flat on Its Back} (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991).} Yet, Geoghegan also acknowledges that working for a union did not always mean developing personal relations with workers. “Suddenly, overnight,” Geoghegan...
writes, “I was a ‘union man.’ I didn’t know any workers, of course, but that didn’t matter. None of my friends outside the union knew that. To them, and to many others I met in town, I spoke for the workers, heard their voices.” By poking fun at the idea that this elusive nature of “solidarity” didn’t matter since his friends outside the union thought that he really did “speak” for workers and “heard” their “voices,” Geoghegan reveals “solidarity” for what it was in the context of a hierarchical union structure—an important front that was helpful for justifying his own career. There was often a contradiction for middle-class activists, staffers, and lawyers who argued that solidarity was important for labor movements, but whose union work did not include actual interactions with the rank-and-file.

Furthermore, while Geoghegan, like most middle-class activists, saw workers and their interests as the center of labor movements—it was supposed to be about helping “them,”—the details he gives of his own experiences show that workers often fell to the sidelines with regard to directing the organization. Geoghegan knew, at some level, that it was lawyers and staffers that drove the union. For them the rank and file was there as an army for the lawyers to organize, for the faces on the brochures. He acknowledges it humorously, in his reaction to a documentary about a strike he organized:

Yes, yes, I wanted to see the miners, the wives locked up in jail, but then I noticed the we the staff were missing. Yes, I know we couldn’t have done it without them, but…It was really annoying. We, the staff, had won that strike. We had organized the boycotts, the rate challenges…We had gone to the White House and the Labor Department to demand that they intervene…The movies never tell you the truth. Sometimes only a bureaucracy can win a strike. Sure, we did it for the rank and file, but we also did it for ourselves…”

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137 Geoghegan, 18.
138 Geoghegan, 23.
This moment of outrage, the desire for recognition, shows the way in which the “we” of the activists was conceived of as the central locus of power in these labor campaigns. Yes, it may be for the rank-and-file, but it was done by the staffers.

Yet, despite the reality of staff leadership, middle-class union activists, like ERAP activists, invoked the idea of worker empowerment. Steve Early, another labor activist and scholar who came out of the 1960s, stresses the need to “shift” and “restore” power to workers. This way of writing and thinking mistakenly positioned power as something that can be given and taken by some figure. Understanding power as some tangible thing that can be transferred from one entity to another sets up a situation in which an individual or group can conceivably control where power is located. For Early, this shift occurs when workers gain “ownership” of union campaigns, when they are “trained and deployed” as organizing volunteers, when they “embrace the idea that organizing is just as important as grievance handling and contract negotiations.” By arguing that worker power came after workers “embrace the idea that organizing is just as important as grievance handling and contract negotiations,” Early links empowerment with his own ideas for union success. Understanding empowerment in this way still positions outsiders as individuals who know what is best for workers to embrace (for workers’ own good).

When workers actually did leverage significant power, middle-class activists often distanced themselves from their working-class allies, sometimes to the point of trying to reign in worker movements. “To me,” Geoghegan writes, “the best part of

140 Early, “Membership Based Organizing”, 89.
being a labor lawyer…is to be with the dissidents.” And yet, in the same breath, he contradicts the reality of being with the dissidents: “It is also the part that a union lawyer should avoid, we are not supposed to side with the rebels.” 141  Geoghegan’s work, as an elite reformer, never included being in solidarity with workers who, independent of middle-class activists, leveraged power through rebellion. The union he worked for began controlling workers, managing their outrage, keeping them from striking, from breaking legal contracts. In 1975, miner strikes began to break out all over the country. They were illegal strikes because contracts were in effect and they were out of the union-staff’s control: “[W]e didn’t call the strikes, or approve them. They were simply happening…Soon it would be a national strike, burning wild and out of control…and back in Washington, we had nothing to do with it. Nothing. I would sit there, stunned.” 142

Geoghegan’s union reprimanded strikers for these actions, even though they were clear demonstrations of worker power. 143 Like Reuther, Geoghegan favored smooth industrial relations (between the courts, unions, and employers) over these demonstrations of power. Soon Geoghegan found himself begging the workers to return to work. The courts, he believed, could destroy the International Union and so Geoghegan and the other staffers “whispered to the [strikers] politely: Please, go back to work.” “We just wanted them to behave,” he writes, “Be the rank and file, but behave.” 144

141 Geoghegan, 182.  
142 Geoghegan, 30.  
143 Geoghegan justifies reprimanding workers by positioning their demonstrations as unskilled, unintentional, and improper. He writes that through wildcat strikes the rank and file “unwittingly “stumbled” upon a “crude” form of worker control. (Geoghegan, 30).  
144 Geoghegan, 34.
Geoghegan sees the hypocrisy of the elite staffers’ positions in the labor movement. There was, at the heart of elite participation, a desire to be with labor, to empower them, to fight for them, with them, but, at the same time, order them, utilize them, manage them...for their own good. Geoghegan’s nervousness about the unruly workers expresses the value he put on industrial order. Wanting the workers to “behave” means wanting them to follow the industrial rules that were in place, contracts included. Geoghegan understood that staffers like himself wanted workers to “be the rank and file,” (that is, some notion of an “authentic” worker) but only if those “authentic” workers were going to “behave” in ways that were conducive to activists’ own vision for unionism; a vision where siding with dissidents is “bad for the movement.” Simultaneously, middle-class activists attempted to prioritize worker power (like SDS) and promote industrial protocols (like Reuther). This combination often resulted in contradictions for middle-class labor activism.\(^{145}\)

The growth of student activism during the 1960s located middle-class students as integral players in labor organizing (and also a larger movement of social change). Political and social values that prioritized participatory democracy, cross-class alliances, and students working on behalf of the poor and unemployed, became hallmarks of labor activism. These values, however, often functioned to undercut independent worker power as students positioned themselves (and their opinions) as essential for successful organizing. Nonetheless, the number of middle-class union staff members continued to increase as former student activists became labor

\(^{145}\) Geoghegan, 182.
professionals. Activists, like Geoghegan, attempted to fit many of SDS’s ideals into
Reuther-like union structures (very much a product of Progressive Era reform).
Unions came to be shaped, more and more, by middle-class staff members.
Understanding student activism in the 1960s, because it has had such legacies, is then
important for contextualizing current union strategies and the increasing role of
students and recent college graduates within labor movements.
Chapter 3: Organizers and Current Union Practices

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s union membership declined and unions became increasingly bureaucratized “top-down” organizations. The ability of unions to engage in aggressive bargaining strategies narrowed, as did public support of unionization. Thus, during the late 1980s many labor activists began looking for ways to boost union membership and support. They argued that in order to revive the dwindling labor movement, unions needed to focus a significant amount of energy to recruiting new members and organizers. As part of a new union strategy, the AFL-CIO founded an Organizing Institute (OI) in 1989 to train part-time and full-time union staff members. The Institute was also meant to serve as a “bridge between the labor movement and a segment of society from which it had been long estranged: students, community activists and left-leaning intellectuals.” Therefore, it is no surprise that during this time the AFL-CIO, through the OI, began actively recruiting organizers from elite college campuses. In 1996, the Union Summer program was developed, which created internships with unions for interested college students. The focus on college activists was, in terms of numbers, extremely successful; by 1998,

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146 During this time labor leaders and lawyers, many from outside the rank-and-file, carried out negotiations and contracts. While the rank and file membership paid union dues, they did not usually actively participate in the day-to-day functioning of unions. (See discussion of Geoghegan’s book in the previous chapter). Also, as the number of industrial jobs available in the United States declined, industrial workers who had previously been unionized began to move into other sectors of the job market, sectors which were not as directly connected to strong union networks. Unionization is not as frequently associated with low-middle-class service workers, professionals, or low-level managers.

half of all OI trainees looking for internships, apprenticeships, and job placements with AFL-CIO affiliates were from academic institutions rather than local unions.\textsuperscript{148}

The creation of programs like Union Summer and the recent influx of student activists into union organizing may be seen as part of a larger development of middle-class participation in United States labor movements. Union staff recruitment on college campuses, the strategies of middle-class organizers, as well as the labor organizing that occurs around “a living wage,” show similarities to middle-class labor activism that has occurred throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Like Progressive Era labor reforms, new union strategies still promote cooperation and self-discipline. And, while current student labor activism has dropped the revolutionary zeal that characterized the student movement in the 1960s, a focus on empowering workers through grass-roots organizing and participatory democracy continues. While many unions now use an “organizing model,” which emphasizes organizing new rank-and-file members and increasing membership participation within the union, middle-class staffers are still the ones who structure, direct, and execute organizing strategies. It is assumed that well-educated, full-time staffers are needed for empowering and helping workers, for it is these educated, idealistic, social-justice oriented activists who are said to possess the skills, vision, and resources needed for mass organizing. It is the vision and strategies of full-time staffers that are regarded as “best” for unionization and employed in union campaigns.

