

When Workers Organized at Wesleyan University

by

Alexandra Ricks

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Abbreviations

AAUP *American Association of University Professors*

AFL-CIO *American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations*

AFSCME *American Federation of State, City, and Municipal Employees*

CWA *Communications Workers of America*

HERE *Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union*

ILGWU *International Ladies Garment Workers Union*

JfJ *Justice for Janitors*

JFO *Junior Faculty Organization*

NLRB *National Labor Relations Board*

OPEIU *Office and Professional Employees International Union*

SEIU *Service Employees International Union*

UAW *United Automobile Workers*

UNITE HERE *Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees- Hotel*

Employees and Restaurant Employees Union

USLAC *United Student Labor Action Coalition*

Timeline of Relevant Events at Wesleyan University

- 1949** Wesleyan University Board of Trustees purchases American Education Publications
- 1962** Board of Trustees approves “little university” plan
- 1965** American Education Publications sold to Xerox Corporation for 400,000 shares of Xerox stock
- 1967** Edwin Etherington replaces Victor Butterfield as University President
- 1968** Food Service operation subcontracted to Saga Food Services Inc.
- (November) Physical plant workers vote against joining AFSCME Council #4 in NLRB election
- 1970** Colin Campbell replaces Etherington as University President
- 1972** (January) Physical plant workers vote against joining Federation of University Employees/ HERE Local 35 in NLRB election
- 1973** (January) Physical plant workers vote against joining Connecticut Employees Union Independent of Middletown, HERE Local 35, or a Wesleyan Independent Union in NLRB election
- 1974** (October) Wesleyan University AAUP Chapter reconstituted
- (December) Secretarial/clerical workers certify Secretarial/Clerical Forum as official independent union in NLRB election
- 1975** Wesleyan administration enacts the Plan for Action, also termed the “Red Book Cutbacks”
- 1977** (May) Secretarial/clerical workers vote to join OPEIU Local 498 (soon absorbed into Local 153) in NLRB election
- 1978** (September 4-26) OPEIU Local 153 secretarial/clerical workers at Wesleyan strike for first contract

(November) Physical plant workers vote to join OPEIU Local 153 in NLRB election

1979 (November) Public safety workers vote against joining International Union of Plant Guard Workers of America in NLRB election

1982 (April) Saga Food Service workers join HERE Local 217 via card check agreement

1987 Marriott Hotel Corporation buys Saga Food Services

1988 William Chace replaces Campbell as University President

1989 Janitorial work subcontracted to Initial Cleaning Services

ARA (later called Aramark) replaces Marriott as food service subcontractor

1993 Grounds keeping work subcontracted to Stonehedge Landscaping

1995 Douglas Bennet replaces Chace as University President

1999 Initial Cleanings Services janitors at Wesleyan join SEIU Local 351 via card check agreement

2000 Justice for Janitors campaign wins janitors a first union contract

(Fall) American Building Management Industries (ABM) replaces Initial as janitorial subcontractor

2003 (April) Public safety workers vote to join United Federation of Security Officers in NLRB election

2007 Michael Roth replaces Bennet as University President

Bon Appétit replaces Aramark as food service subcontractor

2012 Sun Services replaces ABM as janitorial subcontractor

Introduction

At noon on September 1, 1978, many of the secretaries and clerical workers at Wesleyan University locked their desks and walked to the nearby Central Labor Hall with their personal effects—their family photos and their favorite pens—in hand, ready to walk off the job. These women, for they were almost all women, had been hit by the difficult financial times at Wesleyan and were desperate for affordable health insurance and wages that would support their families. This sense of urgency propelled them to join the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU), in May of 1977, but their representatives had met for eleven months with the college's administration without reaching an agreement on their first contract. On this Friday, about half of the University's 160 secretarial/clerical workers arrived at the local labor headquarters nervous, yet determined, and ready to consider the unthinkable: going on strike.

The OPEIU representative, Michael Thompson, sitting in front with rank-and-file leaders, Ruth Williams, Phyllis Tolman, Betty Lenth and others, called the meeting to order. They reviewed the situation. Despite being the only unionized sector of workers on campus, these women remained the lowest paid University employees. Years of negotiating with the administration as an independent union had barely changed the low wages, abysmal benefits, and arbitrary treatment they received. A year before, they had joined the OPEIU, yet they felt that the administration still disregarded their views and failed to recognize their contributions to the University. So a strike vote was called. By a show of hands, and with shouts of enthusiasm, the secretarial/clerical workers voted to strike until a first contract was

reached. After the lunch break, faculty looking for a typist to write up a memo, administrators hoping their secretary would find that receipt from last week, and supervisors expecting a cup of coffee found many of these women had left.

The following Monday, Labor Day, Wesleyan's 2,428 students were scheduled to register for their classes.¹ Administrators, temporary workers, and the secretarial/clerical workers who remained on the job scrambled to distribute and organize the packets of registration, housing, and tuition papers. Amidst the hectic registration activities, the striking workers calmly picketed in front of the Science Center, marching back and forth, holding posters, and singing and shouting out for respect and fairness. They continued these peaceful picket lines the next day, the following day, and for three more weeks until the administration's and union's bargaining committees settled an agreement for the first union contract at Wesleyan University.

The 1978 secretarial/clerical strike represented the climax of changing labor relations on Wesleyan's campus. Up until the late-1950s, the campus workers experienced a small, familial working environment that made them feel part of a community and a stimulating atmosphere despite their meager wages and benefits. The situation changed over the next decade. Rapid expansion of the University in the 1960s and the subsequent squeeze on its budget left the workers struggling to survive economically and feeling neglected by the administration.

It was in the context of these massive shifts in their working environment that activists among the Wesleyan workers took action. The secretarial/clerical workers

¹ David B. Potts, *Wesleyan University, 1910-1970: Academic Ambition and Middle-Class America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2015), 424.

paved the path, but this was only the beginning. In the four years following their strike, the physical plant and food service workers (successfully) and the faculty and professional librarians and public safety officers (unsuccessfully) all tried to remedy their situations through unionization as well. This thesis describes how these sectors all attempting to unionize in such close order represented an unprecedented occurrence and offers an explanation for why it transpired at Wesleyan University.

Historiographical Context

This narrative is constructed on the basis of interviews with actors from the time, archival documents, and supporting secondary source information. Through twenty-one in-person and phone interviews with students, administrators, union representatives, and workers, I gained information about the memories of those who experienced the events. Many interviewees, quite appropriately, reminded me that nearly forty years have passed since many of the key events and their memories may have faded.² However, I confirmed many of their recollections using a range of written primary source documents. Fortunately, Wesleyan University's Special Collections and Archives provided numerous collections of memoranda, fliers, reports, and personal letters related to the various sectors of employees and labor-related organizations on campus. In addition, articles from the time in several newspapers—including the local papers the *Middletown Press* and the *Hartford*

² Valerie Raleigh Yow provides guidance for gaining information from human memory despite its fallibility writing: "we can surmise that the narrator's testimony is possibly not true historically, but we may have evidence for a different kind of truth, perhaps a psychological truth for the narrator." in Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 2 (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005), 58.

Courant and student papers the *Wesleyan Argus* and the *Hermes*—contained extensive information. Finally, secondary sources from books, journals, and encyclopedias supplied guidance about larger historical trends and events.

This research complements a history begun by David Potts in his two-volume history of Wesleyan University: *Collegiate Enterprise in New England, 1831-1910* and *Academic Ambition and Middle-class America, 1910-1970*.³ While Potts describes the financial and academic decisions made at Wesleyan, he neglects to include the stories of the workers who, by remaining on campus decades longer than any student, reflect the character of the University in a substantial way.

In contrast to this thesis, studies by labor historians and economist have focused on the union activity of one specific sector at a college. Secretarial and clerical union organizing has been a favorite topic of scholars interested in the intersection of gender and labor, especially because it occurred during the rise of the Women's Movement in the 1970s. Unions of university clerical workers have garnered particular attention, which economist Richard Hurd has written about in a general way.⁴ Thus, his work provides context for the events at Wesleyan. Several other scholars address the need for specific case-studies by focusing on the clerical organizing on other campuses, including Toni Gilpin et al.'s analysis of Yale

³ David B. Potts, *Wesleyan University, 1831-1910: Collegiate Enterprise in New England* (Hanover, NH; Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1999); *Wesleyan University, 1910-1970: Academic Ambition and Middle-Class America*.

⁴ Richard W Hurd and Gregory Woodhead, "The Unionization of Clerical Workers at Large Us Universities and Colleges," *Newsletter of the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions* 15, no. 3 (1987); Richard W. Hurd, "Learning from Clerical Unions: Two Cases of Organizing Success," *Labor Studies Journal* 14 (1989).; "Organizing and Representing Clerical Workers: The Harvard Model," in *Women and Unions: Forging and Partnership*, ed. Dorothy Sue Cobble (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 1993).

University's clerical strike in 1984-85, John Hoerr's study on the struggle for a clerical union at Harvard University throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and Richard Freeman's chapter on the New York University clericals' failed unionization attempt in 1971.⁵

Furthermore, various scholars, like Gordon Arnold, Nicholas Gier, Frank Kemerer and J. Victor Baldrige, and Everett Ladd and Seymour Lipset, have devoted their attention to the thriving faculty union movement in the 1960s and 1970s.⁶ In contrast, only one researcher, Julius Getman, addresses the unionization of university food service workers; he explains the trajectory of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE) at Yale University in *Restoring the Power of Unions: It Takes a Movement*.⁷ Even less literature exists that pertains specifically to either campus public safety officers or physical plant workers, of which there is almost nothing.

While the research of the aforementioned scholars provided historical context and the potential to make useful comparisons to Wesleyan University, these studies could not offer a complete model for this thesis because, as far as my research has extended, the events at Wesleyan appear to be unique. The unionization attempts by nearly all the workers on one campus—from the janitor who swept the classroom to

⁵ Toni Gilpin et al., *On Strike for Respect: The Clerical and Technical Workers' Strike at Yale University, 1984-85* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988); John P. Hoerr, *We Can't Eat Prestige: The Women Who Organized Harvard* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).

⁶ Gordon Arnold, "The Emergence of Faculty Unions at Flagship Public Universities in Southern New England," *Labor Studies Journal* 22, no. 4 (1998); Nicolas Gier, "The Phenomenal Rise of Faculty Unions," *Rendezvous: Idaho State Journal of Arts and Letters* 13, no. 1 (1978); Frank R. Kemerer and J. Victor Baldrige, *Unions on Campus* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bas Publishers, 1975); Everett Carlil Ladd and Seymour M. Lipset, "Unionizing the Professoriate," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 5, no. 6 (1973).

⁷ Julius G. Getman, *Restoring the Power of Unions: It Takes a Movement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

the professor who taught in it—within a short span of only five years represent a remarkable phenomenon that occurred on no other campus.

Why Wesleyan?

Why did these events come to pass at this small liberal arts college in central Connecticut? An explanation for this apparent uniqueness may be found in several distinctive characteristics of Wesleyan that potentially shaped the expectations and actions of the campus workers and produced these unusual happenings. I propose that the value of family, the importance of the educational mission, the emphasis on creating change, and the high expectations for the college's future at Wesleyan University may have propelled these events.

First, the presidency of Victor Butterfield, from 1943 to 1967, was formative to the University and its labor relations. His emphasis on maintaining a small, tight-knit community was clear in his involvement in every aspect of the campus; for instance, he knew the name of every student and many workers. In order to preserve the sense of the campus as a community or even a family, he fought to keep the school's size small when many other colleges expanded after World War II. This emphasis on family created an expectation among the workers that the administration had their best interest in mind and heightened their disappointment when this was revealed as false.

Second, Butterfield established a precedent of maintaining the focus on undergraduate teaching. Also after World War II, universities nationally began to focus more on research, but Wesleyan maintained its educational mission as the

prime goal because of Butterfield's conviction. This orientation elevated the importance of students and faculty to the administration, as compared to at other universities, making them potentially potent allies for the workers when their conditions worsened.

Third, in order to compensate for a weak reputation compared to its wealthier, more selective rivals, Williams and Amherst Colleges, Wesleyan represented itself as an innovative school that encouraged students and faculty to be creative, push boundaries, and create change in the world. Departments brought in cutting-edge thinkers to speak and teach at Wesleyan, and the University soon gained a reputation as particularly liberal and, eventually, radical. This rhetoric affected not only the students and faculty but also some of the workers as well. Therefore, although problems arose for workers on every campus, employees at Wesleyan were particularly inclined to act.

Finally, especially during the campus labor tumult in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the workers at Wesleyan were affected by a disappointment of high expectations shared by the entire campus. In the mid-1950s and early 1960s, through a combination of revenue sources, Wesleyan University temporarily became the richest school (per-student) in the entire nation, and the campus community began to imagine Wesleyan becoming the "next Harvard."⁸ Unfortunately, through the late 1960s and early 1970s, it became clear that overly ambitious expansions along with national inflation had caused severe overextension of the budget. As a result, the administration implemented major cutbacks on campus. The high expectations for a

⁸ Nathanael Greene, Interview by author, Wesleyan University Public Affairs Center, January 22, 2016.

financially stable future disappointed Wesleyan workers and contributed to their desire for change.

This unique combination of characteristics explains why, despite the University's conformity with some larger patterns, the workers at Wesleyan behaved in remarkable ways. Throughout the chronological sequence of four chapters, this thesis describes how distinctive qualities of Wesleyan University contributed to the apparently unique labor events that transpired. The story began in the 1950s and 1960s, a period in which many of these characteristics developed and which, in retrospect, seemed to be a "golden age" for workers at Wesleyan.

Chapter One

The Golden Age at Wesleyan University

“I have been very happy in my department and in the University. Although we have a lower salary scale than in some industries, it is a congenial place to work, and there are many fringe pleasures.” –Department Secretary Cornelia Ingram⁹

In the 1950s and 1960s, many workers at Wesleyan University shared the sentiment with Cornelia Ingram that, despite the flaws, the tight-knit community and intellectual environment made their work on campus fulfilling. In this period, President Victor Butterfield cultivated a community atmosphere among administrators, faculty, staff, and students that emphasized the mission of educating the small, homogenous body of undergraduates over research. This milieu encouraged workers like Ingram to overlook low compensation and appreciate that they worked at a university that supposedly treated them like family and exposed them to the creative intellectual environment that Wesleyan prided itself on.

Then, when fortunate investments rocketed Wesleyan's endowment to the highest ratio per student in the country in the mid-1960s, the administration pushed to make Wesleyan a "little university" by expanding the student body, the academic programs, and the grounds. The Wesleyan community began to believe that the University would rise to the ranks of top universities in the nation and, concurrently, workers began to see Wesleyan as an employer that could afford stable jobs and solid compensation. The characteristics of Wesleyan that developed in this period—the focus on community, the emphasis on the undergraduate educational mission, the

⁹ Cornelia Ingram to J.R. Ryan, April 26, 1977, Vertical Files, Secretarial-Clerical Forum (bulk) 1975-79 Wesleyan University, Special Collections and Archives (hereafter referred to as Secretarial-Clerical Forum Vertical Files).

push for creating change and innovation, and the presence of high expectations for the school's future—permeated the campus and influenced the workers as well. The image of Wesleyan that developed in this period would linger in the workers' minds later, in the 1970s, when discontent began to surface, and it would come to have profound influence in shaping future labor relations on campus.

The Golden Age of the American University

At Wesleyan University, the steadfast presence of President Butterfield from 1943 to 1967 preserved Wesleyan's focus on its liberal arts education, kept enrollment numbers low, and maintained the primacy of teaching, even as universities nationally began to emphasize research. Like other Wesleyan administrators that followed, Butterfield was committed to upholding the liberal arts educational mission with an emphasis on prioritizing excellent undergraduate teaching. To maintain this, he tried to keep the student body small, first capping it at 750 and, eventually accepting an increase to slightly more than 800 students total in 1960.¹⁰

This emphasis on teaching and preserving a small school clashed with the trends in academia at the time. Nationally, U.S. universities were changing in the first two decades following World War II during what is frequently called their "golden age." The war generated interest in vast military research and funding from the GI Bill, which catalyzed the growth of universities; the number of universities skyrocketed from several hundred before the war to over 2,000 in 1960 and many

¹⁰ Potts, *Wesleyan University, 1910-1970: Academic Ambition and Middle-Class America*, 252.

institutions also increased their student enrollment.¹¹ Furthermore, private and public sources alike began to direct money into major universities for research, which encouraged colleges to shift their focus from teaching to research.¹² By contrast, Donald Meyer, emeritus professor, later highlighted the distinct nature of Wesleyan, when he arrived in 1967, saying, "the one aspect of Wesleyan that I felt was very strong—namely, [was] its concentration on teaching as distinguished from research."¹³

This focus on the educational mission meant that the morale of students and faculty—the key elements in fulfilling that mission—mattered to the administration. Additionally, because Wesleyan did accept large grants to focus on research, student tuition and alumni donations comprised an important segment of the University budget; this essential financial role also elevated the importance of the voices of alumni, parents, and, especially, students. Consequently, the focus on the educational mission at Wesleyan meant students held great sway with the administration, a fact that would prove useful for campus workers in their later struggles with the administration.

In addition to increasing the importance of the students, the small size of the University supported another distinct aspect of the Wesleyan environment promoted in the Butterfield years: its strong sense of community. Community was an integral

¹¹ Frederick Rudolph and John R. Thelin, *The American College and University: A History* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 486.

¹² Robert A. Nisbet, *Teachers and Scholars: A Memoir of Berkeley in Depression and War* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1992), 201.

¹³ Donald Meyer, interview by Nancy Smith, March 26, 2014.

part to what Emeritus Professor Richard Slotkin called "Wesleyan's idealized self-image,"¹⁴ and it manifested in two ways: familial and collegial rhetoric.

The idea that Wesleyan was a "family" imbued the way that employees, students, and administrators conceived of the University during this era. This ideal was exemplified by the holiday parties and summer picnics the administration sponsored for its employees in the period, giving them small gifts of appreciation, like bags or towels, and bringing everyone together to foster the sense of community.¹⁵ The community did, in fact, grow stronger from these events, as former grounds worker, Dave Hall, recounted, "back when I first started here [in the early 1970s], we had a director of Physical Plant, [Chuck Donahue], and if he walked across the campus, he'd stop and talk to anybody in the crews, call them by name, ask how their family was."¹⁶ These examples make clear that to many members of the Wesleyan staff, the sense of community on campus was real. As Hall framed it, "this always was a family, more or less."¹⁷

In addition to the familial values, the Wesleyan rhetoric of community also included the principle of collegiality. This value, however, applied only to the faculty due to their integral role in the educational mission. Collegiality, or the idea that a university's academic community should share decision-making power over the institution's policies and administration, became widespread at universities across the

¹⁴ Richard Slotkin, interview by author, phone, December 4, 2015.

¹⁵ David Hall, interview by author, Wesleyan University Exley Science Center, November 19, 2015.; Georgianne Leone, interview by author, Middletown, CT, January 25, 2016.

¹⁶ Hall, interview by author, November 19, 2015

¹⁷ Ibid.

country in this period.¹⁸ Because the consensus among university administrators supported the principle of collegiality, Wesleyan's administration also embraced it in theory. Indeed, faculty did have a role in the hiring, promotion and tenure processes and in developing academic programs. However, many professors recalled President Butterfield subverting the collegial process and hiring faculty on his own, thus undermining the principle of collegiality.¹⁹ Despite this reality, the stated ideal of collegiality at Wesleyan created the expectation among faculty members that their status on campus meant that their input mattered. Under Butterfield, they grudgingly accepted the President's interventions, but in the administrations that followed, they increasingly came to expect the realization of the collegial principle. Similarly, the other campus workers hoped that the familial values promoted by the administration would continue to be upheld in the future as well.

Wesleyan on Top

In the 1950s and 1960s, Wesleyan's Board of Trustees made a series of fortunate financial investments that catapulted the University into a prime financial position among colleges. This enabled its leaders to spend the necessary amounts to transform Wesleyan into a true university—meaning an institution with graduate programs—which caused expansions in programs, grounds, budgets, and enrollment. Accompanying these vast changes was an attitude, promoted by the administration and taken up across campus, in favor of innovation and pushing boundaries.

¹⁸ Larry G. Gerber, *The Rise and Decline of Faculty Governance: Professionalization and the Modern American University* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014), 80.

¹⁹ Phillip Pomper, Interview by author, Middletown, Connecticut, January 19, 2016.; Greene, Interview by author, January 22, 2016.

Wesleyan had not previously been in such a remarkable financial position. Like other U.S. universities, Wesleyan in the late 1940s had a low endowment. The Board of Trustees tried to remedy this situation by acquiring American Education Publications which became part of the Wesleyan University Press.²⁰ The Press began producing significant revenues from its popular children's educational tool *My Weekly Reader*, and, along with a large donation from alum George Davison, Wesleyan's endowment grew enormously in the mid-1950s. This growth was aided by a national economy that was generally prospering in an almost unprecedented way since the beginning of World War II. Across the country, real wages increased, disposable income became more readily available, consumer culture thrived, and stock prices soared, creating financial stability for many individuals and businesses.²¹

Even in these booming times, Wesleyan leaped ahead in the early 1960s when the Board traded rights to *My Weekly Reader* for 400,000 shares of Xerox stock that quickly skyrocketed in value. This increase put Wesleyan's endowment to student ratio above that of any other college or university in the nation.²² Consequently, as former Vice President of University Relations Robert Kirkpatrick recalled, many members of the Wesleyan community began to develop "expectations and the belief that the University had unlimited funding,"²³ aspirations that would later cause them disappointment.

²⁰ Potts, *Wesleyan University, 1910-1970: Academic Ambition and Middle-Class America*, 300.

²¹ Christopher Conte et al., *Outline of the U.S. Economy* (Washington, D.C.: US Department of State, Office of International Information Programs, 2001).

²² George Keller, *Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 45.

²³ Robert Kirkpatrick, interview by author, Wesleyan Usdan University Center, March 31, 2016.

Prior to attaining this sudden wealth, Wesleyan's reputation had lagged, in terms of admissions credentials (College Board test scores and class ranks) and facilities, in comparison with its rivals Williams and Amherst Colleges. The administration was able to use the news funds to close the gap and attempt to spring ahead by fundamentally changing the institution.²⁴ Against President Butterfield's wishes to keep Wesleyan an intimate liberal arts college, the Board of Trustees voted in 1962 to move the college towards a "little university" structure, principally meaning an introduction of graduate programs, more pressure for faculty to receive grants, additional research, and greater expectations that professors would publish.²⁵ This transition began during Butterfield's last years as President and was solidified during the short tenure of President Edwin Etherington, from 1967 to 1970.²⁶

It is important to understand that this shift towards becoming a "little university" was not trivial, but rather, as Richard Slotkin described, it represented "an institutional structure that [was] in the midst of a huge transformation."²⁷ The first change was in academics, with the introduction of graduate programs in several natural sciences and ethnomusicology. Then, to house these programs, several buildings were erected, including several student dorms, a science building, and a Center for the Arts complex.²⁸ Unsurprisingly, these expansions caused huge increases in the University budgets; for instance, between the 1951/52 and 1960/61

²⁴ Potts, *Wesleyan University, 1910-1970: Academic Ambition and Middle-Class America*, 308.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 309.

²⁶ "Office of the President: Presidents of Wesleyan," Wesleyan University, <http://www.wesleyan.edu/president/pastpresidents/index.html>.

²⁷ Slotkin, interview by author, December 4, 2015.

²⁸ Potts, *Wesleyan University, 1910-1970: Academic Ambition and Middle-Class America*, 385.

school years, the undergraduate education budget alone increased eighty-two percent.²⁹

Lastly, by 1967, the student body had increased to about 1,400, double the size of a decade earlier.³⁰ The administration, staff, and faculty increased as well, though not quite in step. The result of this rapid expansion was significant diversification of the campus, a cutting-edge process that took place before similar efforts at peer institutions.³¹ Previously, both the students and faculty members were almost exclusively middle or upper-class, white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant, small-town, and (in the case of the faculty) Ivy-league-educated men.³² In this period, as Professor Emeritus Phillip Pomper described, “all of this began to change within a few years when there was a general revolution... We began to look more like the world around us.”³³ Blacks, Jews, and, in 1969, women arrived on campus in significant numbers for the first time, exemplifying the massive changes occurring on Wesleyan’s campus.³⁴

These changes were encouraged by an emerging aspect of Wesleyan’s identity as what this thesis refers to as an innovative university. The diversification and coeducation of the student body were a prime example of what Kirkpatrick described

²⁹ Ibid., 316.

³⁰ *Wesleyan University, 1831-1910: Collegiate Enterprise in New England*, 242.

³¹ Kirkpatrick, interview by author, March 31, 2016.

³² Slotkin, interview by author, December 4, 2015.; Pomper, interview by author, December 7, 2015.; Nisbet, *Teachers and Scholars: A Memoir of Berkeley in Depression and War*, 70. The Executive Committee of the Junior Faculty, “Report to the Junior Faculty on Tenure at Wesleyan,” May 1, 1968, Junior Faculty Vertical Files, Wesleyan University Special Collections and Archives (hereafter referred to as Junior Faculty Vertical Files), 15.

³³ Pomper, interview by author, December 7, 2015.

³⁴ Other than a brief period between 1872 and 1909, Wesleyan University was a men’s college until it finally coeducated permanently in the late 1960s. Potts, *Wesleyan University, 1910-1970: Academic Ambition and Middle-Class America*.

as, “a streak of independence and difference” at Wesleyan.³⁵ In addition, among students the 1950s witnessed a nascent culture of activism and a desire to change the world, as black students organized for rights on and off campus, activists protested against Vietnam, and many began to engage in community service off campus.³⁶ This student mobilization began to develop Wesleyan’s reputation as a progressive institution.

Although student activism was emerging on college campuses throughout the country in this time period, Wesleyan University was more unique in its academic experimentation compared to similar institutions, according to Professor Frederick Rudolph, then a professor at rival Williams College.³⁷ By bringing vanguard scholars in their fields—such as composer John Cage in the 1950s and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1964—to campus to teach and lecture, faculty and administrators tried to make Wesleyan “cutting edge,” in the words of Pomper or full of “innovation in the curriculum,” in the words of Slotkin.³⁸ Although the administration principally advocated this climate for student and academic life at Wesleyan, the workers were also impacted by these values, as the following chapter will make clear.

Work at Wesleyan in the Golden Age

In keeping with the growth and prosperity throughout campus, the workers at Wesleyan University generally enjoyed a relaxed atmosphere, respectable working conditions, and, in the faculty’s case, impressive compensation. Although some

³⁵ Kirkpatrick, interview by author, March 31, 2016.

³⁶ Potts, *Wesleyan University, 1910-1970: Academic Ambition and Middle-Class America*, 395-400.

³⁷ Rudolph and Thelin, *The American College and University: A History*, 492.

³⁸ Pomper, interview by author, December 7, 2015.; Slotkin, interview by author, December 4, 2015.

workplace issues arose, workers in this period tended to be more accepting of their situation. Generally, the employees of Wesleyan expressed satisfaction with their jobs in this era, from the zenith of Butterfield's cozy campus in the 1950s through the initial phases of the "little university" in the 1960s.

In contrast to the old-guard of the faculty described earlier, the staff at Wesleyan certainly were not usually of the "WASP" male crowd; although most were white, they came from a broad range of ethnicities, from Polish to Italian, and some were black as well. Also unlike the faculty, the majority was Catholic. Most hailed from Middletown or nearby towns, and, in this period, did not have a college education (although increasingly more Wesleyan employees in all sectors did come to have college degrees).

In the early 1950s, the fifty secretarial/clerical workers were almost exclusively women, most of whom spent the entirety of their day typing. They held jobs such as administrative assistant, switchboard operator, clerk typist, postal clerk, and library assistant, usually under the management of a male faculty member or supervisor.³⁹ By contrast, the physical plant workers were nearly exclusively men. This sector included all workers related to facilities and maintenance on campus. With a broad range of education and skills, from custodial workers and groundskeepers doing manual labor to the skilled workers of building and mechanical

³⁹ Potts, *Wesleyan University, 1910-1970: Academic Ambition and Middle-Class America*, 571.; Leone, interview by author, January 25, 2016.; J.R. Ryan to Members of the Secretarial/Clerical Forum, Departmental Heads and Administrative Officers, "National Labor Relations Board Election," May 4, 1977, Wesleyan University Special Collections and Archives Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU), Local 153 Vertical File (hereafter referred to as OPEIU Vertical File).

trades, the physical plant employees kept the campus physically running smoothly night and day.⁴⁰

Unlike Physical Plant, the male public safety officers mainly worked nights as guards patrolling the campus. Lastly, Wesleyan's food service workers who, beginning in 1968, were in fact employed by a subcontracted firm called Saga Food Services Inc. rather than by Wesleyan University, also had a variety of social backgrounds.⁴¹ The demographics of each food service position differed, with cooks tending to be young men planning on leaving quickly, older women serving, and older Italian men handling utility.⁴² Like the faculty and students, over time these sectors diversified as well, but even as Wesleyan transitioned from a small college to a brand new "little university," in this period, the workers remained fairly homogeneous.

Looking back on the 1950s and 1960s at Wesleyan, workers especially recalled the pleasant work environment of a small, tight-knit college campus. Although the situation began to change with the introduction of the "little university" the workers did not yet begin to feel the adverse impacts in this period. In addition to the family atmosphere described above, one of the most praised features of the Wesleyan workplace were the perks; later, Joan Halberg, a secretary, shared that she appreciated what she called the "the Really Small Things: admission to all athletic events; use of swimming tennis, and ice skating facilities; library; theater and art

⁴⁰ Hall, interview by author, November 19, 2015.

⁴¹ Subcontracted labor will be discussed in depth in Chapter four, as it became most common starting in the 1980s. Records about why the Wesleyan administration decided to subcontract their food service operation at such an early stage are not available; Doug Herbet, "Amidst the threats of a strike, Saga officials bemoan their place at Wes," *Wesleyan Argus*, March 27, 1987.

⁴² Jeffery Hill, interview by author, Wesleyan University Usdan University Center, January 8, 2016.

exhibits.”⁴³ Other workers emphasized the academic environment being surrounded by preeminent scholars, curious students, and frequent academic events; one commented, “I have ideal working conditions, and I greatly enjoy the intellectual atmosphere, working with the professors in the department and with enthusiastic students. To me, it is an ideal job.”⁴⁴ Appreciation of this ambience appears to have been almost universal across the sectors.

Secondly, the working conditions received general praise, as most workers did not feel intense pressure or scrutiny of their work. The secretarial/clerical and food service workers joined the physical plant employees in believing that work in this period was more flexible compared to similar jobs with a nearby company or contractor. In a 1977 article published in the *Hermes* student newspaper, thirteen physical plant workers discussing this era held the general consensus that they received less supervision, and thus felt less pressure, than those doing their jobs outside of the Wesleyan setting.⁴⁵ Moreover, the physical plant employees in that article praised their job for its comparatively strong job security, because the administration had never laid off large numbers of employees, even during the Great Depression.⁴⁶ Finally, workers frequently recalled that their supervisors and the administration addressed their needs in a more empathetic manner in this period, a viewpoint which Ruth Williams, later a key union leader, voiced, saying, “management was available and known by name, and if one had a problem there was

⁴³ Joan G. Halberg to Members of the Secretarial Staff, May 20, 1977, Secretarial-Clerical Forum Vertical File.

⁴⁴ Cornelia Ingram to J.R. Ryan, April 26, 1977, Secretarial-Clerical Forum Vertical File.

⁴⁵ Steven Filler and Andy Polsky, “Inside Physical Plant: The Outside World Closes In,” *Hermes*, March 3, 1977.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

somebody willing to listen and do what they could in a human way to solve it.”⁴⁷

Altogether, these circumstances made the day-to-day experience of working at Wesleyan pleasant.

Most importantly, some employees—namely the faculty—were compensated quite impressively. Historian of higher education George Keller explains that in the 1960s Wesleyan stood out among peer institutions in terms of faculty compensation, writing, “Wesleyan was widely known as the country club of the American professoriate.”⁴⁸ David Potts describes how, when Wesleyan’s wealth began to grow in the mid-1950s, faculty compensation was first to rise, in order to attract premier innovative scholars. For example, in 1959/60 Wesleyan’s faculty salaries were the top among ten small colleges including similar schools like Williams, Amherst, and Swarthmore.⁴⁹ In addition to high pay, this stellar compensation package included significant retirement contributions to TIAA-CREF accounts, full tuition benefits for children, a mortgage assistance program, and travel funds for research. Evidently, in this period the administration compensated the faculty in accordance with the important role it played in the University’s educational mission.

Unfortunately, unlike the other enjoyable features of working at Wesleyan University, the staff (and faculty members who had not received promotions) did not share this generous compensation package with the full professoriate. These groups included more women, ethnic minorities, and un-educated or un-skilled workers. As such, this inequality reflected the national context, as the economic prosperity in the

⁴⁷ Ruth Williams, “Imagine What It’s Doing to Us,” *Wesleyan Argus*, September 6, 1978.

⁴⁸ Keller, *Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education*, 45.

⁴⁹ Potts, *Wesleyan University, 1910-1970: Academic Ambition and Middle-Class America*, 355.

1950s and 1960s did not evenly affect all workers. This era saw uprisings from marginalized groups from the Civil Rights struggles to the Women's Movement that fought this inequality. One such injustice was that in 1963 the wealth of the average white American adult was \$136,221 as compared to the average \$18,893 of people of color, less than fourteen percent the wealth of whites. Similarly, women workers were economically marginalized in comparison to men, earning about sixty cents for every dollar a man earned, on average, in the mid-twentieth century.⁵⁰

The following chapter will detail how, in keeping with this pattern, the wages and benefits for these workers at Wesleyan were abysmal in this period. They also experienced other issues of disrespect and increased workloads, especially in the 1960s with the advent of the “little university.” However, in this era most of the workers did not yet protest these problems.

This lack of agitation prior to the 1970s may be attributed to many workers accepting the tradeoff of lower wages for the positive working environment, their household economic makeup, and the larger political context. Although other staff members, in food service and physical plant, also were accepting of the situation, the secretarial/clerical workers were the key actors in the events at Wesleyan and, thus, their justifications were most telling. First, Connie Rich, a secretary at the time, later described to a reporter how the more appreciative work environment in this period counterbalanced the lower pay: “Many years ago when I worked in the Dean’s office, I used to work overtime and never claimed it because they needed my time and

⁵⁰ Claudia Dale Goldin, *Understanding the Gender Gap: An Economic History of American Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 62.; Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Women and Unions: Forging a Partnership* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 1993), 25.

appreciated it when I gave it.”⁵¹ Clearly, to some extent, the atmosphere made Rich and other workers like her inclined to accept low compensation.

Moreover, in this period specifically, female workers may have been more likely to accept their low wages because they were predominantly secondary wage earners, in some cases even the wives of Wesleyan professors.⁵² Ruth Williams described this trend, saying, “Working at Wesleyan was a prestigious and respectable way for local women to supplement family incomes.”⁵³ Indeed, in the 1950s and 1960s non-married mothers and divorced women were rarer than a mere decade later; from 1966 to 1977 the divorce rate increased from ten to twenty-one (per 1,000 married people) and births to non-married mothers increased from 5.3 percent in 1960 to 30.1 percent of all births thirty years later.⁵⁴ These trends explain why at Wesleyan fewer women were working to support their entire families at this time.

Lastly, workers were more accepting of the situation because, although the Civil Rights Movement had already emerged in the 1950s, the Women’s Movement did not take off until the 1970s. Thus, the emergence of a true sense of rights consciousness—where marginalized people felt entitled to fight for their rights—may not have reached the workers at Wesleyan University in the early stages of these movements. The older workers especially were used to things as they were and did not think to challenge the situation. Former secretarial/clerical worker Georgianne

⁵¹ Dan Wolf, Laura Gibbons, Anne Field, Nancy Winkelman, Anne Wilson, Paul Hammer, “Overworked and Underpaid?” *Hermes*, April 6, 1978, 5.

⁵² Ellam, Interview by author, March 1, 2016.

⁵³ Dan Wolf, Laura Gibbons, Anne Field, Nancy Winkelman, Anne Wilson, Paul Hammer, “Overworked and Underpaid?” *Hermes*, April 6, 1978, 5.

⁵⁴ Robert Lerman and Stefanie Schmidt, “An Overview of Economic, Social, and Demographic Trends Affecting the Us Labor Market,” (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 1999), 16.

Leone confirmed this, describing how she and her coworkers felt: “You think, ‘it’s not so bad.’ Until you start thinking,” and when the staff expanded and new workers arrived, she continued, “those kids, the younger generations, they [made] you think a little more.”⁵⁵ As such, before the early 1970s, the workers at Wesleyan University were at peace with their situation; the atmosphere and working conditions were generally appreciated and, while only the faculty enjoyed great compensation, the other workers had reasons to accept their situation.

Conclusion

The 1950s and 1960s at Wesleyan University set the stage for the labor conflicts that would later arrive on campus. Initially, employees appreciated the working conditions at the small school with a premium placed by President Butterfield on community, the educational mission, and creating innovative change. This environment cultivated a sense among the workers that they were truly part of a family that cared about them and, in the case of the faculty, a workplace that valued their collegial input. Even when the school grew larger with the influx of financial resources arriving in the late-1950s, the workers held on to expectations that Wesleyan would continue to provide a first-rate working environment, and, more importantly, they shared the hopes of the rest of the campus community that the University would continue to lead the nation in its financial situation. With expectations set so high, it is not surprising that soon, in the 1970s, the employees of Wesleyan University were smacked with disappointment.

⁵⁵ Leone, Interview by author, January 25, 2016.

Chapter Two **“You Can’t Eat or Wear Congeniality”**

“The good old majority would suggest (and have, many times) that you can’t eat or wear congeniality and intellectual atmosphere, and the nice professors and enthusiastic students won’t pay our bills because they’re too busy trying to keep up with their own!” –Secretarial/Clerical Forum Core Committee⁵⁶

As these secretaries and clericals expressed, by the 1970s, workers were no longer willing to accept lower wages in exchange for the pleasant atmosphere at Wesleyan University. Overextension of resources from the implementation of the “little university” plan exacerbated by nation-wide inflation, elevated oil prices, and plummeting stock values hurt the University’s finances. Suddenly, the assumption that the Wesleyan administration cared about the workers as part of a “family” was put to the test. Unfortunately, the new President, Colin Campbell, was faced with repairing Wesleyan’s desperate financial situation, and the workers’ well-being was not the top administrative priority. A series of cutbacks provoked worker critiques of the wages, benefits, increased workloads, and, for the secretarial/clerical workers, a lack of respect from the administration. These cutbacks, along with a rising consciousness among the secretarial/clerical workers of their rights as women workers, led to an increased sensitivity to injustice among Wesleyan’s employees. This would soon push some of them to take action. Several sectors of employees formed groups to informally discuss compensation and working conditions with the administration, but the frustrating conversations left the workers wanting more.