\textsuperscript{148} Early, “Membership-Based Organizing.”
Andy Levin and Union Summer

Union Summer was one of the first programs designed specifically for middle-class participation in labor organizing. As mentioned above, it began in 1996 under the direction of Andy Levin, a labor lawyer and Harvard Law graduate. The program, designed as part of a larger effort to broaden the labor movement, sought to inject some youth and excitement into what was considered a dwindling movement. Union Summer provided unions with resources (students) to further organizing campaigns, attract new labor leaders and organizers, and instill a pro-union ideology in young educated citizens. During the first year, three three-week sessions were held at over twenty-five different union sites around the country. A total of 1,045 interns participated and over fifty site coordinators oversaw the interns at their campaign sites. These coordinators were young organizers themselves, usually recent graduates of elite colleges, who were asked to take a summer-break from organizing in order to help with the intern program. Intern recruitment was largely geared toward college students and not rank-and-file workers. Most Union Summer interns came from middle or upper-middle-class families and attended a four-year college program. Only 14% of the participants came from lower income families.

149 Andy Levin, personal interview by telephone, December 4, 2008. I transcribed the recording of this interview. Oral pauses, including “like” and “you know,” have been omitted from all quotations.
151 For this paper, I will be analyzing only the first year of the Union Summer Program. Although the program lasted for many summers, participation fell as individual unions began creating their own internship programs for college youth.
152 Levin, Interview.
153 Clawson, 46.
and only 5% of interns were rank-and-file workers.\textsuperscript{154} Thus there was typically a
class divide between Union Summer participants and the membership of the
program’s affiliated unions.

While middle-class college students who participated in Union Summer did
not usually have experience with or knowledge of union movements or working-class
labor relations, most showed dedication to social justice and “strong commitment to
helping others.” Currently, union leaders tend to look for individuals with general
experience in “social justice” activism as a qualification for union employment or
acceptance into programs like union summer.\textsuperscript{155} I interviewed Andy Levin, who
reaffirmed this sentiment: “We wanted you to show that you had been an activist, that
you had done something to fight for social justice. We didn't care if it was in the
labor movement; if you’d been in the peace movement, or the women’s rights
movement…we said okay.”\textsuperscript{156} Not requiring experience in labor as a pre-requisite for
involvement in labor movements favors the recruitment of, specifically, educated
middle-class youth—the group generally cited for “social-justice” oriented outlooks,
but without a labor-oriented background. Leaders like Levin, who themselves come
to the labor movement from the “outside,” encourage middle-class participation with
labor by emphasizing “social justice,” rather than a knowledge of labor relations.

“Social justice” relies on notions of fairness and reasonableness. Similar to
impartial arbitration, it implies that fairness exists as an objective category
(linguistically, social justice is treated as a definite object). With regard to labor

\textsuperscript{154} Bunnage, 132-134.
\textsuperscript{155} Daisy Rooks, “Sticking It Out or Packing It In?: Organizer Retention in the New Labor
University Press, 2004), 201.
\textsuperscript{156} Levin, Interview.
organizing, a focus on “social justice” means struggling for a fair and reasonable system of labor relations instead of constructing a movement around getting more (money, vacation, leisure-time, authority) for labor. Fairness and reasonableness, however, are not facts that can be applied objectively to specific situations, but rather are subjectively understood. Thus, the social position of activists inevitably informs the “socially just” vision activists have for unions. Basing activism on notions of social justice leaves it to the activists who evoke such terms to articulate what socially just systems entail. Moreover, middle-class activists rarely spell out clearly and specifically what a goal of “social justice” means for the restructuring of labor campaigns and the implementation of organizing strategies. While Levin stressed the importance of “social justice,” he did not articulate what “social justice” meant in terms of workers, employers, activists and unions—it was supposed to be something I implicitly understood. Evoking “social justice” as the backbone of positive social activism, especially when the concept is not laid out specifically within different contexts, legitimizes the specific vision and quality of “social justice” oriented activism while masking the subjective creation of that activism.

A focus on “social justice” also re-directs attention and focus within labor movements. More and more, leaders like Levin embrace “social movement unionism,” which promotes thinking about labor relations in terms of general change, rather than treating unions as member organizations that utilize collective bargaining to leverage worker power specifically for the rank and file. This position assumes that “to succeed, [unionism] really has to be a social movement.”\(^{157}\) This mentality

\(^{157}\) Levin, Interview.
comes out of the student activism during the 1960s and Reuther-type unionism, which, as discussed earlier, sought to broaden the goals of unions and join together various social movements. This assumption, not only justifies middle-class youths’ involvement with labor organizing, but also implies that organizations must embrace “social movement unionism” by welcoming activists outside labor if they wish to succeed.

Levin suggested that one of the reasons for the creation of Union Summer and the move toward “social movement unionism” in general is that “people’s view of the labor movement was that it was a dinosaur, a members only organization that didn’t fight for social justice generally, or for workers generally. It just fought to protect its members.” Historically, though, the whole premise of a union was that it was a members’ organization, where gaining benefits for workers and protecting members took number-one priority. Yet Levin criticizes the union as a “members only organization” (dinosaur-like and in need of reform) and contrasts it to a union that “fight[s] for social justice generally” (a positive new vision for labor movements that includes Union Summer). Criticizing unions that “just protect [their] members” for not doing enough implies unions should concern themselves with other things. Furthermore, this criticism legitimizes the authority of those middle-class organizers who come to labor organizing with “social justice” as their goal.

Labor organizers like Levin also emphasize racial and gender diversity as a way to broaden organizing campaigns. When I asked Andy Levin why Union

158 This is not to say that unions should not recruit new members. Many have correctly argued that “organizing the un-organized” is a very important part of strengthening union power and thereby benefiting current members. But organizing new rank-and-file members should not necessarily be equated with “social movement unionism,” which implies engaging help “outside” of labor.
Summer began, he stated that “inject[ing] some diversity” into union organizing was a main goal of the program. At the time, Levin explained, the union staff was not very “diverse”: “It wasn’t many black people, really,” Levin said, “It was white men and women mostly and no Latinos…and I don’t think there were any Asian Americans…In other words it really wasn’t that diverse.” Middle-class labor activists commonly reference diversity only in terms of race and gender. When asked in an interview whether the composition of OI graduates were representative of the workforce they try to organize, Richard Bensinger, the Organizing Institute’s first executive director, answered: “We make every effort to recruit a representative group. We’re committed to ensuring that a significant number of our organizers are women and people of color.”

For Bensinger and Levin, discussions of representative organizing and diversity excluded class. Levin mentioned gender diversity many times during our conversation, but never explicitly spoke of class and class diversity. The class position of interns is only subtly referred to through the use of the word “student” or “youth.” When Levin and other labor leaders refer to “youth” or “students,” they are referencing labor activists recruited from elite colleges who are, by and large, members of the middle or upper-middle class. But, because “student” refers only to an educational category and “youth” to an age category, using the words “student” and “youth” discreetly divorces individuals from class identity.

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160 As with the class make up of SDS, I do not mean to suggest that all students who attend elite college universities come from middle or upper-middle-class backgrounds. However, an overwhelming majority of students attending elite colleges come from middle-class backgrounds. Therefore middle-class culture, while by no means determinant, pervades those institutions, both structurally and culturally.
Defining diversity in terms of race and gender, without acknowledging class divides, ignores the influence class status has on unions and labor organizing in general.

Levin ignores the issues of class in labor movements even as he admits that it is important for workers to relate to organizers. Levin’s dedication to diversifying the labor movement was quite serious. With regard to Union Summer applicants, he actively chose women and people of color for the internship positions: “I just said, well, they are all going to be women and people of color…I mean, not all, but we just did that.” True to his word, during the first year of Union Summer, 50% of the interns were non-white and over two-thirds were women.¹⁶¹ Later in the interview, I asked Levin about the theory behind bringing diversity into organizing campaigns. He responded that, “workers are more likely to take on a leadership role and to take risks if they have people organizing who they can relate to well.” This position assumes race and gender (the diversity Levin emphasized) affect how well workers relate to union organizers. Levin argues that since women and people of color make up a significant portion of rank-and-file membership, bringing racial and gender diversity into the labor movement is helpful, since females may be better at relating to females, blacks may be better at relating to blacks, etc…

Yet directly after stating “that workers are more likely to take on a leadership role and to take risks if they have people organizing who they can relate to well” he reverses those sentiments slightly, by saying: “You know, I’m not really a very extremely identity politics person…I don’t think that only black people can organize black people and only Latinos can organize—I mean, shit, look at my life, I learned

¹⁶¹ Bunnage, 130; Levin Interview.
Haitian Creole and I organized black Haitian nursing home workers. I think we should have a complete rainbow of organizers.” For Levin the need for a “diverse” movement is more about a “rainbow of organizers,” and not so much about recruiting labor activists, who, because of their background, can “relate” to workers. If Levin’s desire to bring female and black organizers into the labor movement was strictly about “relating” to workers, he would not have spent so much time and energy organizing workers who were of a different race and gender than himself. Moreover, he would not have needed to go looking for organizers at elite colleges in order to recruit women and people of color—most of the people Levin organized were black female nursing home workers.

Levin claimed that “by organizing college students into Union Summer, the U.S. labor movement immediately diversified itself”—by race, gender, and age. And yet, looked at another way, through a more classed lens, Union Summer brought in a cadre of young middle-class activists—all with a commitment to “social-justice”—to labor organizing with the hopes of training them to later take on leadership positions. Thus, Levin’s own definition of “diversity” and the focus on a “rainbow of organizers” draws attention away from the fact that Union Summer brings in almost entirely middle and upper-middle-class activists to unions that typically deal with working-class members.

Site-coordinators and interns participating in Union Summer spoke of class much more openly and showed more skepticism about leaving class out of a

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162 Levin, Interview. Andy himself is a white male who has helped organize many different groups of workers, many of whom were Haitian women.

163 Levin does not expand upon why, exactly, having a “rainbow of organizers” is helpful for union organizing.
discussion of diversity and representation. Leslie Bunnage, in her dissertation, “Labor Movement Revitalization and Youth Participation: Cross-Demographic Alliances, Conflicts, and Campaign Progress in the First Year of Union Summer,” analyzes intern and site-coordinator’s evaluations from the first Union Summer program. Many of these evaluations identified the lack of class diversity as a significant problem with the program. One Boston coordinator suggested that class difference made it difficult for interns to identify with workers: “Class seemed to be the area most lacking diversity. The majority of interns did not identify with the workers we were helping to organize.” A Chicago coordinator wrote, “We desperately needed more working-class/rank-and-file interns, this site contained so much class privilege it was downright uncomfortable…” This suggests not only that class affects worker/intern understandings of each other, but also that the clash of class status that arose during internship programs resulted in considerable discomfort. Many other testaments articulated similar frustration with and concern for the lack of rank and file presence within the Union Summer Program. By looking at the demographic makeup of Union Summer interns, and by reading the opinions of many Union Summer participants, it becomes clear that the program was geared toward middle and upper-middle-class students and that tension arose surrounding the issue of class.

Levin never acknowledged the class tension cited by interns; rather he focused on participants’ energy and intelligence. Recruiting middle and upper-middle-class students…

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164 Unfortunately, Bunnage’s quotations of evaluations do not include the demographics of that evaluator. Therefore, it is unknown what the class background of the students who are critical of Union Summer’s treatment of class issues.
165 Bunnage, 132.
166 Bunnage, 133.
youth to union organizing through Union Summer reflects the assumption that students bring important, if not necessary, skills for productive organizing—research, writing, and communication skills.\textsuperscript{167} Levin, when I asked in an email what college students brought to labor organizing, responded, “Union Summer led to scores of bright, energetic, committed and ambitious young people joining the labor movement as staff and leaders. It was well worth it for that alone.”\textsuperscript{168} Arguing that students’ intelligence, energy, commitment and ambitiousness \textit{alone} justifies welcoming them into the labor unionizing ignores other ways in which students’ positions, as members of the middle class, affect their involvement in labor relations. Examination of middle-class reform and activism during the first half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century shows that students, like workers and employers, are embedded within a web of class structures that shape the ways in which they go about conceiving and making social change. By emphasizing intelligence, energy, commitment and ambition—attributes presumed to be outside class structures (they are not explicitly classed)—Levin glosses over the ways in which inviting middle-class students to take part in labor organizing is not simply a matter of intelligence and commitment.

The focus, by Union Summer and the AFL-CIO, on educated students carries tones of superiority that feeds into positioning educated middle-class youth as the center of the social world, political action, and public space. Excitedly, Levin talked about how explosive Union Summer became: “[It was] what would be called viral today… it was the thing to do!… [Creating] this national wave of all the coolest young


\textsuperscript{168} Andy Levin, email to the author, December 8, 2008.
people who want to change the world [by working with unions]...It was really a good idea!” The idea that educated elite are the “coolest people,” who can turn labor organizing into “the thing to do,” positions them as the locus of power with regard to labor movements. The press coverage surrounding Union Summer exemplified this phenomenon of centering middle-class activists. When Union Summer first began, it received a massive amount of media coverage—articles in local newspapers, as well as longer pieces in the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Time Magazine, as well as others. As John Sweeney pointed out in one such Wall Street Journal article: “Today’s campus activist is at the heart of today’s union movement.” While publicity may benefit labor, the focus on middle-class students often shifts the goals and structure of labor movements. A 1996 Washington Post article quoted Levin, who said: “The primary goals of Union Summer were about the participants themselves rather than getting our [organizing] work done.” Middle-class participants became more important than getting organizing work done. Student participation in labor movements transforms the nature of union movements by focusing on the vision and opinions of middle-class activists and reasserting that the central locus of power emanates from those activists.

Like Progressive Era reformers, Levin positioned his activism as fighting for the greater good of society as a whole. In our interview, he stated, “When I graduated from college, I said well, I have got to fight for the change, the world.” Here, change, like social justice, is posited as an object, a defined thing, meant to be universally understood. Fighting for “the world” assumes that “the world” is a homogenous

place that exists as a cohesive body for which one can fight for in entirety. This sort of language brings to light the ways in which certain middle-class individuals conceive of their own understanding as central and pervasive. This especially holds true as more and more middle-class Union Summer participants and other student activists get offered full-time union positions after summer intern work. “Basically,” Levin says toward the end of our interview when expanding on the theory behind diversifying the labor movement, “the union should be a model of the world it’s trying to create…” If this is true, and if union leadership is, more and more being managed and organized by middle-class leadership, it must be acknowledged that the model of the world unions now try to create is built on the values and assumptions of the middle class.

**The Organizing Model**

Many students who go through programs like Union Summer, and even some middle-class students who come straight from elite colleges, often take fulltime union jobs. Within unions, they help organize, direct, and train rank-and-file committee members. Many of the middle-class tendencies outlined in the previous chapters are discernible within current cross-class alliances; organizers still emphasize worker empowerment, participatory democracy, and order. In addition, assumed expertise by middle-class union leaders often gets translated into authority for those staff members. This authority allows organizers to design and direct union structures and
relations, even when it means ignoring or manipulating the ideas and desires of the rank and file.