⁵⁶ The Core Committee to Members of the Secretarial/Clerical Forum, 1977, Secretarial-Clerical Forum Vertical Files.

Financial Decline

The context of the international economic recession in the mid-1970s that devastated the financial situation of companies and workers across the U.S definitely affected Wesleyan University, but the financial problems on campus began prior to that. Severe overspending on programs and building projects in order to realize the “little university” plan caused sky-high budgets beginning in the late 1960s which were only exacerbated by soaring inflation in the following decade. When the recession hit, the administration had to spend more and more on operational costs while, simultaneously, the campus workers’ wages lost spending-power. The situation was becoming dire when President Colin Campbell assumed responsibility in 1970, so he quickly made cuts in order to salvage Wesleyan’s financial future.

In the late-1960s, the enormous infrastructural and program expansions planned by Presidents Butterfield and Etherington pushed the limits of even Wesleyan’s impressive endowment. When Butterfield retired in 1967, although the endowment was worth \$162 million and far above the per-student endowment of rivals Amherst and Williams, he was worried, for it had already begun to decline from the peak in 1965.⁵⁷ Operating costs at the University from the expanded academic programs combined with high costs for new construction created a strain on its budget. The depth of the situation became apparent when, right before leaving in 1970, President Etherington dipped into the endowment—a practice that only occurs in desperate times—for \$14 million dollars in order to cover the expenses.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Potts, *Wesleyan University, 1910-1970: Academic Ambition and Middle-Class America*, 425.

⁵⁸ Keller, *Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education*, 45.

The situation got worse at Wesleyan when, from 1973 to 1975, the U.S. experienced a recession that pummeled the previously thriving post-war economic situation. This recession differed from previous economic downturns in the U.S. because it was characterized by simultaneous high inflation and high unemployment, which economists had previously assumed were mutually exclusive. The unemployment rate reached 8.5 percent as the result of layoffs, which, fortunately for the workers, Wesleyan University avoided. On the other hand, the inflation rates as high as 9.3 percent in 1975 meant that workers everywhere had wages that did not keep up with inflation.⁵⁹ It also meant that building projects, like the large ones occurring at Wesleyan, were rapidly rising in costs. These negative economic trends hurt all over the country, and they exacerbated the already declining situation at Wesleyan University.

President Colin Campbell arrived at Wesleyan at a difficult moment. He was presented with high budgetary costs, an unusually high faculty-to-student ratio, pathetic fundraising income, increasingly high financial aid expenses and operating costs that could not be funded completely by university revenues.⁶⁰ Campbell remarked decades later, "It was really a time when belt-tightening was going to be inevitable."⁶¹ Upon his arrival, Campbell, along with two newly-hired financial administrators, undertook a campaign to reign in the University's financial situation, which continued to decline, more slowly, over the course of the decade until the endowment reached its low point, in 1980, of \$45 million.⁶² This poor financial

⁵⁹ "Bureau of Labor Statistics," United States Department of Labor, <http://www.bls.gov/>

⁶⁰ *Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education*, 45-46.

⁶¹ Colin Campbell, interview by author, phone, January 11, 2016.

⁶² Potts, *Wesleyan University, 1910-1970: Academic Ambition and Middle-Class America*, 425.

position ended the aspirations of those who believed that Wesleyan's financial situation and academic reputation would continue to grow to ultimately rival that of Harvard.⁶³ Unfortunately, the measures taken to correct Wesleyan's financial woes came at the cost, to varying extents, of the students, faculty, and staff.⁶⁴

The cutbacks took the form of Campbell's Plan for Action, or Red Book Cutbacks, of 1975. This plan was a conservative one that aimed to reduce administrative costs by ten percent and decrease withdrawals from the endowment by one third over time by cutting administrative costs, reducing maintenance expenditures, and increasing the number of students. Although the administration and the Board of Trustees made their plans openly, announcing ideas in a series of publications called the "Rainbow Papers," the decision was unilateral.⁶⁵ The faculty, like other employees, worried that the Plan prioritized budgets over its needs, yet not even a motion of no confidence in the Plan for Action passed in a faculty meeting made a difference.⁶⁶ The new priority of the University became efficiency, which a memo from Treasurer Richard Greene made clear—he wrote: "Wherever it has not already taken place, staffing should be reduced to the minimum level necessary for the effective functioning of the department."⁶⁷ This shift placed pressure on the employees and disappointed their expectations that their needs would be addressed.

⁶³ Nathanael Greene, interview by author, Wesleyan University Public Affairs Center, January 22, 2016.

⁶⁴ Campbell hired two former-financial executives to help: Richard Greene served as the Vice President for Administration and Finance and Burton Sonenstein became the Treasurer. Together, these three administrators undertook the program of cutbacks.

⁶⁵ The Orange, Green, and Purple Books preceded the Red Book and explained the problem, provided details and suggested solutions to the problems; Campbell, interview by author, January 11, 2016.

⁶⁶ Tjip Walker, "Red Book Loses Faculty's Support," *Wesleyan Argus*, May 12, 1978, 1.

⁶⁷ Richard W Greene to Academic and Administrative Department Chairmen, Wesleyan University Special Collections and Archives, Wesleyan University Chapter American Association of University Professors Records, Box 1 (hereafter referred to as AAUP Records).

No Longer a Family

The financial problems forced Wesleyan's employees to come to the realization that their workplace was not a community and their employer did not—or at least could not afford to—value the “family” over its economic situation. As high expectations came crashing down, the workers became more and more ready for change.

The first sign was that the sense of community began to decline with the initialization of the “little university” plan. On the one hand, the increased number of people on campus precluded the possibility that the president could know every student's name as Butterfield previously had.⁶⁸ Beyond merely increasing the numbers, the “little university” philosophy put an increased emphasis on business. Foremost, there was a greater emphasis on the productivity of the faculty and staff. For instance, the faculty had to focus on professionalism, or, as Professor Emeritus Henry Ebel phrased it, “short-term research and the provision of services to the larger community—especially the governmental, business, and military establishments.”⁶⁹ Also, as Potts explains, when Butterfield hired his first Executive Vice President, John W. Macy Jr., it represented, “a first step in the transition of Wesleyan's administration from a family-like model toward that of a small bureaucracy,”⁷⁰ a transition process that was more fully realized during President Etherington's

⁶⁸ Paul Schwaber, interview by Nancy Smith, June 4, 2015.

⁶⁹ Richard Slotkin, “Junior Faculty Organization: A Brief Narrative, 1967-81,” July 2013, Junior Faculty Organization Box 1, JFO History 1967-81 Folder, Wesleyan University, Special Collections and Archives, 1. (hereafter referred to as JFO Boxes); Henry Ebel to The Wesleyan Faculty and Members of the Education Committee of the Board of Trustees, “The Junior Faculty's Report on University Issues,” October 5, 1967, Junior Faculty Vertical Files, Wesleyan University Special Collections and Archives (hereafter referred to as Junior Faculty Vertical File).

⁷⁰ Potts, *Wesleyan University, 1910-1970: Academic Ambition and Middle-Class America*, 359.

expansion of the administration.⁷¹ As a result, by the end of Butterfield's era in 1967, he felt that, as an administrator, he was no longer as close as he once was to the rest of the community. Beyond his own interactions with the students, faculty, and staff, Butterfield was concerned that Wesleyan in general was becoming more impersonal as it grew.⁷²

Workers felt intense disappointment at this decline in the sense of community because of the longstanding rhetoric that they were part of the campus family. This rhetoric was common on university campuses but at Wesleyan in the Butterfield era there was salience and truth to it. However, sociologist Arne Kalleberg describes how, nationwide in the 1970s, relationships between employers and their employees were becoming more "market minded" as workers' value and decisions over their livelihoods were determined increasingly by the dictates of the market.⁷³ Alone, this form of decision-making could have been hard for workers, but years of hearing the familial rhetoric created an expectation that when times got tough, the administration would be there for them. However, as early as 1971, a physical plant employee identified an "increasing lack of faith in the goodwill of the University toward its employees."⁷⁴ This comment captured the disenchantment among Wesleyan employees as their grievances over low compensation, declining working conditions, and decreasing input in their situation began to pile up.

⁷¹ Goksel, Mahoney, Kilbourne, Downs, and Field, "Secretaries Discuss Decline in Working Environment."

⁷² Potts, *Wesleyan University, 1910-1970: Academic Ambition and Middle-Class America*, 413.

⁷³ Arne Kalleberg, *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States, 1970s-2000s* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011), 83.

⁷⁴ "Letter to the Editor: Union Organizing," *The Wesleyan Argus*, November 12, 1971, 7.

Secretarial/Clerical

This increasing discontent was greatest among the secretarial/clerical workers who, in the 1970s, became increasingly aware of their position as the lowest-paid and, in their eyes, least-respected sector of workers on campus. As was explained in the previous chapter, many of their problems were not new but in this period their emerging sense of women's consciousness and new economic realities made the problems more noticeable.

First, the national Women's Movement encouraged and enabled women to both work outside the house more and to speak up for themselves in the workplace. Although poor women and women of color had been working for wages for a long time, women of all backgrounds were increasingly jointly or solely financially responsible for their families because more women chose to get divorced or have children without getting married.⁷⁵ As such, their jobs were important to them, not supplemental income, or "pin-money" as employers often attested.⁷⁶ Furthermore, younger workers at Wesleyan tended to be more affected by these ideologies and outspoken about the issues; most likely describing Wesleyan, one college clerical worker said, "there is a girl who just graduated who works here... she tells [the boss] off. But, of course, she's one of the new breed. You have older women who never

⁷⁵ Marge Larkin, "Fairness and Respect: The Office Employees Union at Fordham University," *The Bronx County Historical Society Journal*: 55.; Dorothy Sue Cobble, "'A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm': Workplace Feminism and the Transformation of Women's Service Jobs in the 1970s," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 56, no. 56 (1999): 30.

⁷⁶ Anna Lane Windham, "Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing and the Origins of the New Economic Divide (1968-1985)" (University of Maryland, College Park, 2015), 314.

think of things like that. They've just been too intimidated."⁷⁷ This new awareness centered around three issues: compensation, inequality, and disrespect.

First, the secretarial/clerical workers came to realize that their compensation, in terms of wages and benefits, was both inadequate and below that of other people doing similar work at nearby insurance companies and government offices. Wages were low, raises were small, and the Red Book policies precluded real cost of living increases in a period of the highest inflation in decades. Several interviewees expressed their sense of gratitude that they were not single women who had to survive on their wages alone but recalled that many women had to support families on these low wages.⁷⁸ Retired secretarial/clerical worker Verna Ellam recalled:

[The administration] would say to us, "you're just working to supplement the family income"... but we did have some women who were single mothers. They were not supplementing the family income, this was the family income. And they needed to make more money."⁷⁹

In addition to these grievances over wages, fringe benefits, from health care to educational scholarships, were a major issue for the staff in this period. For instance, secretarial/clerical workers felt that their health insurance provided service that was low quality, too expensive, and precarious, as the administration had the discretion to change the plan at any time.⁸⁰ In a letter from a group of secretarial/clerical workers

⁷⁷ Although the University is not specified, the journal was published at Wesleyan University, and the article was written right after the Secretarial-Clerical workers unionized, suggesting that the worker is indeed at Wesleyan.; Anne Field, "'A Secretary Could Run the Whole Show'," *Politics and Education* 1, no. 1 (1977).

⁷⁸ Deborah Sierpinski, Interview by author, Wesleyan University Downey House, November 15, 2015.; Leone, Interview by author, January 25, 2016.

⁷⁹ Ellam, interview by author, March 1, 2016.

⁸⁰ Lee Messina, "For Wesleyan Strikers, The Struggle Paid Off," *Hartford Courant*, November 8, 1984, c7. ; Ruth Williams, "OPEIU History of Wesleyan Unionization," 1982 1, Secretarial-Clerical Vertical Files.; The Publicity Committee to Members of Sec/Clerical Subject: Responses to Joan Halberg's Memo, May 25, 1977, Secretarial-Clerical Forum Vertical Files.

to university administrators, the secretaries argued that their benefits were subpar in comparison to those of both public and private sector workers in the area. They wrote, “a survey comparing Wesleyan’s health insurance plan to that of several other major Middletown employers.... reveals that Wesleyan is not competitive, either in benefits or employee cost,” because Wesleyan’s plan lacked a dental and drug riders while requiring an employee contribution.⁸¹ Similarly, Wesleyan’s secretarial/clerical workers contrasted their benefits to those of college workers at peer institutions, noting, “We pay one-third of our medical insurance. (Dartmouth College pays fully for the employee... with a dental rider.”⁸² Overall, between low wages and weak benefits, the secretarial/clerical workers did not feel they were compensated fairly.

Second, these workers noted a major downside to the flexibility of their jobs: management also had flexibility. This resulted in inequality among the secretarial/clerical workers. Wesleyan University did not consistently have a personnel director to handle employment and worker issues, a situation that persisted until Robert Massa arrived in 1972.⁸³ One issue this caused was the lack of institutionalized pay grades, which produced large discrepancies in pay among the secretaries. Each department hired its own workers and had total discretion over

⁸¹ This study compared eight public and private sector employers: American Education Publications, City of Middletown, Connecticut Bank and Trust, Connecticut Valley Hospital, Jarvis Products Corporation, Middlesex Memorial Hospital, Pratt and Whitney Aircraft, and Southern New England Telephone Company. The Core Committee to Members of the Task Force, May 8, 1974, 1, Secretarial-Clerical Forum Vertical Files.

⁸² The Core Committee to Secretarial/clerical Forum Members, May 26, 1977, Secretarial-Clerical Forum Vertical Files.

⁸³ “Wes Secretaries Voice Complaints About Salary Inequities And Low Staff Wages,” *The Wesleyan Argus*, November 2, 1966, 5.; Charley Blaine, “Custodial Workers Defeat Union’s Bid To Organize,” *The Wesleyan Argus*, January 27, 1972, 9.; “Robert A Massa Named Wesleyan Personnel Chief,” *The Wesleyan Argus*, February 11, 1972, 1.

wages; this resulted in variances up to thousands of dollars per year.⁸⁴ Georgianne Leone recalled her frustration at this, saying, “I was there how many years and people would come in making more money than me... That’s why [the union campaign] started. There people who were coming in and making more money when we were there ten, fifteen, twenty years.”⁸⁵

Additionally, the lack of uniformity resulted in distinct treatment for secretaries in each department. Not only were punishments different, but they were unregulated, causing the women to fear for their job security. For instance, while some supervisors communicated with their workers what needed to be improved, others chose simply to dismiss them; in 1966, one secretary was fired with one day’s notice.⁸⁶ Furthermore, some women had more accommodating bosses who would allow them days off to take care of sick children or to leave early in the snow while other supervisors insisted that their workers stay.⁸⁷ The University administration was aware of this faulty system—they were looking into a solution for the better part of the 1960s yet did not implement a solution.⁸⁸

Last but not least importantly, the secretarial/clerical employees experienced a working atmosphere that disrespected and devalued them because they were

⁸⁴ “Wes Secretaries Voice Complaints About Salary Inequities And Low Staff Wages.”; Larkin, “Fairness and Respect: The Office Employees Union at Fordham University,” 59.; The Core Committee to Members of the Task Force, May 8, 1974, 1, Secretarial-Clerical Forum Vertical Files.

⁸⁵ Leone, Interview by author, January 25, 2016.

⁸⁶ “Wes Secretaries Voice Complaints About Salary Inequities And Low Staff Wages.”; Messina, “For Wesleyan Strikers, The Struggle Paid Off.”

⁸⁷ Ellam, interview by author, March 1, 2016.

⁸⁸ “Wes Secretaries Voice Complaints About Salary Inequities And Low Staff Wages.”; Edwin D Etherington to Faculty, Administration and Staff Re Personnel Program, October 18, 1967, Junior Faculty Box 2.

women.⁸⁹ Sociologist Karen Kleeh-Tolley describes how gender shaped women's sense of grievance in this period:

The clerical workers were paid low wages and denied benefits, respect, protection, and opportunities for autonomy and promotion... [This] reflected patriarchal beliefs about the value of women's work and assumptions about the status of women as supplementary wage earners.⁹⁰

Verna Ellam recalled her impression of this at the time saying of the administrators, "back then we used to call it male-chauvinism. And they definitely were."⁹¹ The secretarial/clerical workers had always been seen in the traditional, demeaning box of the "office wife" or "helper," but, in part from the impact of the Women's Movement, the sense of grievance over the sexist attitudes began to boil over.⁹²

In addition to the consciousness brought by the Women's Movement, secretarial/clerical workers began to feel the disrespect more acutely as the "little university plan" increased the size of the student body and faculty and, in turn, their workloads. To this effect, Professor Slotkin observed, "departmental chairs at Wesleyan were not elected for their administrative expertise, so the administrative assistants of the departments tended to be in effect the people running the departments, for everything except curriculum."⁹³ The knowledge that their work was so crucial exacerbated the disrespect the workers felt from the administration's

⁸⁹ Windham, "Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing and the Origins of the New Economic Divide (1968-1985)," 315.; Williams, "OPEIU History of Wesleyan Unionization," 1.; Cobble, "'A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm': Workplace Feminism and the Transformation of Women's Service Jobs in the 1970s," 1.; Hoerr, *We Can't Eat Prestige: The Women Who Organized Harvard*, 50.

⁹⁰ Karen Kleeh-Tolley, "Women Organizing: Action and Reaction in the Formation of a Clerical Union," *Humanity and Society* 17, no. 4 (1993): 461.

⁹¹ Ellam, interview by author, March 1, 2016.

⁹² Jean Tepperman, *Not Servants, Not Machines: Office Workers Speak Out!* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), 40.

⁹³ Slotkin, interview by author, December 4, 2015.

undervaluation of their work. For one, they resented that the mostly-male physical plant workers earned more money even though their work required similar levels of education.⁹⁴ Secondly, they objected to the lack of advancement opportunities. The secretaries hoped to have the chance to study job-related courses at nearby education institutions, like Middlesex Community College, in order to move up the ranks, but the administration repeatedly denied their requests for this benefit.⁹⁵ These workers wanted their hard work rewarded in a significant way, which is clear in one workers' emphatic statement, "rather than pat my head, I'd rather see a title and a raise for what I do so efficiently."⁹⁶ Clearly, then, the secretarial/clerical workers saw the lack of respect they received reflected in their wages, benefits, and loose job descriptions.

Physical Plant

Although the men employed in the physical plant received higher wages and benefits than the secretarial/clerical workers, they too experienced a crunch of increased workloads and pay that did not keep up. The Red Book cuts severely affected their work, as it planned a \$1,000,000 cutback from the department's budget over the course of four years and called for the elimination of thirty positions, increased workloads for those who remained, and minimal wage increases.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ The Core Committee to Secretarial/clerical Forum Members, May 26, 1977, Secretarial-Clerical Forum Vertical Files.

⁹⁵ The Core Committee to Members of the Task Force, May 8, 1974, 1, Secretarial-Clerical Forum Vertical Files.