Middle-class authority and leadership occurs even within unions that moved away from top-down union structures. Many unions now employ the “organizing model”, which, as mentioned earlier, emphasizes rank-and-file participation and collective action. The “organizing model” developed in opposition to the “servicing model” in which union staff members “serviced” union members (by negotiating, bargaining and running campaigns for workers). Certain unions that promote the organizing model criticize the “servicing model” for its over-reliance on union staff and disregard for organizing new workers.\textsuperscript{171} While the creation of the OI meant that the AFL-CIO moved away from the old “servicing model,” it did not lead to the more comprehensive structural reconfiguration many that leaders hoped for. Therefore, in 2005 a group of unions, under the leadership of Andy Stern, left the AFL-CIO to form a Change to Win (CTW) coalition. The new coalition embraced the “organizing model” as the only way for successful organizing and labor movement resurgence.
Like SDS ERAP activists, CTW unions advocate for utilizing a large worker base to create social change; organizing new members and encouraging rank-and-file

\textsuperscript{171} Bill Fletcher Jr. and Richard W. Hurd, “Beyond The Organizing Model: The Transformation Process in Local Unions,” in Organizing to Win: New Research on Union Strategies, ed Kate Bronfenbrenner et al (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 38. It should be noted that under the new organizing model rank-and-file involvement within unions is unpaid volunteer work. Some workers show distain for the new organizing model in general, arguing that the reasons they pay union dues are to be represented (or serviced) by the union. Despite these opinions, many staffers still write-off the servicing model because it does not promote rank-and-file members taking on individual responsibilities. One staffer, in critiquing the servicing model announces, “The job of the union is…not [to] protect whiners.” Here, members who wish to use unions as service providers are considered “whiners” not deserving of protection. This sentiment not only critiques the overall success of a “servicing model” in securing workers benefits, but also criticizes certain rank-and-file behaviors and desires accepted by that model. (Fletcher and Hurd, 41-46).
participation is key. These unions represent primarily working-class or low-middle-class laborers. Their leadership, however, is not unambiguously working class—most union directors are graduates from elite colleges, many of whom were never part of the rank and file. Thus, within these unions, interactions between leadership and rank-and-file membership occur across class lines. While these middle-class leaders emphasize the need for labor movements to be rank-and-file movements, the leadership of the unions, and therefore the unions’ vision and strategy, remain rooted in the middle class.

The class position of leaders and organizers, however, often gets obscured in discussions and literature about union organizing. Many scholars, union leaders, and journalists, utilize the term “organizer” and “staffer” to refer to campaign leaders and fulltime (paid) organizers. By and large, these fulltime staff members do not come directly out of the rank and file. Instead, as previously discussed, they are increasingly being recruited from college campuses. Thus, while the term “organizer” or “staffer” does not inaccurately describe the position of these

172 There are seven unions affiliated with Change to Win: Service Employees International Union (SEIU), UNITE HERE, International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), United Farm Workers of America (UFA), Laborer’s International Union of America (LIUA), and United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBC) (See the Change to Win webpage at <http://www.changetowin.org/about-us.html>, last accessed on April 6, 2009. Members of these unions might be characterized, or characterize themselves as “middle-class.” During the last half of the 20th century, many industrial workers began to gain access to better living conditions and more consumer products, thus moving into the growing group of low-middle-class workers. These Unions however, still represent workers who are not generally considered to be a part of the well-educated professional/managerial sector within the division of labor. It is these unions to which college activists devote their energy.

173 For example, SEIU is led by Andy Stern, graduate of University of Penn; UNITE HERE is led by John W. Wilhelm, Yale graduate, and Bruce Raynor, Cornell graduate; IBT is led by James Hoffa, a University of Michigan law graduate; UFA is led by Arturo Rodriguez who received his B.A. at St. Mary’s college and his M.A at the University of Michigan. See specific union websites for more information.
individuals, it does, like Levin’s use of the term “student,” mask the class background of those individuals. References to organizers’ superior knowledge and skills constantly up-holds the distinction between fulltime organizers and rank-and-file union committee members.174 This distinction, while not discussed in “class” terms, connects directly to perceptions of the well-educated, well-trained outside middle-class activist and the working-class individual with the potential to be trained for union work. For these reasons, the terms “staffers” and “organizers” should not be divorced from discussions of class, especially since class background influences the behaviors of the people in these positions.

Union staffers working under the “organizing model” seek to create union structures (for worker empowerment) and train workers to function within those structures. Teresa Sharpe, in her piece “Union Democracy and Successful Campaigns,” writes that union leadership uses “expertise to create a space in which workers feel able and willing to make decisions and become workplace leaders…With effort and over time, organizers can create structures that give workers increasing input and power within a campaign.” Along with these structures, staffers also teach workers the “basics of strategy and tactics” to encourage “leadership development.” Assuming that workers need cleared “space” and training in order to “feel able and willing to make decisions,” suggests that worker-action is dependent on middle-class staffers who have the strength and expertise to train indigenous leaders. Sharpe quotes Mark Warren who writes: “leadership development implies

174 For examples see: Teresa Sharpe, “Union Democracy and Successful Campaigns: They Dynamics of Staff Authority and Worker Participation in an Organizing Union,” Rebuilding Labor: Organizing and Organizers in the New Union Movement, ed. Ruth Milkman and Kim Voss (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Richard Bensinger, Interview; Early, “Membership-Based Organizing.”
that there is an authoritative agency with the skills and knowledge lacking in others who need such training.” The whole notion that workers need training and space in order to participate within their own unions highlights the assumed strategic superiority of fulltime organizers over union members.¹⁷⁵

Sharpe goes so far as to argue that without the “space” educated staffers provide, workers would not be able to establish productive campaigns. “Without staff training and support,” she writes, “workers will find it difficult to generate effective strategy.”¹⁷⁶ Claiming that worker input and power increases once organizers create certain structures legitimizes outsider construction of those structures. Furthermore, the idea of needing pre-made “space” and “structure” in which to discuss, argue, and organize, (and there are rules around how to behave within that space), conveys another assumption by middle-class leaders, namely that confrontation, conflict, and action need to be ordered within a systematic structure that staff themselves create. Positioning worker power as something acquired through the structures staffers create and the training staffers offer, provides a theoretical framework for a union structure where staff controls the organization of union committees and strategies. “Strategy and tactic,” (in the singular) gets discussed as an objectively understood and agreed upon concept, thereby positioning staffers’ opinions about the skills and structures necessary for running a union as “the” answers.

Democratic participation becomes high priority for staffers who embrace the organizing model. Union staffers do not want to take on the role of absolute director. Instead, they see their position as that of a facilitator for rank-and-file participation.

¹⁷⁵ Sharpe, 68-69.
¹⁷⁶ Sharpe, 65-68.
Yet, as was the case with ERAP activists, fulltime union organizers often become the voice of authority within campaigns. Staffers’ usually work toward “participatory democracy”—a framework that foresees worker participation within a set structure.\footnote{177} For middle-class organizers, promoting participatory democracy within unions often means maintaining authority in order to develop worker leadership congruent with democratic structures. The authority of staffers under the structure of “participatory democracy” can undermine worker participation and input that does not fit within the union model that staffers desire. In her essay, Sharpe studies the leadership strategies of a Hotel and Restaurant Employees International Union (HERE) local B.\footnote{178} From early on in the organizing campaign, fulltime HERE leaders encouraged rank-and-file action, leading committee meetings to facilitate membership participation.\footnote{179} Yet, fulltime union organizers directed the content and strategies of these meetings. Sharpe observes that the organizer running the local HERE meetings “tried to steer the conversation.” But when the leader did not receive the answer she hoped for regarding a decision about how to precede with a specific grievance, she began to “nudge” workers in a specific direction, asking them questions and nodding when one housekeeper made the “right suggestion.” Here, the staffer didn’t just want worker input, but only worker input that fit with her model for organizing. She worked to

\footnote{177 Moreover, Sharpe points out that this vision for democratic union structure also connects with a larger vision of democratic revitalization: “Leaders can teach practical and analytical skills in a way that fosters a type of democratic participation that bodes well for the possibility of a larger democratic revitalization.” Thus union structures are not only about securing benefits for workers, but are geared toward democratic transformation. (Sharpe, 68-69).}

\footnote{178 For privacy reasons, the name of the HERE local has been changed. It should also be noted that HERE has merged with UNITE to form UNITE-HERE.}

\footnote{179 Union committees are made up of rank-and-file union members and are generally directed by fulltime union organizers. Therefore, for unions with a working-class base, committee members tend to be low-wage employees.}
ensure that workers did it her way. Sharpe writes, “While the organizer clearly pushed the committee members to stage the action, the final decision and plan…was the product of dialogue. As a result of the learning process, the housekeepers themselves came to see the value of a delegation, and understood the action as one of their own making.”

It could be argued, however, that, worker participation in such instances is a formality rather than a formative component to the decision. The idea that the decision “was a product of dialogue,” that workers did verbally participate in the process despite being “pushed” toward a specific action, constituted “participation” within the democratic structure.