⁹⁶Field, "'A Secretary Could Run the Whole Show!'"

⁹⁷ Stephen Gavin, "The Red Book Cuts: B&G- Dirtier Dorms & Courtyards," *Wesleyan Argus*, October 3, 1975.

For example, the custodial staff faced increased pressure, as new construction doubled the square footage of the University by the mid-1970s even though the staff size was reduced.⁹⁸ Many workers balked at the increased workloads, as one janitor explained, in 1972, “the janitorial force is faced with a crisis of the first magnitude whereby most all janitors are expected to produce ten to twenty percent more work than a year ago.”⁹⁹ Similarly, the grounds crew was pushed harder in this era. Dave Hall, a former grounds worker, recalled “You had to prioritize and do the areas that were most important... You had to do more. You had to move faster. And you didn’t have a lot more time to do it in.”¹⁰⁰ Overall, these changes negatively affected the physical plant workers’ perception of their jobs.

Also like the secretarial/clerical workers, the physical plant workers suffered problems with their compensation, both in the actual value and in the system of distribution of raises. To begin with, the workers identified flaws in the labor grade classification system that determined their pay; almost none of the positions were deemed fit for the top of the pay scale. Even the most highly paid tradesmen objected that their wages did not keep up with the rising cost of living and were already lower than those of similar institutions nearby, such as Middletown’s Connecticut Valley Hospital.¹⁰¹ Further, they recognized disparities in who received raises, an issue that they attributed to favoritism. Due to these issues and others, such as supervisor

⁹⁸ Dave Garrow, “Custodial Employees File Union Petition,” *The Wesleyan Argus*, November 16, 1971, 1.; Steven Filler and Andy Polsky, “Inside Physical Plant: The Outside World Closes In.”

⁹⁹ “A Service to Wesleyan Employees: Letter to Wes Employees,” *The Wesleyan Argus*, October 10, 1972, 2.

¹⁰⁰ Hall, interview by author, November 19, 2015.

¹⁰¹ Chris Mahoney, “Wes Worker Support Wooed By Competing Independents,” *The Wesleyan Argus*, October 20, 1972, 1.

harassment, high insurance premiums, and exams required for promotions, many of the physical plant workers took second jobs and their sense of dissatisfaction grew.¹⁰²

Faculty

Despite the fact that the faculty held a very distinct position on campus to that of the staff—in that they were valued as an integral part of the educational mission and, thus, held the promise of faculty governance—they too had labor complaints. Many of these issues were not utterly different from those of the secretarial/clerical and physical plant workers; most faculty members objected to changes in their wages and benefits, hoped for more say in their situation, and desired better promotional opportunities.

In the 1960s, the salaries of Wesleyan's faculty that had ranked among the very top in the nation began to slip in comparison to other universities.¹⁰³ The faculty objected to this and to the decline in real spending power of their salaries due to high inflation.¹⁰⁴ For example, in 1974, they received seven percent raises, although the faculty cited numbers of an expected 8.8 percent inflation rate for the upcoming year, meaning their earnings would not keep up with rising costs.¹⁰⁵ Most importantly, faculty—especially in the social sciences and humanities—objected to what they termed “salary inversion,” or inequality among their salaries resulting from new natural science hires being offered more than many long-time professors in other

¹⁰² Ibid.; “A Service to Wesleyan Employees: Letter to Wes Employees.”; Steven Filler and Andy Polsky, “Inside Physical Plant: The Outside World Closes In,” *Hermes*, March 3, 1977.

¹⁰³ “Report Has Faculties’ Pay Down,” *Hartford Courant*, June 27, 1976, 5.

¹⁰⁴ “Faculty Petition Asks Inflation Adjustment Made Semi-Annually,” *The Wesleyan Argus*, October 4, 1974, 1.; Report Has Faculties’ Pay Down,” *Hartford Courant*, June 27, 1976, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Donald B Meyer to President Campbell, Jan 28, 1974, AAUP Records.

divisions to promote the research goals of the “little university.”¹⁰⁶ Further, the faculty decried reductions in their fringe benefits, including their mortgage support plans, research funds, and retirement benefits. For example, in 1975, the faculty disputed the Wesleyan University administration’s determination that it needed to cut the contributions it made to the faculty’s TIAA-CREF retirement accounts.¹⁰⁷

In addition to their compensation, faculty members in this period resented what they saw as a lack of input in the administration of the University and their own working conditions. They had tolerated their limited power since Butterfield assumed the presidency in 1943, but after his departure in 1967, faculty became increasingly dissatisfied under his successors Etherington and Campbell. In the 1970s, there was what Slotkin described as “a backlog of resentment,” as members of the faculty increasingly felt that their opinions were not respected, especially regarding finances.¹⁰⁸ In this period, they came to realize that their influence was not significant enough to bolster their own financial situations against the hard economic times; Professor Emeritus Philip Ennis represented this awareness from the faculty writing to colleagues: “just a few facts about my own financial situation underscore the way the administration giveth and taketh.”¹⁰⁹ Ultimately, it became clear that despite the rhetoric of collegiality, faculty governance was a tenet second to financial realities.¹¹⁰

Finally, among the group known as junior faculty—both assistant professors and associate professors who had received tenure but had not been promoted to full

¹⁰⁶ Slotkin, interview by author, December 4, 2015.

¹⁰⁷ Meeting of the Wesleyan Chapter AAUP at CFA Cinema, October 9, 1974, AAUP Records.

¹⁰⁸ Slotkin, interview by author, December 4, 2015.; Pomper, interview by author, January 19, 2016.

¹⁰⁹ Donald B Meyer to President Campbell, Jan 28, 1974, AAUP Records.

¹¹⁰ Gier, “The Phenomenol Rise of Faculty Unions,” 26. Arnold, “The Emergence of Faculty Unions at Flagship Public Universities in Southern New England,” 62.

professor rank—the issue of discriminatory tenure and promotion policies aroused great ire. Richard Slotkin describes the bigoted tenure practices that excluded Italians, Jews, Asians, blacks, and women in the 1960s. As the senior faculty participated in making the decisions about who received tenure, the junior faculty protested that these practices were bigoted, inconsistent, and inequitable on the part of a few administrators and senior faculty.¹¹¹ Slotkin further explained the views of the junior faculty saying, “we blamed an ‘adjudicating oligarchy’ of senior faculty (our ‘polite’ term for Old White Christian Gentlemen) for enforcing the ‘cultural insularity’ of Wesleyan by eliminating those it deemed culturally or socially incompatible.”¹¹² These grievances from junior faculty piled on to the complaints about compensation and input shared by the entire faculty.

Food Service

Although the food service workers were employed by the subcontracted company Saga Food Service Inc. since 1968, they experienced many of the same issues as the direct Wesleyan University employees. First, many of the workers were not paid enough to support their families and rarely, if ever, received raises. As a result, it was common to work one or two other jobs in addition to the food service at Wesleyan.¹¹³ Moreover, the company policies did not allow workers opportunities to increase their pay; as eventual union leader Audrey Carta described in a later *Wesleyan Argus* article, in the 1970s, “You could work sixteen hours one day and

¹¹¹ Slotkin, “Junior Faculty Organization: A Brief Narrative, 1967-81,” 1.; Jim Drummond, “Wes Tenure Practices Attacked By Report From Junior Faculty,” *The Wesleyan Argus*, May 3, 1968, 1.

¹¹² Richard Slotkin, “The JFO: 1967-74,” (Unpublished manuscript, 2012).

¹¹³ Hill, interview by author, January 8, 2016.

then not be allowed to work the next day so you wouldn't get any overtime pay.”¹¹⁴ Second, Carta also described the sense of disrespect that some of the Saga employees experienced, saying management treated them like “a piece of dirt” and called the workers “you.”¹¹⁵ Most universally, the food service workers struggled with their dreadful health insurance benefits, which were expensive yet not comprehensive. Management was not responsive to their entreaties for improvements, which cook Jeffery Hill described saying, “we kept asking them for better insurance. And they kept saying ‘we’ll see if we can look into it, we’ll see if we can look into it.’ But the bottom line was they never would.”¹¹⁶ Overall, although they did not have the same employer, the food service workers shared many of the grievances about compensation, respect on the job, and input into their situation with the other Wesleyan University workers.

Informal Discussions or Negotiations?

In the mid-1970s, hoping that family and, for the faculty, collegiality really meant something at Wesleyan University, several sectors of workers entered into informal discussions with the University administration about remedying the deteriorating situation. Unfortunately, the administration continued to deny real input from the employees, so these discussions proved frustrating and increasingly ineffective over time. To gain more force, the Secretarial/Clerical Forum gained

¹¹⁴ Andrew Schell, “Union Continues Seeking Support, Holds Candlelight Vigil,” *Wesleyan Argus*, February 5, 1993, 5.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Hill, interview by author, January 8, 2016.

recognition with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), but, even then, the talks remained irregular, unproductive, and, ultimately, unsuccessful.

The first groups to initiate these informal discussions was the faculty through two organizations: first, the Junior Faculty Organization (JFO) and, later, as the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). In the mid-1950s, even before the financial cutbacks spurred other groups to action, many among the ranks of the junior faculty, who were shut out of the tenure and promotion processes, came together to revive a previous iteration of the JFO. Initially, the organization aimed to collaborate with the administration to improve the situation, which Professor Emeritus Richard Ohmann described in a letter, writing that the relationship between the administration and the JFO “was usually cordial, appreciative on both sides, laced with proclamations of good faith and a common interest in Wesleyan’s future.”¹¹⁷ Conversely, Richard Slotkin noted a shift that, “by 1967, when I got involved, the mood had shifted. There was a stronger sense of grievance.”¹¹⁸

The change resulted not only from the declining financial situation on campus but also from the transformed faculty demographics from the “little university” expansions. Slotkin noted that, “the new people in town came from wage-earning families, many with union affiliations or sympathies,” and felt more empowered to make demands as employees than the previous generation of “gentleman scholars” who viewed discussing wages as taboo.¹¹⁹ To the new faculty members, many of

¹¹⁷ Richard Ohmann to Richard Slotkin, August 4, 1998, Junior Faculty Organization Boxes.

¹¹⁸ Richard Slotkin to Richard Ohmann, August 14, 1998, Junior Faculty Organization Boxes.

¹¹⁹ Slotkin, “The JFO: 1967-74,” (Unpublished manuscript, 2012), 10.

whom had grown up around union workers, the concept of discussing wages and pushing the employer for more was familiar.

With its new demographics and energy, the JFO organized around the issues of compensation, input, and discriminatory tenure practices outlined above through junior faculty meetings and discussions between the organization's Executive Committee and the administration. In its peak in the late-1960s, nearly the entire junior faculty participated in the meetings, and this group comprised about sixty percent of the faculty as a whole. According to Slotkin, the year 1968/69, "was a watershed for the JFO and the University. It saw rising political agitation, by students in general and minority students in particular; and the JFO would add to that mix a set of radical moves for faculty rights."¹²⁰

First, that year, the JFO Executive Committee acquired permission, through authorization cards, of a majority of the junior faculty to represent it in discussions about compensation with the administration. Although these were not formal negotiations, the committee was able to secure concessions from the administration. For one, the administration agreed to pay "retrobucks" to compensate those victimized by salary inversion; social science and humanities professors passed over for raises received \$800, if they had at Wesleyan for more the four years, and \$400 if less than that.¹²¹ Additionally, the JFO attained some reforms of the tenure process; notably, when a professor went up for tenure, the department was newly required to solicit the opinions of outside scholars, so when the advisory committee later reviewed the applications it could judge scholarly merits rather than personal or

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Slotkin, interview by author, December 4, 2015.

cultural attributes.¹²² All in all, the changes that the JFO achieved signaled an increased weight of their voices.

The influence that the JFO gained appealed to the senior faculty, some of whom joined in to form the Wesleyan Chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in 1974. The main catalyst for the senior faculty to join in the informal discussions was a unilateral decision by the administration to reduce its contributions to the faculty's TIAA-CREF retirement funds.¹²³ This decision—and the way it was undertaken—produced great frustration in the faculty and led some members to look for new avenues of influence. The full professors had seen the JFO successfully bargain for concessions, and about 100 of them, along with several professional librarians, voted to re-instate the AAUP to work along with the JFO. The professional librarians did not share the elevated role of the faculty on campus, but the dozen librarians were always included in the AAUP because they also held advanced degrees and academic positions. They benefitted from being included in the discussions and the faculty AAUP members gained more strength in numbers.¹²⁴ These groups hoped that the efforts from these combined bodies—the junior faculty, senior faculty, and professional librarians—could gain the true collegial power they expected. In this way the informal conversations about compensation continued, but over time they became increasingly frustrating.

Informal discussions with the administration were also taken up by the physical plant workers' Communications Committee in the mid-1970s. As will

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Meeting of the Wesleyan Chapter AAUP at CFA Cinema, October 9, 1974, AAUP Records.

¹²⁴ Erhard Konerding, interview by author, Wesleyan University Albritton Center, November 13, 2015.

become clear in the following chapter, some physical plant workers had been pushing for unionization since the late 1960s and three times throughout that decade unsuccessfully attempted to organize. The failure of these efforts, however, left informal discussions as the only remaining option for physical plant workers to make their needs clear with the administration. The Committee consisted of representatives from each physical plant department who met with high-ranking representatives from the administration to discuss issues of compensation and working conditions from crew size, uniforms, and equipment to wages.¹²⁵ Although some employees were content with this outlet, others felt their conversations went nowhere.

Finally, and most significantly, the secretarial/clerical workers formed the Secretarial/Clerical Forum which started as a similar informal discussion group but eventually transitioned to an officially recognized independent bargaining agent. Despite this change, the independent union lacked the power of an established union and acted much the same as an informal group. Thus, in both its forms the Forum achieved similar results to other workers on the issues of wages, benefits, inequality and disrespect.

The Forum originated as a social organization in 1973 after a series of meetings called for the secretarial/clerical workers by the University administration itself, ostensibly for the purpose of teaching them about women's social and professional opportunities in that era.¹²⁶ Bringing the women together turned out to be

¹²⁵ Hall, interview by author, November 19, 2015

¹²⁶ The purpose of these meetings was not made clear to the workers at the time but, in retrospect, Verna Ellam suggested that Sheila Tobias, Wesleyan's sole female administrator, intended to teach the women about affirmative action; Ellam, interview by author, March 1, 2016.; Williams, "OPEIU History of Wesleyan Unionization."

an unfortunate decision for the administration, because it gave these workers from disparate sides of campus the potential to organize. At first they formed social bonds, which later allowed them to communicate with each other to hear common grievances. As one key rank-and-file leader, Ruth Williams, put it, “disembodied telephone voice became people, people became friends, and friends discussed their working conditions and problems, and they found that they had many common concerns.”¹²⁷ Especially among clerical workers, this kind of bonding has been highlighted by scholars as a key step in moving towards collective action; Kleeh-Tolley describes this process, writing, “Social networks that had once been used to share individual concerns and frustrations became vehicles for a politicized interaction.”¹²⁸ And so was born the Secretarial/Clerical Forum.

A leading group of workers called the Core Committee met with a task force composed of three top administrators¹²⁹ to discuss the secretarial/clerical workers’ grievances about wages, benefits, and work organization. Unfortunately, these informal discussions happened so infrequently that virtually no changes were made after a year, and the Committee members felt the administration’s representatives were disrespecting their time.¹³⁰ One Committee member described this simply, writing to a student newspaper, “our concerns have been ignored” in the meetings.¹³¹

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Kleeh-Tolley, “Women Organizing: Action and Reaction in the Formation of a Clerical Union,” 454.

¹²⁹ The members of the administrative task force were Dean of the College Edgar Beckham, VP for Business Affairs Donald Bruster, and VP for Finance and Administration Richard Greene; Edgar F Beckham, Donald C. Bruster, Richard W. Greene to All Secretarial/Clerical Personnel and All Department Heads and Administrative Officers, “Non-Academic Staff Personnel Concerns,” July 1, 1974, Secretarial/clerical Forum Vertical File.

¹³⁰ Williams, “OPEIU History of Wesleyan Unionization.”

¹³¹ “Secretaries and Administrators Debate Progress,” *Wesleyan Argus*, October 15, 1974.

Consequently, they moved to gain recognition as an official bargaining agent in 1974. Core Committee member Verna Ellam later recalled their thought process:

“We said, well, we can’t get anything else. Let’s look into unionizing.”¹³²

Fortunately, they did not have to look far; as Middletown is a blue-collar town, many of the leaders had husbands, brothers, or fathers in unions who informed them how to petition for a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election.

After requesting the election in the summer of 1974, the workers had to deal with daily memos from above discouraging unionization.¹³³ The administration even tried to utilize the familial rhetoric by emphasizing how unique Wesleyan’s atmosphere was; Vice President for Business Affairs Donald Bruster wrote in a memo:

We would not take the position that unionization is bad or unnecessary in all circumstances. Obviously, there can be situations when it is valid—for example, in large, impersonal institutions where management is remote and unresponsive. But we don’t think that’s a fair description of Wesleyan University as we are today or as we intend to remain in the future.¹³⁴

Additionally, some of lower-level supervisors opposed the idea and made it clear to their workers; Ellam recounted in a later interview that, “a lot of the department chairmen called their secretaries at home and said, ‘what do you think you’re doing? You’re going to get in trouble! You’re going to lose your job!’ Quite a few of the girls were threatened.”¹³⁵ The dissuasion from respected officials combined with the

¹³² Ellam, interview by author, March 1, 2016.

¹³³ Sibel Goksel and Betsey Mahoney, “Frustrated by Administration: Secretaries Moved to Unionize,” *Hermes*, April 28, 1977.”

¹³⁴ Donald C. Bruster to Secretarial/Clerical Personnel Eligible to Vote in the December 20th Election, “Answers to Questions We Have Received,” December 17, 1974.

¹³⁵ Ellam, interview by author, March 1, 2016.

daily discouragement some of the women faced every day from their direct supervisors created a climate of fear that was palpable. Nonetheless, the majority of the women remained on board.

As the election approached, the administration used a common stalling tactic and challenged the bargaining unit, saying “confidential” secretaries who worked for the top administrators should not be included and, thus, not eligible to vote. In response, several women of the eleven who formed the Core Committee of the Forum traveled to Boston, unrepresented by a lawyer or union official, to defend themselves against three top Wesleyan officials in front of the Labor Board.¹³⁶ The workers successfully won their right to an election, and on December 20, 1974, the secretarial/clerical workers—excluding those who were deemed “confidential secretaries”—voted one hundred-twenty-eight to forty-one in an NLRB election to recognize the Forum.¹³⁷ This vote, it seems, made the Wesleyan University secretarial/clerical workers among the first unionized units of this sector on a university campus in the country, along with New York’s Fordham University and Chicago’s Roosevelt College,¹³⁸ and the very first in New England.¹³⁹

That the secretarial/clerical workers at Wesleyan would move to unionize, surpass the discouragement of the administration and their supervisors, defend their bid to the Labor Board without outside assistance, and become the first unionized

¹³⁶ Pat Blakeslee, “Wesleyan Staff Women Fight For Rights,” *Hermes*, April 15, 1976, 3.

¹³⁷ Meredith Richman, “Secretarial Forum Receives Vote as Official Labor Unit,” *The Wesleyan Argus*, February 7, 1975, 1.

¹³⁸ Larkin, “Fairness and Respect: The Office Employees Union at Fordham University,” 62.