Sharpe, and presumably the leaders who engage in this sort of interaction with rank-and-file committee members, see this type of authority as a valuable and necessary component of successful union campaigns and indigenous leadership development. For Sharpe, leaders’ veiled authority at union meetings was a “learning process” that allowed workers to “see the value” of the leaders’ strategies. Authority, in Sharpe’s view, “enables, rather than constrains, participatory democracy,” and therefore should be seen as “a productive force.” As long as staff leaders have a “sophisticated and well-developed conception of leadership development,” (which she concludes the leaders she studies do) those organizers can create structures that “give” workers increasing power. Because union hierarchy and organizers’ authority is implemented in the name of “participatory democracy” and worker “empowerment,” Sharpe accepts union leaders’ tactics as positive, even when, as a result, leaders attempt to control rank-and-file participation.

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180 Sharpe, 76-78.
181 Sharpe, 68-69
Even while acknowledging the reality of staff authority, Sharpe maintains that “when organizers insisted that workers were the highest authority in the union, this was not just rhetoric.” However, only paragraphs later, she contradicts the reality of “workers as highest authority” by writing, “If committee dissent threatened to derail the [campaign] process, organizers continued to invoke the language of democratic process even when they worked to eliminate all such dissent.” Organizers tried to discourage worker input that ran counter to organizers’ wishes. This sometimes meant that staff members made unilateral decisions and then passed them off as committee-endorsed. Leaders of the HERE local campaign drew up agendas before a meeting with workers and then directed the committee meeting so as to re-create that same agenda. One time, a chief organizer printed out the flyers with the March plan on it before the March planning meeting took place. “‘And what would you have done if we hadn’t agreed to those actions?’ one of the men from the banquet department asked. Laughing, the organizer assured him that ‘we knew you’d agree.’”

In this case, worker participation is barely even a formality. Staffers made and executed decisions before workers even had a chance to agree or disagree. Here, staff authority restricts committee members’ freedom to make campaign decisions and thereby undercuts worker authority and freedom within the very structure that is meant to “give” workers power.

Workers were not blind to this reality: “Ok, we’ll tell you what you want to hear,” one worker stated sarcastically during one meeting. And then at another meeting, “You should just tell us since you know all the answers anyway.” Both leaders in these situations responded with laughter, one adding “But we want you to
say it. It’s your campaign.” Despite the claim by both Sharpe and HERE local B leaders that worker authority is not just rhetoric, there are instances when leaders actions and language reveal that worker participation is formulated and manipulated by staff leaders. The notion of “participatory democracy” often acts as a cover for hierarchical leadership by outside union organizers.¹⁸²

Workers sometimes resisted the participatory structure that staffers promoted. Sharpe herself writes, “[Workers] pushed back—actively arguing strategy or passively withdrawing their participation. Sometimes organizers consciously overlooked or ignored this resistance, whereas other times they could not.” Overt tension between workers and staffers indicates that “outsiders” were not always warmly welcomed into labor relations: “Power and control were negotiated continually in interactions between organizers and workers.”¹⁸³

**A Handbook for the Rank-and-File**

In 2002, Richard Bensinger, the founder of the AFL-CIO Organizing Institute, published a handbook for union organizing committee members.¹⁸⁴ Titled *Reaching Higher*, the handbook acts as a guide for rank-and-file union member participation within their union. Typical of middle-class activism, especially industrial democracy, it reinforces the notion of the expert organizer, as well as promotes cooperation, non-confrontational organizing strategies, and broad social union goals. The deployment of these types of training manuals demonstrates the ways in which middle-class labor

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¹⁸² Sharpe, 80-85.
¹⁸³ Sharpe, 69.
activism still encourages middle-class behaviors and ways of being for working-class laborers.

While Bensinger never explicitly mentions class, he distinguishes between organizers and committee members, reinforcing the notion of the expert organizer outside the rank and file who directs committee members. His chapter titled “Be a Partner With Your Union Organizer,” indicates that the handbook addresses rank-and-file committee members, and not fulltime organizers. Moreover, Bensinger assumes committee members (his audience) are from the rank and file, while organizers are not. He writes: “The organizer has much less access to your co-workers than you do. Because you work inside the organization, you as a committee member, are the only one who can maintain regular communication with co-workers.” This language acknowledges the committee member as an insider and the organizer as an “outsider.” Bensinger then distinguishes between the role of organizers and the role of committee members: “While the organizer is the expert on overall campaign strategy, you are the expert on your workplace.” Thus the organizer is positioned as the one with general skills and knowledge needed to direct a successful campaign, while the committee members are the ones who provide


185 It should not go unnoticed that the publication of the book does not resemble a serious adult manual. The font of the book is similar to elementary chapter books and pictures go along with the points made in the book. For example to illustrate the “Grow the Committee” chapter there are progressive pictures (shown to the right) of a man watering a bud that eventually becomes a tall flower smiling on its own.
organizers with access to a large workforce needed for a base of support. Bensinger uses this dichotomy to encourage committee members to obey the instructions of the organizer experts: “When your organizer gives you an assignment…you have to take this job seriously. Do it right away, and get back [to] the organizer.” Thus, while he acknowledges that the organizer relies on members for insight into the workforce, he supports a hierarchical structure where the “outside” organizer designs the general direction of campaigns and encourages committee members to obey instructions from these outsiders.\(^{186}\)

The handbook also encourages member action congruent with middle-class tendencies outlined in Chapter 1—cooperation, harmony, and rationality. Bensinger warns committee members not to become “strident or combative.” “Your tone,” he says, “should be one of humility, honesty, generosity and truthfulness…try to reduce and soften conflicts, not aggravate them.” Like Jane Addams and other Progressive Era reformers, Bensinger promotes cooperation as a way to soften conflict and in doing so encourages committee members to refine “strident or combative” behaviors. “Strident and combative” actions, such as strikes, are played down in the organizing handbook. With regard to strikes, Bensinger writes, “Unions today have other effective and sophisticated ways of exerting pressure over issues.” This language portrays striking in opposition to effective and sophisticated strategy and thereforenegatively comments on confrontational strategies like strikes (which in the past have been effectively utilized by unions as a way to demand more for workers). Bensinger concerns himself, not only with getting more for workers, but also with the quality of

\(^{186}\) Bensinger, Reaching Higher, 39, 49-50.
committee member’s behavior. “Your tone and demeanor are as critical as your 
message,” he writes to committee members. Bensinger associates behaving in a 
“principled, professional, and positive” way with being a successful committee 
member. In this case, training committee members for participation is also about 
encouraging certain behaviors. As was the case with Progressive Era reform women, 
middle-class labor activists link certain (middle-class) behaviors with legitimate 
political action, and in doing so promote middle-class ways of being.  

Cooperation with employers is emphasized as well. In a chapter titled 
“Support the Mission of Your Employer,” Bensinger writes: “As committee members 
you are pro-union, but you are also most likely hard-working, loyal employees, 
dedicated to your employer’s mission.” Assuming that pro-union members are 
“dedicated to their employer’s mission” provides justification for a cooperative union 
approach. It is not clear, however, where this assumption comes from, given that, 
historically, working-class union activists do not prioritize employer missions. 
Rather, their demands remain antagonistic to capital. Furthermore, Bensinger 
suggests “if you didn’t care about the organization, you wouldn’t be working so hard 
to make it better.” But, traditionally the whole premise of a union centered around 
bettering life for workers and not about reforming companies to make them better for 
all parties involved. By making the claim that the pro-union committee members are 
also pro-employer, Bensinger defends the notion of “harmonious” union/employer 
relationships “enhanced by mutual respect” and in doing so alters the conception of 

187 Bensinger, Reaching Higher, 21, 69.
unions as organizations formed to combat capital. This stance goes hand-in-hand with Progressive Era middle-class labor reform and Reuther-like unionization, both of which prioritize cooperative labor relations in order to support production and industrial peace—which in turn function to maintain capitalist labor structures.

In the wake of encouraging a more cooperative style of union organizing, Bensinger also draws attention to broad union goals, goals that do not follow the traditional pattern of winning benefits for workers. “Remember,” Bensinger urges, “[t]he union is about respect for people.” By insisting that unions are about “respect for people,” Bensinger equates union goals with looking out for people generally, rather than for union members specifically. Calling for general respect—even with regard to hostile management—runs contrary to the original purpose of unions, which began not to “respect” those groups against which they fought, but to struggle for higher wages, fewer hours, and better benefits. Bensinger claims that one of the major characteristics of unions is about “giving back to the community.” He applauds and promotes this notion, arguing that broadening union goals helps union visibility. This mentality encourages unions to focus on general social well-being instead of paying attention only to the interests of workers.