¹³⁹ This claim was made in the following sources from the time and seems to hold true, but has not been confirmed by any outside research studies. Jon Lender, “Wesleyan Clerical Union Backed by Jon Lender,” *Hartford Courant*, September 26, 1978, 21d.; Eric Arnesen and Alan Saly, “After The Strike... Whither Wes?” *Hermes*, September 28, 1978, 1.

university clericals in the region and the first on Wesleyan's campus was not at all obvious. In fact, it was extraordinary. The secretarial/clerical workers did not unionize first because they were radical. Frances Sheehan, a Wesleyan student at the time who worked a campus job alongside clerical workers, emphasized this in a later interview: "This was a very hardworking group. This was not a rabble-rousing group of women. And the fact that they got to a point where they unionized and they walked out was very significant. They did not want to have to do this. This was not the way they operated."¹⁴⁰ Additionally, Ruth Williams acknowledged that unionizing was never something they considered a mere few years previously, describing her coworkers as, "a group of people who would not allow the word 'union' to be spoken at the start."¹⁴¹

Several factors come together for these Wesleyan workers that enabled them to overcome the obstacles: their undervalued position on campus, the existence of a nationwide movement of secretarial/clerical organizing, strong leadership, and the high expectations they had for work at Wesleyan. First, a partial explanation for why the secretarial/clerical, rather than any other group on campus, unionized was their marginalized position on campus. A letter explaining their position to the student body stated that, "We are the lowest paid group on campus. A new custodian (no skills required) starts at \$662 more per year than our beginning secretary (typing, dictation, bookkeeping ability required). In our opinion, skills should be worth something!"¹⁴² This clearly demonstrates the sentiment that their low pay reflected

¹⁴⁰ Frances Sheehan, interview by author, phone, November 10, 2015.

¹⁴¹ Ruth Williams, "Imagine What It's Doing to Us," *Wesleyan Argus*, September 6, 1978.

¹⁴² The Wesleyan Secretaries to Students, August 29, 1978, Secretarial/clerical Forum Vertical File.

the lack of respect afforded them, and this position offers some explanation as to why the most underestimated group of employees ended up playing such a crucial role in labor relations on campus.

A further reason for their action was the existence of a larger movement of secretarial/clerical organizing in this period. The trend of office workers organizing developed throughout the 1960s and 1970s with the rise of public sector unionism, as the public sector clericals were the first to organize, followed by those in the private sector.¹⁴³ The Women's Movement that raised the consciousness of the secretarial/clerical workers played a role in motivating female workers to initiate their union organizing drives, as women began to assert their rights in all realms of life. For instance, historian Dorothy Sue Cobble describes how working-class feminism helped working women identify and confront problems in their jobs that occurred because of their gender, like the gender-wage gap and disrespect in the workplace.¹⁴⁴ This awareness was clearly present at Wesleyan, as Verna Ellam later described: "And I remember one time a guy on the committee said, 'well you don't have to eat steak, you can eat chicken.' Sure, HE can eat steak, but not us. There were always a lot of derogatory comments made and we would be really ripping coming out of there."¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ For more on female service work see: Cobble, "'A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm': Workplace Feminism and the Transformation of Women's Service Jobs in the 1970s," 30. Hurd and Woodhead, "The Unionization of Clerical Workers at Large Us Universities and Colleges," 1.; Tepperman, *Not Servants, Not Machines: Office Workers Speak Out!*, 319.

¹⁴⁴ Cobble, "'A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm': Workplace Feminism and the Transformation of Women's Service Jobs in the 1970s," 12; *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America*, vol. Newition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). For more on a gendered class-consciousness among clericals see: Roberta Goldberg, *Organizing Women Office Workers: Dissatisfaction, Consciousness, and Action* (New York, NY: Prager Publishers, 1983), 110.

¹⁴⁵ Ellam, Interview by author, March 1, 2016.

These workplace issues pushed clerical workers throughout the country to organize both non-union organizations—such as the famous 9-to-5 founded in Boston in 1973—and unions, principally as part of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the United Automobile Workers (UAW), the Communications Workers of America (CWA), and the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU). Secretaries and Clericals at Wesleyan may have been paying attention to these developments.

These trends seem to explain why the secretaries and clericals unionized first, rather than physical plant or another group of campus workers. Still, they do not clarify why at Wesleyan, rather than at any other college, the workers organized. One key reason why these events occurred at Wesleyan was that, merely by chance, the leaders were strong. Nearly everyone interviewed remembered the strength, the persistence and the intelligence of the five or so leading women of the secretarial/clerical group. Georgianne Leone, an original member, praised key leader Ruth Williams, saying, “[she was] wonderful. She was very strong in her conviction.”¹⁴⁶ Verna Ellam added to this the intelligence and maturity of these women, describing how “some of them had gone to college, gotten married, raised a family, then started going back to work. They worked their way up and started working full time. So they were educated and they just knew.”¹⁴⁷ Even Michael Thompson, an OPEIU representative for over thirty years who would later work closely with Wesleyan’s secretarial/clerical workers, noted their distinctive qualities,

¹⁴⁶ Leone, Interview by author, January 25, 2016.

¹⁴⁷ Ellam, Interview by author, March 1, 2016.

calling them “the most responsible group of people I think I’ve ever met.”¹⁴⁸ These extremely capable leaders were thus able to take the steps toward unionization on their own and to organize their co-workers to get on board. The leaders supported and encouraged the other women, who had much faith in their abilities, and the result was a strong and united group.¹⁴⁹

Nonetheless, such leaders almost surely existed at other schools, but the workers at Wesleyan University were the first to act. Two characteristics of Wesleyan explain why its workers took such unusual steps: the extreme disappointment of the high expectations for its financial future and the value of creating social change promoted at that university. First, as previously described, the Wesleyan community had imagined the “little university” would rise in prestige and wealth to the level of the most elite U.S. universities, but when economic restraints dashed these dreams, the sense of disappointment was shared among all facets of the community. Workers especially felt this disillusionment intensely, as the familial environment cultivated by Butterfield led them to expect good treatment from their employer. When cutbacks made them feel belittled, the sense of betrayal by the administration was heightened. Such high expectations led to huge disappointment.

What led the secretarial/clerical workers to act on their disenchantment? The culture of innovation, being cutting edge, and changing the world that was depicted by the faculty and administration at Wesleyan did not miss the workers who were typing the papers and memos and attending the academic events on campus. “We used to sit on the grass and talk. I attended most of the student meetings and learned

¹⁴⁸ Michael Thompson, Interview by author, Phone, February 17, 2016.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

from them. I don't think the administrators ever really understood the impact those young people had,"¹⁵⁰ one worker remarked. In addition to the students, the support of several faculty members also boosted the confidence of the workers. Former administrator Robert Kirkpatrick later described his perception that, "some members of the faculty [believed] that a utopian world could exist and everyone would be happy and get paid well and so forth," and he continued on to say that the these faculty shared these ideas with their secretaries and encouraged them to take action.¹⁵¹ With this rhetoric circulating around them, secretarial/clerical workers at Wesleyan were spurred to make change for themselves. Together, this specific Wesleyan context and the circumstances of the secretarial/clerical workers enabled these workers to overcome fears and organize a union despite opposition from their supervisors.

After gaining NLRB recognition, the members of the Forum were able to make some small improvements in their work over the next two years. The Core Committee pushed the administration to solidify a grievance procedure that ended in a review board. Although three of the five members were selected by presidential appointment, having a grievance procedure at all represented an improvement over the prior informal systems.¹⁵² Additionally, they gained upgrades to their health insurance and achieved access to job-related classes outside of Wesleyan, pending

¹⁵⁰ Dan Wolf, Laura Gibbons, Anne Field, Nancy Winkelman, Anne Wilson, Paul Hammer, "Overworked and Underpaid?" *Hermes*, April 6, 1978, 5.

¹⁵¹ Kirkpatrick, interview by author, March 31, 2016.

¹⁵² "Chronology," September 1, 1978, Secretarial-clerical strikes, Vertical Files, Wesleyan University Special Collections and Archives (hereafter referred to as Secretarial-clerical strikes vertical file).

supervisorial approval.¹⁵³ It is important to understand, though, that none of these improvements were part of a legally binding contract, rather they represented informal agreements which the administration could technically renege on at will.

Although recognition as a union and the subsequent concessions from the administration were real victories, the group never achieved the full culmination of getting recognized by the NLRB: a contract. As such, the Secretarial/Clerical Forum was, in all aspects except its legal status, very similar to the informal discussion groups on campus in this time period. This inability to successfully negotiate a contract stems from an issue faced by several groups of Wesleyan employees: the ineffectuality of the conversations with the administration. The discussions were characterized across the board as “painfully slow,” “exhausting,” and “like talking to a brick wall.”¹⁵⁴ The meetings were held infrequently and the suggested changes that the workers hoped to see in their jobs rarely happened.¹⁵⁵

The Wesleyan administration’s reticence to accept changes was usually rationalized in financial terms. Author of a history of faculty unions Nicholas Gier describes how, at universities all over the country, the financial crises of the 1960s and 1970s revealed the administrative priority of balancing budgets, as was the case at Wesleyan.¹⁵⁶ For instance, the administration shut down Secretarial/Clerical Forum’s proposals for wages and benefits as “disturbing in that a revised and

¹⁵³ The Publicity Committee to Members of Sec/Clerical Subject: Responses to Joan Halberg’s Memo, May 25, 1977, Secretarial-Clerical Vertical Files.; The Core Committee to Secretarial/clerical Forum Members, May 26, 1977, Secretarial-Clerical Forum Vertical Files.

¹⁵⁴ Williams, “OPEIU History of Wesleyan Unionization,” 1.; Amy Bermar, “Physical Plant Thinking Union Again,” *Hermes*, Thursday November 9, 1978, 1.

¹⁵⁵ Jerry Stouck, “Workers Pleased with Suggestions,” *Wesleyan Argus*, October 1, 1974.

¹⁵⁶ Gier, “The Phenomenol Rise of Faculty Unions.”

broadened list of concerns was introduced having very substantial financial implications.”¹⁵⁷ Even the faculty experienced this response; the AAUP Financial Planning Committee minutes note that Vice President Business Affairs Burton Sonenstein insisted “a presently depressed stock market and tuition revenue which cannot be increased” precluded the increased salaries the faculty requested.¹⁵⁸

Because of this administrative stance, the workers felt like their fates were predetermined and their voices were not heard. One member of the Communications Committee described the experience saying: “we had a negotiating committee that met with them, and at the end of three months, the administration told us what they were going to give us. They had decided that three months before we ever met.”¹⁵⁹ In the end, the employees of Wesleyan had to settle with whatever the administration decided, because it ultimately had the power to administer decisions and change them at a whim.

Conclusion

When Victor Butterfield left Wesleyan University, the student body, programs, and facilities were growing, as were expectations for Wesleyan’s future. Growing alongside these was the University’s budget. These soaring costs corresponded with intense financial hardship for the United States as a whole, and the belt-tightening implemented by President Colin Campbell created discontent among

¹⁵⁷ Donald C. Bruster to the Core Committee, “Subject Status Report,” May 21, 1974, Secretarial-Clerical Forum Vertical Files.

¹⁵⁸ “Financial Planning Committee Minutes,” October 11, 1973, AAUP Records.

¹⁵⁹ Amy Berman, “Physical Plant Thinking Union Again,” *Hermes*, Thursday November 9, 1978, 1.

Wesleyan's workers. They expected a grand university that cared about them as part of the family. Instead, they got the Red Book cutbacks.

In attempts to combat these many and increasing workplace issues, the faculty, physical plant workers, and secretarial/clerical workers organized informal committees to discuss solutions with the administration: the Junior Faculty Organization and American Association of University Professors, the Communications Committee, and the Secretarial/Clerical Forum respectively. Although these committees made steps, the improvements the workers required to weather the financial crises of the 1970s were not forthcoming. The talks with the administration were consistently unfulfilling, as their ideas were shot down and the administration made it clear that it did not actually need to listen to the employees. Evidently, the administrative ideals of family and collegiality at Wesleyan University were no longer the reality in labor-management relations. Emboldened by the emphasis on making change on campus, the secretarial/clerical workers demonstrated their displeasure with the situation by gaining NLRB recognition, but their efforts did not materialize into improvements in their work. This impossible situation pushed many sectors of workers at Wesleyan to look for other ways to make change in their workplaces; they began to think about unionization.

Chapter Three Sticking Together, Acting as One

“We began to realize that in order to survive individually, we had to join together collectively, and so we banded together during the first years and presented our concerns to the University administration.”
– Secretarial/clerical worker Ruth Williams¹⁶⁰

By the late 1970s, the workers at Wesleyan University were ready for change.

The weak national economy in the 1970s increased the financial pressures at Wesleyan, both for the administration and the campus workers. The administration’s “Rainbow Papers” made it clear that there was not much money to go around, but workers hoped nonetheless that the stated values of community and family on campus would make the administration support the living standards of its employees. Unfortunately, the discussions with the administration over wages and benefits were taking the workers of Wesleyan nowhere, and the only place left to look seemed to be the labor movement.

The pressure was greatest on those at bottom; the secretarial/clerical workers—the lowest paid and, from their perspective, least respected by the administration—were pushed in 1977 to join a national union and then even strike. The bravery of this often ignored group provided an example to other employees. Within the next five years, four other sectors of campus workers made unionization bids. The physical plant and food service workers successfully unionized while the public safety workers and the faculty and professional librarians failed to do so. Although the efforts did not all succeed, this intense period of labor action on

¹⁶⁰ Williams, “OPEIU History of Wesleyan Unionization,” 1.

Wesleyan's campus represents a unique occurrence; it appears that at no other college in this period did such a widespread wave of unionization efforts occur.

Why, then, did Wesleyan University workers take on the challenge of unionization in such numbers? Foremost, the emphasis on creating change and innovation, which emerged in the 1950s, permeated the University's culture and empowered the workers to push for improvements in their own lives. This mentality also tied the University's hands when it might have led an anti-union campaign, because it did not want to contradict its stated value of supporting social change by hindering collective bargaining. Moreover, the importance that the Wesleyan administration still placed on the educational mission facilitated unionization; when the key actors in the educational mission—the students and the faculty—became supportive of and involved in the union campaigns, the administration ceded more quickly to worker demands than did the administrations of other colleges at the time. Together, these characteristics of Wesleyan University's self-image allowed the campus workers to improve their labor standards and shift the power dynamics between them and their employers.

This period of unionization efforts on Wesleyan University's campus between 1977 and 1982 created an environment in which the workers were able to assert their needs and gain concessions from the University, a sharp contrast to the frustrations earlier in the decade. Through international union guidance, campus community support, and the efforts of the workers themselves, Wesleyan University workers finally gained some agency in determining their compensation and working conditions.

Context of Unionization

The peak of unionization efforts at Wesleyan University took place within a context of historically low unionization rates nationally, especially within the private sector. Previously, in the Post-War period, unions had been large, growing and powerful, with a peak unionization rate of 28.3 percent of the workforce in 1954.¹⁶¹ From that point, union density (the percent of the workforce in unions) gradually declined over the decades, but real numbers of union members rose to 22.2 million in 1975.¹⁶² However, starting in the mid-1970s, the strength of the labor movement began a very rapid downward spiral. First, the unions began to lose more NLRB elections than they won,¹⁶³ then, fewer workers participated in elections signifying a drop in organizing rates,¹⁶⁴ and, as a result, union membership by the end of the decade was down severely in both percentage and real numbers.¹⁶⁵ Between 1975 and 1983, U.S. union membership declined by 3.9 million people, or 17.6 percent, demonstrating the rapid fall of the labor movement in this period.¹⁶⁶

Scholars offer myriad explanations for this decline—ranging from the economic, cultural, or political context to blaming the unions or employers—in an

¹⁶¹ Gerald Mayer, "Union Membership Trends in the United States," (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service., 2004), 1.

¹⁶² Leo Troy and Neil Sheflin, *U.S. Union Sourcebook: Membership, Finances, Structure, Directory*, vol. 1st (West Orange, N.J.: IRDIS, 1985), 3.1.

¹⁶³ Windham, "Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing and the Origins of the New Economic Divide (1968-1985)," 139.; Lawrence Richards, *Union-Free America: Workers and Antiunion Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 2.

¹⁶⁴ Dorian Warren, "Union Organizing in National Labor Relations Board Elections," (New York: Roosevelt Institute, 2015). Richards, *Union-Free America: Workers and Antiunion Culture*, 2.; Windham, "Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing and the Origins of the New Economic Divide (1968-1985)," 361.

¹⁶⁵ Mayer, "Union Membership Trends in the United States," CRS-22.

¹⁶⁶ Troy and Sheflin, *U.S. Union Sourcebook: Membership, Finances, Structure, Directory*, 1st, 3.3.

effort to understand how such a powerful force could be diminished so intensely.¹⁶⁷ Some fault macro-economic change for shifting traditionally unionized, industrial jobs to the South and abroad, away from organized labor's stronghold in the Northeast and Upper-Midwest.¹⁶⁸ Other scholars, such as Jefferson Cowie and Arne Kalleberg, pinpoint the identity-based movements of the 1960s for highlighting individual rights over collective rights and turning the cultural tide away from collective bargaining.¹⁶⁹ Relatedly, national politics were not supportive of the labor movement, as politicians, including labor's traditional Democratic allies, viewed the battle against inflation as paramount—and mutually exclusive—to supporting bids for employment and higher wages.¹⁷⁰ This political climate led to interpretation of labor laws that favored management over workers, exemplified by the light penalties for illegal anti-union activity meted out by the NLRB during this period.¹⁷¹

Unlike scholars who attribute declining unionization to contextual factors, others see the decline as a more active process. On the one hand, the labor movement

¹⁶⁷ Mayer, "Union Membership Trends in the United States," CRS-22.

¹⁶⁸ Kalleberg, *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States, 1970s-2000s*, 21.; Paul Le Blanc, *A Short History of the U.S. Working Class: From Colonial Times to the Twenty-First Century* (Amherst, N.Y: Humanity Books, 1999), 120.; Windham, "Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing and the Origins of the New Economic Divide (1968-1985)," 211.

¹⁶⁹ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010), 240.; Kalleberg, *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States, 1970s-2000s*, 31.; Richards, *Union-Free America: Workers and Antiunion Culture*, 13.

¹⁷⁰ Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2010), xii.; Jefferson Cowie, "'Vigorously Left, Right, and Center at the Same Time: The Crosscurrents of Working-Class America in the 1970s," *America in the Seventies*: 84.; Joseph A McCartin, "Turnabout Years: Public Sector Unionism and the Fiscal Crisis," in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 216.; "'A Wagner Act for Public Employees': Labor's Deferred Dream and the Rise of Conservatism, 1970-1976," *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 1 (2008): 25.

¹⁷¹ Steve Early, *Embedded with Organized Labor: Journalistic Reflections on the Class War at Home* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009), 149. Windham, "Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing and the Origins of the New Economic Divide (1968-1985)," 52.

in general is pegged as racist, sexist, and xenophobic and blamed for not organizing marginalized workers in the growing service sector.¹⁷² On the other, some scholars fault the rise in employer opposition in the late 1970s and 1980s, including corporate lobby groups and the normalization of anti-labor consulting firms. Despite the numerous factors that contributed to the declining unionization rates in this period, fortunately for workers, this decline was not total.

While private sector union rates plummeted starting in the mid-1970s, public sector unions continued to organize workers. Beginning in the 1950s and lasting into the later parts of the 1970s, unionized federal, state, and municipal government employees brought vitality to the labor movement as their ranks swelled ten times between 1955 and 1975.¹⁷³ Maintenance, custodial, clerical, food service workers and even faculty on public university campuses were not immune to this wave, and their momentum spread to private universities as well. Gordon Arnold explains that, even in the private sector, workers at colleges unionized at higher rates than other private sector employees. He attributes this higher rate to the positive example provided by the unionization of public sector workers in similar positions on university campuses.¹⁷⁴

These trends of public sector labor organization and unionization on college campuses were vigorous in Connecticut around the time of organizing at Wesleyan

¹⁷² Cowie, "Vigorously Left, Right, and Center at the Same Time: The Crosscurrents of Working-Class America in the 1970s," 95.; Le Blanc, *A Short History of the U.S. Working Class: From Colonial Times to the Twenty-First Century*, 108.; Windham, "Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing and the Origins of the New Economic Divide (1968-1985)," 113.

¹⁷³ See McCartin, "Turnabout Years: Public Sector Unionism and the Fiscal Crisis." for more on Public Sector unionism in the 1970s.

¹⁷⁴ Arnold, "The Emergence of Faculty Unions at Flagship Public Universities in Southern New England," 64.

University. This local context was important in the story of unionization at Wesleyan because scholars have shown that in states with a higher union density, where they are exposed to more union activity, workers, especially clericals, are more likely to unionize.¹⁷⁵ To the advantage of the proponents of unions at Wesleyan, organized labor was widely covered in Connecticut's media in this period. Locally, public employee unions were frequently featured in the *Middletown Press*, the most prominent paper in the vicinity of Wesleyan University.¹⁷⁶ Furthermore, Yale University in New Haven was a hotbed of activity, including several prominent strikes by the blue-collar workers at that university in 1968, 1971, 1974, and 1977.¹⁷⁷ Not only did media cover these events extensively but Wesleyan's staff, faculty and administration often looked to Yale as an example.¹⁷⁸ Evidently, the local context provided plentiful models of unionization to the workers at Wesleyan.

Secretarial/Clerical Workers

The first group to bring this pattern of unionization to Wesleyan University's campus was the secretarial/clerical sector, which catalyzed a series of unionization efforts at Wesleyan University in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although they were not the first group to attempt unionizing, as the physical plant workers had several

¹⁷⁵ Richard W. Hurd and Adrienne McElwain, "Organizing Clerical Workers: Determinants of Success," *Industrial & Labor Relations Review* 41, no. 3 (1988): 371.

¹⁷⁶ "Striking Teachers Picket Bridgeport, Norwalk Schools," *Middletown Press*, September 6, 1978.; "Close Vote Brings Town Hall Workers Into Union," *Middletown Press*, February 20, 1981.

¹⁷⁷ John Wilhelm, "A Short History of Unionization at Yale," *Social Text*, no. 49 (1996): 13-14.; Herbert Janick, "Yale Blue: Unionization at Yale University, 1931-1985," *Labor History* 28, no. 3 (1987): 350.; Gilpin et al., *On Strike for Respect: The Clerical and Technical Workers' Strike at Yale University, 1984-85*, 20.

¹⁷⁸ Colin Campbell, interview by author, January 11, 2016.

failed attempts in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they were the first to succeed. After certifying the Secretarial/Clerical Forum as an independent NLRB-recognized bargaining unit in 1974, they moved on to affiliate with the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) in 1977. This affiliation brought them the experience and legal expertise they needed to successfully bargain for a contract, and, although they found the process frustrating and it led to a three-week strike, they achieved their first contract in September 1978. The secretarial/clerical workers successfully unionizing and the power of their strike provided the example and impetus for other workers at Wesleyan to strive for better compensation and working conditions through unions as well.

The decision to affiliate the independent Secretarial/Clerical Forum with a national union grew from three years of negotiations with the administration that failed to produce a first contract. The leaders of the Forum had been looking into national unions for their legal advice and expertise in contract negotiating for several months, but the final push came when the administration offered them an insignificant raise of little more than three percent—adding only a handful of dollars a week to their paltry wages—in April 1977.¹⁷⁹ The next step was selecting a union.

Presumably, the OPEIU stood out to the Wesleyan secretarial/clerical workers because it was one of the main organizers of college clerical workers, with eight such

¹⁷⁹ Martin Saggese, "Faculty and Physical Plant Workers Agree on Salary Hikes for Next Year," *Wesleyan Argus*, April 5, 1977.; "Frustrated by Administration: Secretaries Moved to Unionize," *Hermes*, April 28, 1977."

bargaining units already.¹⁸⁰ Furthermore, it had gained a reputation for competence in Connecticut from an impressive victory in 1959 when it organized over 100 clerical workers in a highly contested campaign at the Knights of Columbus fraternal insurance organization headquarters in New Haven.¹⁸¹ Lastly, several workers recalled the impact of a visit from the female president of Local 153, a former clerical worker at Fordham University, who assured them that the union was not a male-headed organization that would dismiss their needs as women.¹⁸² As a result, they moved quickly, and on June 1, 1977, the 160 Wesleyan secretarial/clerical workers approved OPEIU Local 498 (soon merged into Local 153) as their bargaining agent by a vote of ninety-six to forty-seven in an NLRB election.¹⁸³

This strong result did not mean that the union went unchallenged. The pro-union contingent faced opposition from other workers and the administration. The opposition within the secretarial/clerical workers was grounded in a general aversion to unions and worries about damaging relations with their supervisors, the professors, and the administration. First, there were those opposed to unionizing because of politics or biases, an opinion which one administrative assistant voiced, writing, “I for one—and there are others—don’t relish the idea of initiation fees and union dues, more supervisors (which is a likely result also), nor the restraints that will be

¹⁸⁰ The OPEIU represented clerical workers at Oberlin, Fordham University, Long Island University-Brooklyn, Jewish Theological Seminary, Pratt Institute, Seton Hall, Hofstra University, Wayne State,; The Wesleyan Secretaries to Students, August 29, 1978, Secretarial-Clerical Forum Vertical Files.

¹⁸¹ John Wilhelm, interview by author, phone, January 7, 2016.

¹⁸² Ellam, interview by author, March 1, 2016.; Thompson, Interview by author, February 17, 2016.

¹⁸³ The NLRB requires a majority of the workers to vote yes in order to approve the union. Then the union becomes the official bargaining agent for the unit. Depending on the contract that the union and the employer negotiate, it may not be required for all eligible employees to join the union. However, the contract agreed upon covers all eligible employees.; John Brooklier, “Union Vote at Wesleyan Challenged,” *Middletown Press*, June 10, 1977.

imposed.”¹⁸⁴ Second, because their jobs often involved working closely with the faculty or their supervisors, some workers feared that unionization would create tension or cause unpleasant treatment.¹⁸⁵ This opposition was voiced through letters to coworkers, announcements in meetings, and statements in local newspapers.

Moreover, the Wesleyan University administration launched mild opposition, but it was not to the extent that was quickly becoming the new standard for employers. The administration’s reaction can be explained by the University’s politics and values. On the one hand, the administrators emphasized their neutrality towards the *idea* of collective bargaining as it clearly fell within the University’s positive stance towards creating change in the world. That is, they accepted the idea anywhere but at Wesleyan; Personnel Director Joseph Rumberger was quoted saying, the administration “‘is not anti-union; it’s pro the University’s ability to do its job. We do not think there’s a place for a union coming between an organization and its employees.’”¹⁸⁶

Added to this theoretical neutrality towards collective bargaining was the University administration’s stated value of being a family; launching a hostile and public campaign against the union would clearly signal to the campus that the rhetoric about community was false. Finally, the focus on the educational mission at Wesleyan deterred the administration from fighting the union, because it feared the conflict would escalate and distract from the main goal of the University. Supporting these ideas, President Campbell commented in a recent interview, “we did not hire

¹⁸⁴ Joan G. Halberg To Members of the Secretarial Staff, May 20, 1977, Secretarial-Clerical Forum Vertical File.

¹⁸⁵ Slotkin, interview by author, December 4, 2015.

¹⁸⁶ Mark Mininberg, “P. Plant Workers To Vote on Union,” *Wesleyan Argus*, October 27, 1978, 1.

counsel to develop a strategy of preventing unionization from happening... a union battle did not strike me as consistent with what else we were trying to achieve both institutionally and certainly educationally.”¹⁸⁷ Because an anti-union campaign had the potential to disrupt the political, community, and educational values engrained in Wesleyan’s self-image, the top administrators decided not to hire consultants, despite their ever-increasing prevalence on college campuses in this period.¹⁸⁸

On the other hand, despite the administration’s restraint from hiring outside help, it did not entirely refrain from campaigning against the union; it utilized several common anti-union tactics, including sending discouraging letters, giving raises before the contract was settled, and filing an NLRB suit. First, employees received several memoranda from top administrators discouraging them from voting for the union and suggesting alternatives. For example, J Randolph Ryan, the President’s Assistant, sent out a memorandum to all of the secretarial/clerical staff that claimed they would be required to take a “loyalty oath” to OPEIU.¹⁸⁹ John Hoerr describes similar tactics used at Harvard University and explains that letters from such respected officials can have a strong negative impact on a campaign.¹⁹⁰ Second, the administration used a tactic that often served to dampen the urgency of unionization by unilaterally handing out raises in July of 1977 while still disputing the Secretarial/Clerical Forum’s raise proposals in negotiations.¹⁹¹ Lastly, shortly after

¹⁸⁷ Campbell, interview by author, January 11, 2016.

¹⁸⁸ Robert Michael Smith, *From Blackjacks to Briefcases: A History of Commercialized Strikebreaking and Unionbusting in the United States* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003), 97.

¹⁸⁹ J.R. Ryan to Members of the Secretarial/Clerical, May 27, 1977, Secretarial/clerical Forum Vertical File.

¹⁹⁰ Hoerr, *We Can't Eat Prestige: The Women Who Organized Harvard*, 103.

¹⁹¹ Wesleyan Secretarial Negotiation Committee to Trustees, September 14, 1978, Secretarial-clerical Strikes Vertical File.

the union won the election, the administration asked the NLRB to invalidate it, claiming the OPEIU purposefully misrepresented the significance of the election to mislead workers into voting yes.¹⁹² Although the regional NLRB rejected their claim, labor relations scholar Robert Michael Smith argues that the act of filing NLRB suits is a common example of employers “manipulating labor law” in order to “slow psychological momentum.”¹⁹³

The response of the Wesleyan administration to the unionization of its secretarial/clerical workers can be compared to that of the New York University (NYU) and Harvard administrations’ reactions to campaigns from their workers. During the failed 1970 clerical organizing campaign at NYU, the administration was pressured to hold off on an overt anti-union campaign because of its “liberal public image.”¹⁹⁴ Similarly, during the Harvard campaign between 1977 and 1988, the liberal university administration stated that it did not oppose unions and, thus, did not hire labor consultants or anti-labor lawyers, just like at Wesleyan. Also like Wesleyan, the Harvard administration’s main goal was, as Hoerr describes, “defeating the union without tearing apart the University community.”¹⁹⁵ These cases exemplify how different university administrations shaped their responses to union campaigns on campus on the basis of their self-images. In this case, the Wesleyan officials did not want to counteract their stated values of supporting education,

¹⁹² J.R. Ryan to Sec/Clerical Staff, Department Heads and Administrative Officers, June 8, 1977, Secretarial Clerical Forum Vertical File.; John Brooklier, “Union Vote at Wesleyan Challenged,” *Middletown Press*, June 10, 1977.

¹⁹³ For more information on union-busting tactics consult: Smith, *From Blackjacks to Briefcases: A History of Commercialized Strikebreaking and Unionbusting in the United States*, 113.

¹⁹⁴ Richards, *Union-Free America: Workers and Antiunion Culture*, 147.

¹⁹⁵ Hoerr, *We Can't Eat Prestige: The Women Who Organized Harvard*, 193.

community, and change-making. Notably, although the administration's claims that the workers were part of a community were not sufficient to make the workers completely satisfied with their jobs, they were enough to withhold the administration's potentially most dangerous weapons to prevent unionization: anti-union consultants.

After weathering the opposition of their coworkers and bosses and approving the OPEIU in an NLRB election, the secretarial/clerical workers became embroiled in a yearlong series of negotiations with the administration for the first union contract at Wesleyan. The administration, represented by a labor specialist named John Sabanosh of the law firm Cummings and Lockwood,¹⁹⁶ and the workers, represented by a small committee of rank-and-file leaders and union representatives, bargained over a broad range of issues: grievance procedures, raises, retroactive raises, union security, a step system for employees to reach the top of their pay grades, length of the work week, transfer policies, and insurance costs.

Although President Campbell stated that the mood for negotiations was intended to be "as collaborative as possible given the circumstances,"¹⁹⁷ the workers often perceived it to be otherwise. The secretarial/clerical workers characterized the administration as unavailable for negotiations, citing infrequent and short bargaining sessions.¹⁹⁸ Moreover, the negotiating committee experienced condescending

¹⁹⁶ The OPEIU Negotiating Committee to the Wesleyan University Trustees, Faculty, and members of the Secretarial-Clerical Forum, "Update on Negotiations," July 13, 1978, Secretarial-Clerical Forum Vertical File.

¹⁹⁷ Campbell, interview by author, January 11, 2016.

¹⁹⁸ The OPEIU Negotiating Committee to the Wesleyan University Trustees, Faculty, and members of the Secretarial-Clerical Forum, "Update on Negotiations," July 13, 1978, Secretarial-Clerical Forum Vertical Files.

attitudes from the administration's side; as one member stated, "From the start we have contended with the cavalier and patronizing attitudes of the University representatives."¹⁹⁹ The origin of this attitude most certainly lay in the fact that the University administrators prioritized balancing budgets and ensuring the long-term financial stability of the school, and they felt that by explaining this the workers would capitulate. However, as one worker wrote at the time: "We are aware of the University's financial problems, but they refuse to recognize ours."²⁰⁰ The workers were also under financial stress. Rather than finding a compromise to please both sides, the negotiations became an exercise in power with each side hoping to wrench concessions from the other.

This power struggle became evident in the months between the first bargaining session on September 6, 1977 and the day the tentative agreement was reached a year later on September 26, 1978.²⁰¹ At several points during that year each side insisted it could not move any further.²⁰² As a result, federal and state mediators were called in during the summer of 1978, but the sessions began to heat up as the school year—and the pressure of having the student body around—approached.²⁰³ This tension was epitomized by a particularly contentious session on June 21, 1978,

¹⁹⁹ Secretarial/clerical Forum Negotiating Committee to Board Members and President Campbell, April 4, 1978, AAUP Records.

²⁰⁰ The Negotiating Committee for the Secretaries to Trustees and Faculty, September 1, 1978, Secretarial/clerical Forum Vertical File.

²⁰¹ Joseph P. Rumberger to Department Heads and Administrative Officers, "Negotiations Status Report," September 26, 1978, Secretarial-clerical strikes Vertical File.; "Chronology," September 1, 1978, Secretarial-clerical strikes Vertical File.

²⁰² Secretarial/clerical Forum Negotiating Committee to Board Members and President Campbell, March 29, 1978, AAUP Records.

²⁰³ "Martin Saggese, "Mediators Called In: University and Secretaries Remain at a Deadlock," *Wesleyan Argus*, May 5, 1978.

after which denunciations flew from both camps that the other side refused to bargain. The union even filed an NLRB unfair labor practice suit against the University administration with these charges that was ultimately rejected.²⁰⁴ These accusations, though not substantiated, illustrated the conflicted nature of bargaining. The conflict reached its peak when the 1978 school year began on September 4, 1978.

The secretarial/clerical strike, the first strike in Wesleyan University's history, lasted three weeks, with about half the workers refusing to work from September 4 to September 26, 1978. Michael Thompson, the first Local 153 representative at Wesleyan, highlighted the rarity of Wesleyan's strike, later commenting, "That's the most wrenching thing you can do, to take secretaries and clericals out on a picket line."²⁰⁵ That the secretarial/clerical workers ended up in this situation demonstrates the strength of the group, the ardency of their demands, and their determination to improve their working conditions at Wesleyan.

The tone of the strike showed the workers' agreement on one matter with the University; the strikers took great care not to hinder the educational mission, reflecting their shared commitment to the Wesleyan students. At the eight picket line locations throughout the Wesleyan campus, the strikers marched peacefully; a reporter described the scene, observing, "Pickets paraded quietly around university buildings, but did not attempt to prevent students from attending classes." He continued on to quote one picketer who said "[disrupting] the educational process of

²⁰⁴ The union also filed a second charge several weeks later but withdrew this charge. Joseph P Rumberger to Department Heads and Administrative Officers, "Negotiations Status Report: Union Withdraws Second Charge," August 16, 1978, Secretarial-Clerical Forum Vertical File. The OPEIU Negotiating Committee to the Wesleyan University Trustees, Faculty, and members of the Secretarial-Clerical Forum, "Update on Negotiations," July 13, 1978, Secretarial-Clerical Forum Vertical File.

²⁰⁵ Thompson, interview by author, February 17, 2016.

Wesleyan students [was] the last thing’” they wanted.²⁰⁶ Nevertheless, the strikers were certainly not naïve enough to believe that their strike could make an impact without some disruption. Therefore, they gained the support of local unions who pledged not to cross their picket lines; members of the Teamsters union refused to make deliveries to the Mocon dining hall, telephone repairmen denied requests to install students’ phones, and the city sanitation workers would not pick up trash on campus for the duration of the strike.²⁰⁷

In large part, the University was still able to function throughout the strike, because a portion of the secretarial/clerical workers, estimated between twenty-five and fifty of the one-hundred-sixty-member bargaining unit, continued to work.²⁰⁸ It can be supposed that some of these workers were motivated by the financial push to continuing earning a paycheck (beyond the \$47 in strike benefits from the union strike fund).²⁰⁹ However, others were vehemently opposed to the union and the strike entirely; one woman was quoted in the paper saying, “the union is leading many of those poor people around by the nose. In effect, they have brainwashed them.”²¹⁰ Fortunately, the goal of the strikers to be respectful carried through to their colleagues

²⁰⁶ Tom Hennick, “Wes Classes Begin Without Incident,” *Middletown Press*, September 5, 1978.

²⁰⁷ Student Strike Support Committee to the Students of Wesleyan University, Secretarial/clerical Forum Vertical Files.; Tom Hennick, “Wes Classes Begin Without Incident,” *Middletown Press*, September 5, 1978.; “Picket Line Bolstered,” *Hartford Courant*, September 7, 1978, 70.

²⁰⁸ Jon Lender, “Group of Wesleyan Secretaries Speaks Against Striking Union,” *Hartford Courant*, September 22, 1978, 23D.

²⁰⁹ Jon Lender, “Wesleyan Clerks Walk Out 3 Days Before Strike Date,” *Hartford Courant*, September 2, 1978, 38.

²¹⁰ Tom Hennick, “Wes Students, Faculty To Rally for Strikers,” *Middletown Press*, September 22, 1978.

as well, and even those who opposed to union were invited to meetings and to ratification votes to speak their mind.²¹¹

More than toward their colleagues, the strikers harbored resentment against the administration for hiring temporary replacements (also known as “scabs”) and for intimidating some of the strikers. One worker on the bargaining committee voiced this opinion, writing, “[the administrators] are currently advertising for temporary help, have in fact hired scab labor, hired Middletown police to keep order... and finally paid in lawyers’ fees enough to give us decent wages for the next three years.”²¹² Another striker, Verna Ellam, recalled the personal intimidation from lower-level administrators and department heads, saying, “There was one dean in particular who was very nasty. He would stop by where his secretary was picketing and he was real nasty to her.”²¹³ Again, though the administration chose not to release a strike-breaking campaign led by consultants, employer opposition still took shape in the form of individual supervisors.