United Student Labor Action Coalition

Recently, the notion of “living wages,” a term taken up by middle-class reformers in the Progressive Era, has made a come-back. Living wage campaigns are

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189 Bensinger, Reaching Higher, 22, 57.
springing up all across the country. They have gained immense popularity on college campuses, where students work to secure workers (usually contracted cleaning and dining staff) a “livable” wage. Over thirty-five college campuses have organized to demand university workers be paid a “subsistence wage” with decent health benefits. Like Progressive Era wage legislation, living wage campaigns seek to institutionalize wages and benefits for workers through the government or other institutions (universities, for example). Thus, like minimum wages in the Progressive Era, securing living wages does not require worker organizations (unions) to be involved in the process or outcome of labor struggles. Clawson notes that, “Living wage, anti-sweatshop, and Code of Conduct struggles are built primarily by students, union of community staff, or religious organizations with a social conscience”—workers are not usually a fundamental part of these campaigns. Therefore, structuring labor activism in this way furthers the authority and control of students and affluent activists. Middle-class activists, rather than workers, shape these workplace struggles.

Living wage campaigns replace the notion of “union” with “social movement.” Struggles for higher wages, fewer hours, and better benefits, become community issues, inherently broadening labor coalitions. These campaigns, which structure worker struggles as “community against employer” rather than “workers against employer” invite participation of community activists and students who will not directly benefit from the wage campaigns. But, unlike outside participation in union organizing, living wage campaigns do not rely on unions as the locus of

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190 Clawson, 180.
191 Clawson, 189.
change. Therefore, they make it possible to bypass worker participation in labor organizing altogether. As Clawson points out, “Typically living wage and anti-sweatshop struggles directly involve few if any of the workers to who the new policies would apply…they decide what the priorities should be.”

One example of a living wage campaign took place at Wesleyan University, an elite private university with a politically active and socially liberal student body. After participating in Union Summer, over twenty students formed a labor activist group on campus called USLAC (United Student Labor Action Coalition). In 1999, USLAC students found that some contracted janitors worked for less than seven dollars an hour without health benefits. Students immediately contacted SEIU local 531 to discuss the possibility of organizing those contracted janitors. Next, students went to talk to workers, providing them with information about the SEIU local and encouraging them to sign union authorization cards. During the struggle for Union recognition, students met with the University president, circulated petitions to support the janitorial staff (signed by over half the student body and many faculty members), and published articles in the student newspaper to publicize the issue. After Union recognition was achieved, students worked equally hard to win a preliminary

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192 Clawson, 187-188. Clawson refers to this group as “SLAC” (Student Labor Action Coalition), however, I use “USLAC” which is how the group is referred to in News articles surrounding the 1999 and 2000 campaigns.

193 The group is still active on Wesleyan’s campus.

194 In this way, Wesleyan students were actually more involved with workers than many other living wage campaigns, which do not utilize unions at all in securing living wages. (Clawson, 190)
contract. They wrote letters to the Board of Trustees, held large rallies around campus, and even staged a sit-in at the University Admissions Office.\textsuperscript{195}

This activism, while done with some worker-student communication, was designed, directed, and organized by students. For example, students presented worker concerns to the Board of Trustees. Moreover, those concerns were drafted and articulated by students \textit{and then} explained to workers. Therefore, the “worker concerns” students presented relied on their own interpretations of workers’ wants and desires. One USLAC activist explained that most of the workers understood the demands about a union contract, “and some workers understood the demands about the [Code of Conduct]… but most of them didn’t.” The notion that most workers did not understand the Code of Conduct, one of the two main demands students presented, demonstrates how removed workers were from the formulation of the demands students made on workers’ behalf. Another USLAC student mentions that while some workers did come to USLAC meetings, it was “more like they sat in on meetings rather than particpat[ed].”\textsuperscript{196} As with most living wage campaigns, Wesleyan janitorial workers did not directly control the demands students made on behalf of workers, nor were janitors central figures in negotiations with the University. The implications of this were not inconsequential. Olivia Debree, the USLAC campaign leader, when looking back on the campaign articulates: “I think actually in retrospect, that because of the way we organized we kind of reproduced this power relation, between people who have money, have an education, and those

\textsuperscript{195} These petitions and articles are available on the campaign website at <http://www.wesleyan.edu/uslac/ancientindex.htm> (last accessed on April 2, 2009).
\textsuperscript{196} USLAC activists as quoted in Clawson, 185-186.
who don’t, and us telling them what they needed.”

Thus, despite material outcomes of the campaign—higher wages for a handful of Wesleyan employees—the position of workers within a social hierarchy did not alter significantly.

Furthermore, Wesleyan students inserted themselves as mediators, acting as the link between workers and the University or workers and the union. It was USLAC students who set up bi-weekly meetings between the union and the janitors. This role as mediator even became institutionalized through the demands students drew-up. Along with higher wages, safe working conditions, and nondiscriminatory practices, students lobbied for a “Code Compliance Board” to enforce the Code of Conduct. This board, similar to the impartial arbitration boards that began during the Progressive Era, was to be made up of mediatory (neutral) bodies—two students and one faculty member. It is students and faculty who then gained the authority to oversee relations between workers and their employers.

The role of students as directors of living wage campaigns and mediators between employer-employee relations, along with the publicity student activism draws, means that living wage campaigns tend to center around students. While both the 1999 Union campaign and the 2000 Code of Conduct campaign received significant publicity on campus, articles written in the student newspaper only briefly mentioned workers direct opinions about the campaigns. Relative to students, janitors were rarely quoted directly and when a janitor was quoted, it was often an

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197 Olivia Debree as quoted in Clawson, 191.
199 Clawson, 187.
opinion about how they felt about students’ activism. Thus, it was students, their opinions and voices, that took center stage. One participant in a University of Vermont (UVM) living wage campaign, when asked whether workers or worker opinions were represented in the most recent protest answered, “A few workers came out physically to support us…[and] through other workers we know that they do support us.” This student referenced worker involvement on behalf of the students instead of worker involvement on behalf of the workers themselves. The idea that workers “supported” the UVM students (whose campaign was designed to support the workers) positions students as the focus of the protest. This reference by a UVM activist poignantly demonstrates the ways in which the structure of living wage movements, because they do not rely on workers struggling for themselves, tend to sideline workers within their own movements. It is affluent and well-educated activists who determine which issues deserve attention and what constitutes adequate results. Even if these activists work to defend workers, their work, because it focuses on student power on behalf of workers, does not rearrange the class hierarchies that already exist.

Furthermore, USLAC’s focus on janitors instead of other non-unionized campus workers, inevitably comments on student’s ideas of who needs helping. USLAC activists often invoked the idea of “economic justice” as a reason to support

\footnote{200 See the Wesleyan Argus Articles posted on USLAC’s campaign website: <http://www.wesleyan.edu/uslac/ancientindex.htm> (last accessed on April 2, 2009). Many of the janitors did not speak English very well, which, coupled with the accessibility of students on campus presumably contributed to the student-centric nature of Wesleyan Argus articles. It is partly for reasons like this that students typically become the center of living wage movements.}

\footnote{201 Aliza Gordon, e-mail to the author, November 13, 2007.}

\footnote{202 Clawson, 189.}
paying janitors a living wage. In a letter to the editor, USLAC asserted, “we categorically oppose poverty wages on this campus.” And yet, there existed (and still exists) a whole other group on campus being paid less than a living wage—students themselves. Students, whether on work study or not, who worked in dining halls, libraries, the athletic center, did not (and still do not) get paid what they themselves considered to be a living wage. These students were not unionized, nor did they receive any health benefits. And yet, students did not include themselves or their friends in their struggle for higher wages. I do not highlight this inconsistency in order to argue that students and janitorial workers should be seen as the same group, or to argue that the exploitation of the janitorial staff was in some way “equal” to that of students. Rather, USLAC’s failure to incorporate students into their demand for higher wages and better benefits makes clear some of the assumptions middle-class students make about what groups need help. Moreover, assumptions like this are not just made about campus workers. Labor activism taken on by students and educated members of the middle-class does not generally focus on more undeniably middle class unions—such as teacher unions, graduate student unions, engineer unions etc. These assumptions end up feeding into existing class hierarchies.