Despite the opposition from above and from within the group, the overwhelming sentiment from the campus community towards the strikers was supportive. Although local unions respected picket lines and Middletown residents often honked in support of the strikers, the main outpourings of support were insular to the campus. Regardless of this small scope, the campus support did ultimately have a significant effect on the outcome of the strike. The students, especially a small core group, were a great source of support to the strikers, and they expressed this through a

²¹¹ Sierpinski, interview by author, November 30, 2015.

²¹² Wesleyan Secretarial Negotiation Committee to Trustees, September 14, 1978, Secretarial-clerical strikes Vertical File.

²¹³ Ellam, interview by author, March 1, 2016.

petition with over 1,100 signatures urging the administration to settle the strike, a benefit concert for the strike fund, and a student-run day care center for the strikers' children.²¹⁴

Likewise, the faculty, especially those active in the AAUP, extended moral and financial support to the strikers. Most significantly, in an AAUP chapter meeting approximately half the faculty passed a resolution by one-hundred-twenty-six to one placing the blame for the strike solely on the administration and vowing not to hire temporary workers, to refuse to monitor the workers' attendance, and not to perform any secretarial/clerical duties.²¹⁵ This resolution was followed by letters of admonishment to President Campbell and financial contributions to the strike fund from several departments, including the German Department, English Department, and College of Letters.²¹⁶

The culmination of the community support was a plan for a two-day series of actions on September 25 and 26. On the 25th, students and faculty staged a festive rally consisting of music, theater, and addresses by students, faculty and strikers themselves, followed by a nighttime candlelight vigil in front of President Campbell's house.²¹⁷ However, the labor history teach-in and picnic planned for the 26th never

²¹⁴ Martin Saggese, Tim Redmond and Mark Mininberg, "Admin, Sec's At Odds Over Wages, Union," *Wesleyan Argus*, September 8, 1978, 1.; Student Strike Support Committee, "On Strike," 1978, Secretarial-clerical strikes Vertical File.

²¹⁵ John Grumm, David Konstan, Alan Nathanson, Betty Traube, Jim Truscott to Colin Campbell, September 6, 1978, Secretarial-clerical strikes Vertical File.

²¹⁶ David E Swift to unknown, September 4, 1978, Secretarial/clerical Forum Vertical File.; The German Department to Colin Campbell, "Secretarial and Clerical Workers' Strike," Secretarial/clerical Forum vertical Files., The Department of English to AAUP, September 7, 1978, Secretarial/clerical Forum Vertical File.; Dick Vann to Colin Campbell, September 7, 1978, Secretarial/clerical Forum Vertical File.

²¹⁷ Student Strike Support Committee and Faculty Strike Support Committee, "Take Action! Get the facts about the strike," September 1978, Secretarial-clerical strikes Vertical Files.

occurred, because after that day of community action, a tentative agreement was reached at one in the morning of September 26.²¹⁸

Although there surely were multiple reasons for the conclusion of the strike, the timing suggests that the strong show of community support catalyzed the resolution. The students and faculty were key to upholding Wesleyan University's educational mission, thus their morale was of great importance to the administration.²¹⁹ This suggests that the involvement of these key constituents could have been the main factor that led the University administration to settle. This is supported by the example of Yale, where worker allies also played a crucial role. At Yale, the famous 1984/85 clerical strike garnered massive support from the New Haven community and national media attention, which mattered because the University's external reputation was very important to Yale's administration. The strike's resolution came, as historian Herbert Janick describes, "not because the University was unable to function but because [President] Kingman Brewster no longer could endure the damage to Yale's reputation."²²⁰ Contrastingly, at Wesleyan, the vital strike support came from within the Wesleyan community. Because of the University's priorities, the students and faculty were the groups best positioned to pressure the administration.

The power of the strike and its campus community support resulted in a contract that was more favorable to the secretarial/clerical workers than what they had previously been offered, but whether this was a total triumph for the strikers is

²¹⁸ Joseph P. Rumberger to Department Heads and Administrative Officers, "Negotiations Status Report," September 26, 1978, Secretarial-clerical strikes Vertical Files.

²¹⁹ Slotkin, interview by author, December 4, 2015.

²²⁰ Janick, "Yale Blue: Unionization at Yale University, 1931-1985," 365.

unclear. In the end, both sides were able to force concessions from the other, according to their own most desperate financial exigencies. The workers were pleased by the one-year contract (which allowed them to renegotiate quickly), their new grievance procedure, and the implementation of a step-system to move workers to the top of their pay scale within five years.²²¹ On the other hand, the administration won on several other issues: a maintenance of membership shop which allowed new employees to decide whether to join the union and did not require those who opted out to pay dues; the seven percent raises it had initially offered the union, which were less than half of what the union wanted; the length of the work week; and health insurance contributions thirty-three percent higher than the union negotiators had requested.²²² Accordingly, the workers and union representatives on the negotiation committee were not entirely pleased with the contract, but they relished the base they had established and the opportunity to improve it in years to come.²²³

The result of the strike demonstrates that, though this action and the community support enabled the secretarial/clerical workers to make progress, they simply did not have the power to force the administration's hand any further to achieve a contract that met all of their requirements. Nonetheless, their inspiring action was an important moment for the campus, because it signified the beginning of

²²¹ Eric Arnesen and Alan Saly, "After The Strike... Whither Wes?" *Hermes*, September 28, 1978, 1; Mark Mininberg, "A New Relationship," *Wesleyan Argus*, September 29, 1978, 1.

²²² "Agreement between Wesleyan University and Office and Professional Employees International Union Local 498," October 4, 1978.; Joseph P Rumberger to Department Heads and Administrative Officers, "Union Agreement," October 11, 1978, OPEIU Vertical File.

²²³ Mark Mininberg and Martin Saggese, "The Strike Is Over! Workers Vote to Accept One-Year Pact," *Wesleyan Argus*, September 26, 1978, 1.

the construction of a collective power that would enable workers to get the working conditions and compensation they sought.

Physical Plant: Boosted by the Strike

Beyond just improving their own situation, the secretarial/clerical workers inspired other sectors of employees to make changes as well. Scholars have noted that the presence of unions in one sector on a campus can facilitate and encourage other workers to pursue unionization as well,²²⁴ and, at Wesleyan, the workers from blue-collar custodians to the faculty were influenced by the secretarial/clerical workers' efforts. Even before the secretarial/clerical workers joined OPEIU, Ray Natale, a leading advocate for a union for the physical plant workers, noted that the secretarial/clerical workers' affiliation "would have a positive effect on the unionization efforts of the physical plant workers."²²⁵ On the other side of spectrum, the faculty also felt the pressure; Richard Slotkin described the widespread sentiment that "the secretaries were unionizing [was] kind of a goad to us to do the same."²²⁶

The first group to take up the baton was the physical plant workers. They had been building up to this for nearly a decade and had previously voted against a union in three NLRB elections. In the first attempt, in 1968, issues with pay and unclear job duties led to an effort to join the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME); this bid failed by nearly a two to one ratio due to a

²²⁴ For example, Richards describes how at NYU the blue-collar union inspired a strike by the clerical workers who, in turn, served as an example for the cafeteria workers to strike in 1970. Hurd, "Organizing and Representing Clerical Workers: The Harvard Model," 320. ; Richards, *Union-Free America: Workers and Antiunion Culture*, 136.

²²⁵ Martin Saggase, "Secretaries: National Union Next?" *Wesleyan Argus*, April 22, 1977.

²²⁶ Slotkin, interview by author, December 4, 2015.

Vote No leaflet campaign by a rival union, the Connecticut Employees Independent Union. (This union was presumably gunning for the Wesleyan workers itself, as it started an organizing campaign several years later.)²²⁷ The second time around, in 1971, the physical plant workers reached out to the Federation of University Employees/HERE Local 35 mere weeks after its successful blue-collar strike at Yale; this time, HERE organizers, known for building strong rank and file committees,²²⁸ failed to organize sufficiently and the campaign succumbed to the age-old tactic of one-on-one discouragement from low-level supervisors.²²⁹ Lastly, in 1972, physical plant employees were courted by both the Connecticut Employees Union Independent and a group advocating for a Wesleyan Independent Local who reminded the workers about their high insurance premiums, confusing labor grade classifications, and low raises. Ultimately, after accusations of malevolence and incompetence between the unions, the Connecticut Independent petitioned for an election but employees voted for no union over either union at an almost two-to-one ratio again.²³⁰ Overall, inadequate organizing and lack of direction discouraged the physical plant workers from unionizing previously.

²²⁷ "Wes Workers In Union Vote," *Middletown Press*, Nov 16, 1968, 2.; "Wes Blue Collar Workers Reject Bid to Join Union," *Middletown Press*, November 23, 1968, 1.; Harley Gross, "Buildings And Grounds Employees Reject AFL-CIO Bid As Sole Bargaining Agent," *Wesleyan Argus*, November 26, 1968, 1.

²²⁸ For more on HERE's organizing style see later in this chapter on Food Service workers.

²²⁹ Wilhelm, interview by author, January 7, 2016.; John Logan, "The Fine Art of Union Busting," *New Labor Forum* 13, no. 2 (2004): 78.

²³⁰ HERE/FUE Local 35 was also on the ballot for this election, but they did not campaign and only receive two votes. Chris Mahoney, "Wes Worker Support Wooed," *Wesleyan Argus*, October 20, 1972, 1.; "University Employees to Vote On Unionizing," *Hartford Courant*, December 9, 1972, 20D.; William E Collins, "Wes Workers Reject Unions," *Middletown Press*, January 13, 1973, 1.

In 1978 when the physical plant workers began to look into unionizing again they were motivated by a desire for job security, because the weak economy made many of them realize that, as trade workers, there would not be many other jobs available in case of layoffs. Their concerns—and their desire to fight—were cemented when the Mason Shop was disbanded shortly after the union was confirmed. Although the three workers were transferred elsewhere, the cutbacks concerned other employees.²³¹ This worry added to preexisting resentment over pay, insurance, and the lack of a grievance procedure.²³² However, the most important distinction from the previous attempts was witnessing the secretarial/clerical workers' experiences making real change in their jobs. Kevin McMahon, one of the two chief organizers, described this impact: "I think we saw the way the administration dealt with the secretaries and clerks when they were on strike and the school's attitude in those negotiations changed a lot of minds in favor."²³³

Seeing that the administration did not treat its workers like a family pushed the physical plant workers to make an extremely surprising move: they started unionizing during the secretarial/clerical strike. Usually strikes deter other nearby workers from unionizing because they fear the loss of wages and antagonism with their bosses caused by strikes. Thus, when Local 153 representative Thompson was contacted by two carpenters, McMahon and Jerry Warmly, he was skeptical. These workers shared that they were impressed by the union's strength and wanted the same

²³¹ John Phillips (pseud.), interview by author, Wesleyan University Pi Café, December 7, 2015.

²³² Amy Berman, "Physical Plant Thinking Union Again," *Hermes*, November 9, 1978.

²³³ Tom Hennick, "Wes Plant Workers Vote in Union," *Middletown Press*, November 20, 1978.

kind of representation. Thompson gave them authorization cards, and, to his surprise, within two weeks they returned with nearly all the cards signed.²³⁴

By the time the administration became aware of the unionization attempt, most of the workers were on board, so it once again avoided a full on anti-union campaign. Instead the administrators chose to display their disapproval through several all-employee meetings, fliers, and one-on-one meetings with low level supervisors explaining the “pros and cons” of unions.²³⁵ Ultimately, however, this opposition was not enough to prevent success, and on November 17, 1978 the Wesleyan University physical plant workers voted sixty-five to forty-three to approve OPEIU Local 153 as their collective bargaining agent.²³⁶

Once the physical plant workers also became members of the OPEIU, an important blue-collar pink-collar alliance was formed.²³⁷ Because they were both in the same local and both negotiating contracts at the same time, workers expressed excitement about collaborating in their negotiations and exercising a larger influence on the University through concurrent contract cycles covering about 300 workers.²³⁸ Although the negotiations for each group occurred separately, at this time they had

²³⁴ Thompson, interview by author, February 17, 2016.

²³⁵ Mark Mininberg, “North College Memo: How to Nix Union Page,” *Wesleyan Argus*, October 31, 1978.; Jon Lender, “Union Organizers Drive for Maintenance Victory at Wesleyan” *Hartford Courant*, November 15, 1978, 47D.; Tom Hennick, “Wes Plant Workers Vote Saturday,” *Middletown Press*, November 19, 1978, 27.

²³⁶ Joseph P Rumberger to Department Heads and Administrative Officers, “Labor Relations Status Report,” October 2, 1978, OPEIU Vertical File.; Joseph P Rumberger to Department Heads and Administrative Officers, “Physical Plant Union Election,” November 20, 1978, Physical Plant Vertical Files, Wesleyan University Special Collections and Archives (hereafter referred to as Physical Plant Vertical Files.)

²³⁷ I use “pink-collar” in reference to stereotypically female white collar-jobs, usually less prestigious than typical white collar jobs.

²³⁸ Mark Mininberg, “Physical Plant Workers Vote to Join Union,” *Wesleyan Argus*, November 21 1978, 1.; David Hessekiel, “Physical Plant Contract Works Begins: Negotiating Committee Chosen,” *Wesleyan Argus*, January 26, 1979, 1.

the same union representatives and their action plans and bargaining sessions were closely connected. Even the administration saw the clear change in power dynamics, as the *Middletown Press* quoted Personnel Director Rumberger saying, ““there are more employees this year and the impact of any actions they threaten is great.””²³⁹ This power created high expectations for the first physical plant contract and the second secretarial/clerical contract.

Unfortunately, although the mood of the negotiations this year was characterized as more polite than in the previous year, they progressed at a disappointing pace for many of the workers.²⁴⁰ Some of this disappointment arose from the fact that, while the workers desperately wanted better insurance coverage and higher wages,²⁴¹ the administration contended that the workers should compromise on compensation because of the community atmosphere and work environment. The workers did not see it this way because, as McMahon commented, “Sure, it’s a nice place to work. But if you can’t feed your family on the average of \$10,000 that our workers earn, then it doesn’t matter how nice it is.”²⁴² Confronted with this attitude, the workers used their power to force concessions in the form of an affirmative strike vote from both bargaining units towards the end of August. The

²³⁹ Jeff Kotkin, “Union at Wesleyan Rejects Offer, Authorizes a Strike,” *Middletown Press*, August 22, 1979, 5.

²⁴⁰ Tom Hennick, “Faculty Accepts Offer: Serious Bargaining Starts at Wes,” *Middletown Press*, May 18, 1979.; Alexandra Peers, “Wesleyan and Employees’ Union Said Far Apart on New Contract,” *Hartford Courant*, June 28, 1979, 41D.

²⁴¹ David Hessekiel, “Physical Plant Contract Works Begins: Negotiating Committee Chosen,” *Wesleyan Argus*, January 26, 1979, 1.

²⁴² Alexandra Peers, “Wesleyan and Employees’ Union Said Far Apart on New Contract,” *Hartford Courant*, June 28, 1979, 41D.

strike was narrowly averted when a tentative agreement was reached on the day before the deadline after nineteen hours of negotiations.²⁴³

The resulting contracts were evidence of the power that the workers exercised over the administration; the physical plant workers received a somewhat better first contract than that of the secretarial/clerical workers. While this could be attributed to the University valuing them more as men or as “skilled” labor, their strong contract was most certainly due in part to the power built from their partnership with the secretarial/clerical workers. Not only did the physical plant workers end up with a progression system to the top of the pay grades, more holidays, a dental program and pay raises in a two year contract, but the secretarial/clerical workers settled a three year contract with an improved progression system, more holidays, a dental program, and the shorter work week they had previously pushed for.²⁴⁴ Although neither employee group achieved all that they had wanted, the leaders of both expressed satisfaction with the results.

To the detriment of the workers and the growth of worker power at Wesleyan University, the contracts were for different lengths of time; therefore, the next round of contract negotiations was not concurrent for the two sectors of employees. As this was a first contract, the physical plant workers and their union representatives wanted to be able to make improvements sooner, thus they insisted on a shorter contract than that of the secretarial/clerical workers. The deleterious effects of this separation were

²⁴³ Joe Price, “Tentative Accord Reached Averting Wesleyan Strike,” *Middletown Press*, September 4, 1979.; Alexandra Peers, “Wesleyan, Employees Try to Avoid Strike,” *Hartford Courant*, September 4, 1979, 17D.

²⁴⁴ Joe Price, “Tentative Accord Reached Averting Wesleyan Strike,” *Middletown Press*, September 4, 1979.

clear in the second physical plant contract in 1981. Although the negotiations were shorter and calmer than before, the ultimate result was not seen as an improvement by most of the workers. They had wanted full medical insurance, dental insurance, a union shop that required all workers to join the union, and increased tuition benefits, but they got none of these.²⁴⁵ As the contrast between this contract (negotiated alone) and the first contract (negotiated alongside the secretarial/clerical workers) exemplified, larger numbers of unionized employees had more collective power that they were able to leverage in their negotiations with the administration.

Faculty and Professional Librarians: Joining the Ranks?

Following the secretarial/clerical strike in 1978, some members of the faculty and professional librarians were also prompted to consider unionization. Despite the undeniable differences in their situation, the faculty also experienced deteriorating compensation and a desire for more influence. However, it appears that, ultimately, the distinct position of the faculty proved enough to keep them from joining the ranks of unionized workers; in 1981, a final straw poll indicated that the faculty as a whole was not motivated enough to unionize, and the efforts came to an end.

Like the secretarial/clerical and physical plant workers, the faculty had its own context and history with unionization, nationally and on Wesleyan's campus. In particular, it must be understood that a surge of faculty unionization was spreading across the U.S. from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s.²⁴⁶ From the time the first four-

²⁴⁵ Karen Schneider, "Wesleyan Workers Accept 1-Year Pact with 10% Raise," *Hartford Courant*, July 10, 1981.

²⁴⁶ For more on unionization of faculty see: Robert H Metchick and Parbudyal Singh, "Yeshiva and Faculty Unionization in Higher Education," *Labor Studies Journal* 28, no. 4 (2004): 46.; Gordon Arnold,

year college, the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, organized in 1966, as many as 430 college faculties unionized by the late 1970s.²⁴⁷ In some ways, trends suggested that Wesleyan was prone to unionizing, as faculty unions took hold in Southern New England more than in any other region. In Connecticut alone, by the late 1970s, faculties at University of Bridgeport, University of Connecticut, Quinnipiac University, and University of New Haven were unionized, among others.²⁴⁸ However, unlike most of these school, Wesleyan was not a two year or public school, which were the most likely to unionize. Moreover, researchers identified that faculty at liberal arts colleges that were more selective and more established were typically much less likely to join unions.²⁴⁹ Therefore, the question remained whether the issues and organizing efforts at Wesleyan were enough to overcome the improbability of organizing at this kind of institution.