Attempts at labor movement revitalization over the last several decades have, by and large, relied on middle-class activists working on behalf of laborers. It is

204 Jonathan Cutler brought this inconsistency to my attention in his course Paternalism and Social Power at Wesleyan University (Fall 2007).
expected that well-educated organizers are the ones able to direct union organizing campaigns and mediate between rank-and-file workers and their employers. This expectation is not surprising, when considered within a history of middle-class labor activism that has always upheld class hierarchies. For some time now, socially minded members of the middle-class have worked within working-class organizations and attempted to forge cross-class solidarity. Consequently, middle-class labor activism, centered on benevolence and aiding the under class, does not ultimately dismantle, reverse, or re-organize, structures of power that permeate labor relations.
Conclusion: Students and Wages

For a long time now middle-class activists have used labor organizing as a way to promote social justice. Reformer women in the Progressive Era sought to form solidarity around gender while others wanted to rationalize industrial relations. Later, during the 1960s, students worked to instigate widespread democratic reform. And now, young activists from the educated elite take jobs or summer intern positions with unions as a way to work toward a more “just” society. Always, though, middle-class activists maintained, and continues to maintain, a discourse of benevolence. Middle-class labor activists work on behalf of a more exploited and marginalized class. Socially minded middle-class individuals and groups continue to cross class lines in order to join a working-class cause—the organization the United States labor force.

There are, however, and always have been, terms of middle-class activism. Help does not come without a price. Through their activism, middle-class activists promote values and behaviors characteristic of their own class position. Cooperation, discipline, production, participatory democracy, and rational order are factored into a positive vision for industrial relations and union structures. Meanwhile, moral ideologies of intellectual development, modest consumption, and hard work are suggested, encouraged, and sometimes forcibly enforced for those rank-and-file members with whom middle-class labor activists work. Thus, helping workers has also been about putting into place certain social structures and moral ideologies—both of which do not always coincide with securing more for workers. Notions of
“justice” oftentimes replace traditional labor language of “larger returns.” As the Ehrenreichs put it, “Professional Managerial Class radicalism emerges out of PMC class interests, which include the PMC’s interest in extending its cultural and technological hegemony over the working class.” Middle-class labor activism reinforces middle-class interests even as it functions under the premise of worker power, worker freedom, and worker assistance.

For these reasons, developing real solidarity with workers proves difficult. Even within cross-class alliances, the middle-class shows attitudes of condescension and elitism toward working class laborers. These alliances, then, uphold the hierarchies that proclaim the dominance of the “expert activist” over the “untrained masses.” Moreover, class hierarchies that exist within the current labor movement largely remain unacknowledged and unexamined. Instead, notions of “solidarity” and “alliance” with the working class render the cultural aspects of class oppression non-existent or unimportant. While middle class labor activists spend time analyzing, publicizing, and working to change the material inequalities of working class laborers, those activists do not focus on connections between their own activism and cultural class inequalities.

Thus while some may argue that cross-class alliances have positively affected the material conditions of workers over the last century, those benefits still sit within larger structures, including new union structures themselves, that subordinate workers to both the capitalist and middle class. In an attempt to tame and contain worker struggles within certain boundaries, middle-class labor activists promoted discipline,

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205 Ehrenreichs, 42.
cooperation, rational order and production for workers, consequently reproducing worker subordination. And, by and large, middle-class activists have had a significant effect on working class organizations. They have taken over many top union positions as well as grass-roots organizing jobs. Workers, meanwhile, become further removed from the center of union organizing, making it more difficult for them to collectively voice opinions that are not filtered through middle-class mediators.

What then, is the alternative to middle-class labor activism that reproduces capitalist class relations? Some scholars and activists advocate for working through class differences within labor coalitions by making sure that middle-class activists emphasize rank-and-file leadership development, community involvement, and direct communication with workers. For example, Steve Early criticizes new union strategies that welcome student activists without question. But, he supports unions that utilize students outside the rank and file to restore worker power and train rank-and-file leaders. This stance acknowledges some of the difficulties with cross-class labor organizing while allowing for the possibility of student-worker alliances that genuinely support worker causes and worker empowerment. Early’s opinion, however, fails to acknowledge that any worker-student alliance where middle-class students work on behalf of workers assumes the working class needs help and the middle class can help. Moreover, forming worker-student alliances only within working-class organizations means that middle-class organizers bring in their own opinions, interests, and visions to working-class groups. Students’ classed

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206 Early, “Membership Based Organizing.”
upbringing, which influences their interests, behaviors, and desires, cannot be put aside in their work with working-class laborers. The history of middle-class involvement in labor organizing demonstrates the inability of students to shed their class background in order to join with workers. And thus working-class movements transform to take into account these middle-class visions, assumptions and values.

There is however, another alternative that has yet to receive considerable attention by liberal minded, educated youth and their liberal minded professional counterparts. This alternative requires middle-class students to examine their own position as laborers, themselves part of an increasingly bureaucratized capitalist system that constricts both their autonomy and freedom. Focusing on the plight of “poor” and “exploited” workers draws attention away from the ways in which students themselves are affected by institutionalized structures that determine the conditions of work for students. As discussed earlier in Chapter 2, this presumption is not entirely new. Some student activists during the 1960s began to examine their own position as laborers in a capitalist system. They called attention to the increasing bureaucratization of universities, pointing out that schools had become “knowledge factories” designed to produce an army of professional and managerial workers for capital’s use.\(^\text{207}\)

Many people dismiss the concept of student subordination, pointing to the numerous privileges elite students, professionals, and managers enjoy within the nation’s social, political and economic system.\(^\text{208}\) To quote SDS member Carl

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\(^{207}\) Breines, 100-102.
Davidson, “Students are oppressed. Bullshit. We are being trained to be the oppressors and the underlings of oppressors.” But, the issues at hand are not just about discerning a hierarchy of oppression. The reality that working-class laborers are subordinated both materially and culturally by the members of the middle and upper class (through capitalist structures)—that they make less money, enjoy fewer educational and professional choices, and are forced, at times, to struggle for survival—does not negate the reality that members of those middle and upper classes also function within capitalist structures. These systems produce cultural norms and institutional mechanisms that subordinate individuals to the larger system. Understanding and combating the systems that give rise to one’s own subordination may be a more effective way for middle-class activists to score significant changes for labor relations without promoting the hierarchical class relations that reproduce themselves during middle-class involvement with working-class labor organizing.

To do this, middle-class activists must first examine their own position within labor relations. George Caffentzis, in his piece “Throwing Away the Ladder: The Universities In The Crisis,” draws attention to the “lingering distinction between economic base and ideological superstructure.” Because the University falls under the category of ideology superstructure, Caffentzis argues, “it appears to be external to the basic dynamic of class struggle in capitalist society.” Typically, left leaning activists, surrounded by the university, mark themselves off from the economic base where class struggles over wages, hours and working conditions ensue. Even during

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209 Carl Davidson as quoted in the Ehrenreichs, 37.
the 1960s, when students attacked universities for authoritarianism and bureaucracy, they never connected these complaints explicitly to notions of wages and waged/unwaged labor. Thus, groups like SDS always searched for an economic base (workers, the poor and unemployed) to either lead or to follow.211 They never sought change without the notion that their had to be some “other” that would be the tangible bodies behind their ideological impetus. The distinction between an economic base and ideological superstructure, however, fails to acknowledge that intellectual and ideological work done at universities functions as unwaged labor for capital. Universities are not external to class struggle.

The reality is that students are workers, forced to sell their labor.212 More precisely they are unwaged workers. As Caffentzis puts it:

What goes on at the university is work, namely schoolwork. It is work done to prepare to do more work…[I]t is unwaged work. Its unwaged character gives it an appearance of personal choice and its refusal and equally personal even “psychological” symptom. So ironically, though students consider themselves, at times, the most advanced part of the working class they still belong to the ranks of unwaged workers.213

During college, students prepare to move into the labor market. They learn technical skills that can lead to greater productivity at future jobs (writing, organizational, communication, analytical, research, and computational skills are just some examples). But they also learn self-discipline, self-control, self-regulation—all of which become extremely valuable for employers looking for productive, well-behaved, hard-working, and malleable laborers. (As Caffentzis notes, “What good to capital is an engineer who speaks Chinese and can solve differential equations if he

211 Caffentzis, 135.
212 Caffentzis; The Ehrenreichs.
213 Caffentzis, 141.
never shows up for work?”214) This training, from the standpoint of capital, remains costless. Students, however, often leave school thousands of dollars in debt; tuition at private universities now sits at about 50,000 dollars per year, with tuition at well-ranked public universities not all that much behind. Graduate students especially, who often work as teaching fellows or adjunct professors, find themselves exploited by low wages, lack of benefits, inadequate job security, and poor working conditions. These students/university employees often get paid less than a “living wage” and receive little to no health benefits. Yet, they are responsible for more than half of the undergraduate teaching that goes on at large universities.215

Despite this reality, employers (including universities) take advantage of competition among students as a way to maximize labor hours at minimum cost. Many, if not most, students at elite universities take unpaid or low-paid internships as a way to gain access into the job market—a tactic not all that different from wage-laborers who bid against each other and drive wages down. Putting in time as an unpaid intern is, at greater frequency, being connected to securing decent jobs. Furthermore, the sacrifices students are asked to make for the sake of their career do not end when they finish school. For salaried employees, the forty-hour workweek has all but flown out the window. Recent graduates wanting to work only forty hours a week are easily replaced by those willing to work fifty, who are easily replaced by

214 Caffentzis, 140.
those willing to work sixty, even seventy hours a week. As with the case with
unorganized labor, there is always someone willing to work more for less.\textsuperscript{216}

Why is this relevant? Understanding student and professional work as waged
labor opens up new channels for labor organizing that have the potential to
significantly restructure labor relations within our capitalist society. When students
and professionals recognize how capitalist systems affect the conditions of their own
employment—their hours, wages, and conditions—they can mobilize in their own
name around work. Students and activists don’t have to find “others” in order to
combat capitalist class relations. Struggles over wages and hours already take place
at the university and in the realm of professional work.

Some groups have already discovered this. For many years professional
teachers have organized unions from which to advocate for better wages, hours,
benefits and working conditions. Even within this realm, however, teacher unions
struggle to reconcile what are considered by many to be contradictory ideas—namely
professionalism and unionization.\textsuperscript{217} Marjorie Murphey in her book on teachers union
titled \textit{Blackboard Unions: The AFT and the NEA 1900-1980}, writes that “Collective

\textsuperscript{216} Added to these issues of wages and hours are SDS’s previous complaints, namely political
and social alienation stemming from increasing bureaucratization of the entire nation,
universities included. Institutions of higher learning become places to secure an edge in the
job market rather then communities in which to experiment with personal and intellectual
growth. Grading, ranking, academic degrees, graduation requirements, and a whole slew of
other bureaucratic mechanisms—all of which connect with the prestige of a university
diploma, and therefore advantage in the job market—direct life at the university.
\textsuperscript{217} The National Labor Relations Act and U.S. Supreme Court reinforces this dichotomy. In
1980, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that full-time, tenure-track, faculty at private colleges
and universities have no legally protected right to organize because these faculty members are
“managers” not “employees.” (Gregory M. Saltzman, “Union Organizing and the Law: Part-
Time Faculty and Graduate Teaching Assistants,” in \textit{The NEA 2000 Almanac of Higher
Education} (2000): 43-55.). This mentality assumes that “managers” and “employees” are
mutually exclusive categories.
bargaining itself presented the [National Education Association] with its deepest concern; it was an ideological construct that fundamentally challenged the association’s long-cherished concepts of professionalism…the term [collective bargaining] itself was embedded in unionization.”

This quotation demonstrates the challenge NEA members and leaders faced in trying to function as a union while maintaining professional status. Here, “professionalism” and “unionization” (based in the practice of collective bargaining) function in opposition to one another.

Graduate student organizing has also seen a dramatic increase over the last fifteen years. Graduate students have been forming, or trying to form, unions at universities around the country. Yale, New York University, University of California, University of Wisconsin, and numerous other campuses have seen graduate students coming together to resist low wages, poor benefits, and unsatisfactory working conditions. These students make it clear that academic labor is labor. Yet students have seen considerable resistance. Even faculty members, many of whom support unionization in other realms, have resisted graduate-student organizing. Michael Berube in his essay “The Blessed of the Earth,” shows the way in which Yale faculty’s overwhelming opposition to a graduate student union connects to the idea the Yale, as a prestigious university, exists outside the realm of labor and unionization. There is resistance to seeing the University as a place of wage struggle. For middle and upper-middle class professionals, ideas of waged

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219 It may be worthy to note that discussions of graduate student organizing began in the 1960s around the Free Speech Movement and the anti-war protests (Robert and Gary Rhoads, “Graduate Employee Unionization as a Symbol of and Challenge to the Corporatization of U.S. Research Universities,” in *The Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 76. no. 3 (May/June 2005): 243-275).
labor remain connected to manual labor and the lower classes. The “unions are for them” mentality reinforces the presumed cultural and political superiority of middle-class intellectuals. Moreover, this mentality creates a barrier for progressive thinking about labor movement revival.

“Professionalism” and “unionization” no longer need to be viewed in contradictory terms. And “work” no longer needs to be associated with only manual labor. Students and professionals have the opportunity to engage in collective bargaining, much like workers have done for many years, demanding better wages (or in the case of unpaid internships, a wage) and fewer hours of work. This activism would pin-point, and potentially dismantle, the cultural ideology that often legitimizes the exploitation of laborers—namely the acceptance of work and production as the center of being. Refusal of long-hours, unpaid overtime, useless bureaucracy, personal mechanization, high tuition, and high loans, would be a first step to combating the capitalist culture that subordinates workers. For years now middle-class labor activists have encouraged workers to engage in labor struggles without realizing that members of the middle class can also refuse subordination at work. The question, as Kevin Mattson puts it: “[is] not a question of academics and labor but academics as labor.” The skills, the power, the central position of middle-class activists can be channeled to resist the domination of work and bureaucracy within a society where affluence should mean increased autonomy and the ability to develop interests outside the realm of waged work.

\footnote{Berube; Mattson. See Berube for a more detailed articulation of the reasons for faculty resistance to graduate organizing at Yale.}

\footnote{Mattson, 8.}
The implications of this activism could have potential benefits for other groups of workers as well. The interests of middle-class professionals looking to decrease hours and secure decent wages may intersect with certain working-class interests. For years, working-class labor unions have tried to find ways of increasing the demand for labor while decreasing the supply of workers. As mentioned briefly, the 30-hour workweek at 40-hours pay was one such campaign that functioned in this way. By refusing to work without pay and demanding shorter workweeks, students and professionals increase the number of salaried jobs available while decreasing the supply of labor hours. This refusal then opens up job markets previously closed off by students willing to work at unpaid internships and middle-class managers and professionals willing to work the hours of two jobs for the price of one.222

When members of the middle-class engage in labor organizing around their own interests and class position, they cease to work on behalf of the working-class, and therefore they do not, with their activism, reproduce the class hierarchies that position working-class laborers as dependent on middle-class training and leadership. The Ehrenreichs write “the left, which is now predominately drawn from the PMC, must address itself to the subjective and cultural aspects of class oppression as well as to the material inequalities; it must commit itself to uprooting its own ingrained and often subtle attitudes of condescension and elitism.”223 Acknowledging, analyzing, and critiquing ones own subordination may humble students and professionals even

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222 Parents who value spending time at home cultivating familial relationship also benefit from a movement that advocates for working fewer hours. Furthermore, this arrangement coincides with the interests of some feminists groups looking for a way to combat the reality that mothers (and fathers) wishing to work full-time are often pushed to the side by professional men and women who can put in more hours on the job.

223 The Ehrenreichs, 45.
as it empowers them. Constantly focusing on the political, economic, and social position of “other” groups, and organizing on their behalf, allows students to take on the role of “expert” organizer and turn away from the reality of their own situation. It allows students to feel free alongside workers who are not, to feel powerful beside workers who seem powerless, to feel unique next to workers who are part of the masses. Taking a look at one’s own position, may uncover ways in which these distinctions cease to be so clear. Considering the limitations of and potential power in one’s own social, economic, and political position becomes an effective way to create change, replacing the condescending and reforming nature of benevolent social work.
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