Unionization had always been favorable to a small minority of Wesleyan's faculty and professional librarians. Since the days of the JFO in the late 1960s through the 1970s, there had been sporadic talk of unionizing at JFO and AAUP meetings, and much of the leadership was supportive of unionizing.²⁵⁰ For some of

"The Emergence of Faculty Unions at Flagship Public Universities in Southern New England," *ibid.* 22 (1998): 62.; Victor G. Devinatz, "The Fears of Resource Standardization and the Creation of an Adversarial Workplace Climate: The Struggle to Organize a Faculty Union at Illinois State University," *Advances in Industrial and Labor Relations* 11 (2002): 150.

²⁴⁷ Arnold, "The Emergence of Faculty Unions at Flagship Public Universities in Southern New England," 62.; Kemerer and Baldrige, *Unions on Campus*, 1.; Devinatz, "The Fears of Resource Standardization and the Creation of an Adversarial Workplace Climate: The Struggle to Organize a Faculty Union at Illinois State University," 151.; Ladd and Lipset, "Unionizing the Professoriate," 38.

²⁴⁸ Elizabeth Sanger, "Faculty May Follow Wesleyan Workers Down Union Road," *Hartford Courant*, September 9, 1979, 40A.

²⁴⁹ Kemerer and Baldrige, *Unions on Campus*, 53.

²⁵⁰ CSS Professor to Don Meyer, Sep 5, 1974, Wesleyan University Special collections and Archives, AAUP Records; Jeremy Zwelling to Colleagues, November 18, 1975, AAUP Records.

the faculty at Wesleyan, studying social change and radical politics was an everyday task, and they were inspired to enact these ideologies in their own jobs. Others among the union advocates came from lower or middle class households and were familiar with unions; some of the leaders had family members who had dedicated their lives to organized labor, such as one main advocate for faculty unionization, William Firshein, whose father helped form the prominent International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU).²⁵¹ Additionally, most of them held positions that were, according to studies, generally likely to support unions, such as those lower in the academic hierarchy or social sciences and humanities professors.²⁵² Surprisingly, though, some of the leaders did come from the sciences and the ranks of full professors, drawn for a variety of reasons ranging from ideological principles and personal background to grievances about faculty governance.²⁵³ Despite this diversity of faculty union supporters, their numbers were initially quite small.

When the unionization push reached a head at the end of the 1970s, as for the physical plant workers, the difference in this situation compared to previous consideration of unionization was that the campus labor environment was brightened by the secretarial/clerical strike. Although some, both in the administration and among the faculty, insisted that the situation of the faculty was radically different due to their role in university governance, there were explicit connections made by some AAUP members to the situation of other employees.²⁵⁴ For instance, one of the

²⁵¹ William Firshein, interview by Emma Paine, April 10, 2015.

²⁵² Ladd and Lipset, "Unionizing the Professoriate," 39. Kemerer and Baldrige, *Unions on Campus*, 60-61.

²⁵³ Slotkin, interview by author, December 4, 2015.

²⁵⁴ Campbell, interview by author, January 11, 2016.

professional librarians, Erhard Konerding, later suggested that the secretarial/clerical strike “showed us that it was possible to do something.”²⁵⁵

In addition to the campus climate, the faculty and professional librarians had a number of grievances that stirred them, principally issues of compensation and faculty governance. The faculty members felt their situation had been degraded since Wesleyan’s golden economic years, or as a Wesleyan AAUP chapter proposal reported, “since 1970/71, faculty compensation at Wesleyan has declined drastically when measured in real (non-inflated) dollars.”²⁵⁶ Although their position remained high as compared to professors at most other schools, Wesleyan faculty’s position slipped in comparison to peer institutions; whereas in the Golden Age in the late 1950s Wesleyan professors received better pay than those at any peer college, by the 1981/82 school year, the pay at Amherst, Williams, and Wellesley colleges surpassed that at Wesleyan.²⁵⁷

Secondly, dissatisfaction with the level faculty governance was one of the most common motivating factors for unionization in this period, and Wesleyan was no exception. In 1979, the administration released the White Book, a follow up to the Red Book, to announce its intention to make more cutbacks.²⁵⁸ Having felt the negative impact on their wages and benefits from the Red Book, the faculty voted to ask the administration to reconsider its plan. However, Richard Vann, a leader in the AAUP, said, “The administration chose not to take this advice, which created a great

²⁵⁵ Erhard Konerding, interview by author, November 13, 2015.

²⁵⁶ AAUP Executive Committee to Wesleyan Faculty Members and Librarians, “Compensation Proposal,” February 21, 1979, AAUP Vertical File.

²⁵⁷ Burton Sonenstein to AAUP Executive Committee, “Schedules in Faculty Compensation,” December 9, 1982, AAUP Records.

²⁵⁸ Keller, *Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education*, 47.

deal of resentment toward the administration.”²⁵⁹ This incident was certainly a factor in the push for unionization. Together, declining compensation and a feeling that they did not have the governing power to prevent these changes were strong motivators toward unionization for a portion of Wesleyan’s faculty.

In response to these issues, proposals were made to investigate unionization three times after the secretarial/clerical strike, and a pattern emerged: the AAUP Executive Committee negotiated fruitlessly with the administration for more compensation and benefits until it began to consider proposing unionization, at which point the administration ceded a slightly better deal, halting the steps towards joining a union. Once in the 1978/79 and once in the 1979/80 academic year, the cycle began with the AAUP requesting raises above twenty percent across the board and full tuition benefits for their families, among other things.²⁶⁰ Both times, in the fall, the AAUP members voted to “immediately begin organizing toward a collective bargaining election under the regulations of the National Labor Relations Board” and invited the national AAUP and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) to present

²⁵⁹ Sharon Haar, “New attempt to unionize Faculty appears unlikely,” *Wesleyan Argus*, October 31, 1980.

²⁶⁰ AAUP Executive committee to Wesleyan Faculty Members and Librarians, “Compensation Proposal,” February 21, 1979, AAUP Vertical File.; David Hessekiel, “AAUP Calls for 20 percent Hike in Faculty Pay,” *Wesleyan Argus*, February 23, 1979, 1.; Jon Lender, “Pay Hike Asked at Wesleyan,” *Hartford Courant*, February 28, 1979, 56.; “Faculty Seeks 27 percent in Raises At Wesleyan,” *Hartford Courant*, January 8, 1980.

at meetings.²⁶¹ However, follow up votes on the matter ended these efforts and the AAUP ended up accepting seven percent and ten percent raises each of those years.²⁶²

The last cycle, in the 1980/81 academic year, was the most dramatic. The AAUP requested fourteen percent raises and met resistance from the administration.²⁶³ The result was the strongest bid for unionization when, in the spring, “as a result of the resoundingly negative vote to the administration’s offer, the faculty [began] measuring support for a union.”²⁶⁴ Even though this attempt was more widespread than any previous one, it ended in defeat. Richard Slotkin, one of the main organizers, recalled:

We failed to win a sufficiently large majority of the faculty at the meeting that we called to authorize us going ahead. It was as well attended as any full faculty meeting I’ve ever been at. We got a majority, but we wanted two-thirds. We felt we needed two-thirds. We felt we needed a super-majority to go ahead.²⁶⁵

As a result, the union bid failed. However, the faculty and professional librarians received an 11.2 percent raise that year, a dental package, and more research money, which was a better deal than they had received in previous years. Elaborating on these

²⁶¹ Elizabeth Sanger, “Faculty May Follow Wesleyan Workers Down Union Road,” *Hartford Courant*, September 9, 1979, 40A.; Tim Redmond, “Faculty Takes Steps Toward Unionization,” *Wesleyan Argus*, September 11, 1979.; “Call to Meeting and Agenda, September 11,” September 1979, AAUP Vertical File.; Laura Walker, “Faculty Consider Unionization,” *Hermes*, October 12, 1978, 1.; Amy Berman and Laura Walker, “Faculty Consider Unionization,” *Hermes*, November 9, 1978, 4.; Tom Hennick, “Unions, Wes set to Open Talks,” *Middletown Press*, March 3, 1979, 1.

²⁶² AAUP Executive Committee to All Faculty and Librarians, “Compensation,” May 15, 1979, AAUP Vertical File.; Tom Hennick, “Faculty Accepts Offer: Serious Bargaining Starts at Wes,” *Middletown Press*, May 18, 1979.; Nat Greene to The Faculty and Librarians, March 7, 1980, AAUP vertical file.; John Laidler, “Administration, Faculty Group Reach Agreement,” *Wesleyan Argus*, March 11, 1980, 1.

²⁶³ Elizabeth Sanger, “Wesleyan Faculty Seeking 14 percent Raise,” *Hartford Courant*, December 19, 1980, C1D.

²⁶⁴ Elizabeth Sanger, “Faculty Makes Salary Counteroffer,” *Hartford Courant*, March 4, 1981.

²⁶⁵ Slotkin, Interview by author, December 4, 2015.

events, Slotkin reflected, “the fact that we went as far as we did upped our hand in negotiations,” revealing the power that the threats of unionization had.²⁶⁶

The reason that three years in a row these unionization efforts failed was a combination of political biases against unions, an image of unions as unprofessional, a fear of the faculty losing its influence, and the sense that compensation and working conditions were adequate without a union.²⁶⁷ The first obstacle was a group of faculty members who vehemently opposed unionization on principle, some of whom publicized the view that “we... are convinced that this belief in unionization is utopian and irresponsible.”²⁶⁸ While this vocal anti-union group was small, the attendance at the pro-union AAUP meetings was small too, typically numbering in the forties, fifties, or sixties and comprising only about one quarter of the entire faculty.²⁶⁹ Thus, the remainder of the faculty was available to be swayed either way. Secondly, some among the faculty worried that unionization would compromise their professionalism, prioritizing their compensation over the students. This position was stated by one professor who wrote, “It would place the faculty in a potentially

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Notably, it seems that the unionization efforts of the faculty did not fail as a result of opposition from the administration. President Campbell did in fact express displeasure at the thought of dealing with a faculty union, writing to the faculty that “to [move to formal collective bargaining] would, in my view, not serve the best interests of the faculty or of the University.” Despite this, the faculty openly organized in faculty meetings and communicated their intentions in the media, indicating that the fear of repercussions from the administration was not a major hindrance for the faculty union organizers.; President Campbell to Victor Gourevitch, November 7, 1974, AAUP Records.

²⁶⁸ Phil Hallie (cosigned by Wis Comfort, George Creeger, Russ Murphy, Bob Rosenbaum, Karl Scheibe, Richard Winslow), “An Open Letter on Unionization,” *Argus*, October 26, 1979, 2.

²⁶⁹ By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Wesleyan University faculty numbered slightly less than 200.; “Inflation vs. Increases in Faculty Salaries: 1975/76-1984/85,” 1985, AAUP Records.; “Wesleyan Faculty Reject Pay Offer by 59-0 Vote,” *Middletown Press*, February 25, 1981.

colonial relationship to a union bureaucracy whose first concern would not be the excellence of the education we offer.”²⁷⁰

Not only did some faculty members fear losing their professionalism, they worried even more about losing their influence in university governance. Even if their level of governance did not meet the standards the faculty desired, this sector clearly had a distinct influence on university affairs as compared to the other employees. In the eyes of some faculty members, unionizing represented an acknowledgement that they were indeed employees and this placed their power in jeopardy. As former librarian Erhard Konerding later suggested, “The long and the short of it is that more faculty felt that they had more to lose than to gain.”²⁷¹

Most importantly, the majority of the faculty members and professional librarians was deterred from unionization because they attained decent working conditions and compensation without a union. One potential explanation for this is that the administration was trying to satisfy the faculty because of this group’s highly-valued role in the University’s educational function. Particularly at Wesleyan, where the educational mission was paramount, the administration recognized the importance of keeping the peace. As such, this non-unionized group routinely got ten percent raises, while the unionized secretarial/clerical and physical plant workers struggled to attain more than seven percent.²⁷²

²⁷⁰ Richard Buel, “Argus Manufactured Confrontations,” *Wesleyan Argus*, October 19, 1979, 2.

²⁷¹ Konerding, interview by author, November 13, 2015.

²⁷² The average raises for continuing faculty around this period hovered around ten percent: 8.5% in 1979/80, 11.9% in 1980/81, 11.9% 1981/82, 9.6% in 1982/83, and 8.5% in 1983/84.; “Inflation vs. increases in Faculty Salaries 1975/76-1984/85,” 1985, AAUP Records.

Despite the fact that the faculty and professional librarians were able to get a fair deal without a union, that they even considered unionizing showed that their situation was not quite so different from that of the other sectors. While their privileged position ultimately led to the defeat of the union bids, these faculty organizing drives were inspired by the change that the other sectors achieved. In addition, although they did not unionize, the mere threat of doing so appeared to pressure the University into give them concessions, thus demonstrating the power that the employees of Wesleyan had established.

Public Safety Officers: The Outliers

Although a union organizing drive for the public safety officers took place in the fall of 1979, in the midst of the labor agitation on Wesleyan University's campus, the stimulus to unionize was rather detached from that of the other workers; unlike the other campaigns, there were no references made to the secretarial/clerical workers or the other union drives. On the other hand, like the other sectors the public safety employees were motivated by the culture of pursuing social change at Wesleyan. In this case, the campaign was led by two recent alumni of Wesleyan working at public safety, Paul Gallino and Michael Goldman, who were inspired by a lineage of leftist intellectual thought they had learned about in their classes. They ran a six-week campaign for the nineteen-person unit, but the International Union of Plant Guard Workers of America was voted down in an NLRB election on November 5, 1979.²⁷³

²⁷³ Alexandra Peers, "Wesleyan Security Force Rejects Unionization," *Hartford Courant*, November 5, 1979, P21D.

The two alumni had each spent over four years on Wesleyan's notoriously leftist, activist campus, reading radical literature and taking classes on topics from socialism to the labor movement. Therefore, although issues of wages, benefits, and working conditions played a role, both alumni organizers were more inspired by their political ideologies; as Gallino described it, "wages can always be higher, and then also, honestly, [it came from] a real died-in-the-wool notion of the kind of critique that one would get from reading Marx and being with... students that had a left-leaning perspective on the world."²⁷⁴ Although the campaigns of other sectors did indeed gain encouragement from the innovative campus culture as well, that these ideas were the prime motivator for the leading public safety union advocates set this campaign apart. Moreover, the disconnection of this campaign to the others on campus was exacerbated by the fact that the majority of public safety officers worked at night and were not present on campus during most of the highly visible labor events or to talk with other campus workers.²⁷⁵

In addition to the lack of connection, this campaign suffered from a lack of experienced organizing; the union representatives met with these two enthusiastic alumni/workers merely a couple of times, leaving them to organize all of their coworkers. The lack of support left the workers vulnerable when the administration reacted. Once again, the administrators chose not to run a forceful anti-union campaign, but they publicly recommended against unionizing while allowing the lower level supervisors to take a more active role. For example, the administration voiced its opposition in a student paper with a statement from Personnel Director

²⁷⁴ Paul Gallino (pseud.), interview by author, phone, November 17, 2015.

²⁷⁵ Michael Goldman (pseud.), interview by author, January 8, 2016.

Rumberger saying, “we worked to urge them not to vote for a union... The administration feels both sides will be better off without the union.”²⁷⁶ Beyond this, Goldman suggests that the lower-level supervisors took a more active approach; although such one-on-one meetings cannot be confirmed, he recalled, “One of the second-in-command management took one of the security guys out to a hockey game in Hartford and convinced him to change his vote.”²⁷⁷ In the end, this persuasion may have had a significant consequence as the bid failed by a close vote of nine to seven in an NLRB election.²⁷⁸

Overall, this campaign did not tap into the growing power of workers on campus and, as an isolated event, it did not have the power to succeed. Despite the seeming connection of these events to a larger movement on campus, they appear to have been separate and did not end up contributing to the growth of organized labor on campus. Nevertheless, the impetus to organize came from alumni eager to enact the value of creating change they learned at Wesleyan; thus, the characteristics of Wesleyan that affected the other sectors were still at play in this failed campaign.

Food Service: A Different Wave

Much like the case of the public safety officers, the organization of Wesleyan’s food service workers did not fit neatly into the pattern set by the secretarial/clerical workers; they organized a few years later, in 1982, and, more importantly, they were not employees of Wesleyan University, rather, they were

²⁷⁶ Tim Redmond, “Security Guards Vote Against Joining Union,” *Wesleyan Argus*, Oct 26, 1979, 1.

²⁷⁷ Goldman, interview by author, January 8, 2016.

²⁷⁸ Tim Redmond, “Security Guards Vote Against Joining Union,” *Wesleyan Argus*, Oct 26, 1979, 1.

employed by the food service subcontractor, Saga Food Services. However, although the food service organizing did not tap into the energy of labor on campus, it was part of a wave of organizing conducted by Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE) Local 217, which gave the workers the momentum to achieve a strong first contract the following year.

In the 1970s, the HERE locals based in New Haven (Local 217 and Yale's Local 35) were very forward-thinking in terms of organizing strategy compared to the vast majority of unions, including other HERE locals. In 1973, the International Union gave a grant to renowned organizer Vincent Sirabella to hire and train four new organizers for Local 217 in his worker committee-based approach in order to launch new organizing campaigns. One of these organizers was Henry Tamarin, who later led the campaign at Wesleyan.²⁷⁹

These new organizing efforts strategically focused on subcontracted food service operations at colleges in Connecticut, because the subcontracted relationship produced more restrained reactions against the union from the client university and the employers than in, for instance, corporate settings. Usually, the university administrations were, in the words of Tamarin, “smart enough to say out of the direct fight,” which President Campbell confirmed was the case at Wesleyan.²⁸⁰

Furthermore, these fights elicited little opposition from the subcontractor, because, as another Local 217 organizer at the time, John Wilhelm, added, “These were the seventies, in which there was a tremendous amount of turmoil on the campuses of

²⁷⁹ Getman, *Restoring the Power of Unions: It Takes a Movement.*; Wilhelm, interview by author, January 7, 2016.

²⁸⁰ Henry Tamarin, interview by author, phone, January 9, 2016.; Campbell, interview by author, January 7, 2016.

American universities. Part of our strategy was assuming that the last thing that the food service companies at a college would want to be identified with is turmoil.”²⁸¹ Thus, the employers more easily accepted unions in order to avoid student or worker protests.

Coupled with these strategic targets, Local 217 achieved success using Sirabella’s organizing strategies, which were groundbreaking in the early 1980s.²⁸² Importantly, these tactics did not rely upon the cumbersome NLRB elections; instead they used what labor historian Julius Getman calls “a comprehensive-campaign model based on mobilizing workers, forming committees, and pressuring employers to sign neutrality and card-check agreements” in which employers recognize a union after receiving a majority of signed union authorization cards.²⁸³ Additionally, the local operated under Sirabella’s motto that “the organizer organizes the committee, the committee organizes the workers,” which ensured that hesitant workers heard from people they knew and respected in their workplace.²⁸⁴ With this combination of tactics, Local 217 made tremendous progress, as shown by the fact that between 1979 and 1985, the local won eleven consecutive campaigns, including at University of Hartford, Central Connecticut State University, and Wesleyan University.²⁸⁵

Although food service work at Wesleyan was generally described as a decent job compared to other employment options nearby, the workers suffered from low pay and horrible health insurance, which, after fruitless attempts to ask the

²⁸¹ Wilhelm, interview by author, January 7, 2016.

²⁸² Hoerr, *We Can't Eat Prestige: The Women Who Organized Harvard*, 157.

²⁸³ Getman, *Restoring the Power of Unions: It Takes a Movement*, 3-4.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

management for improvements, became issues worth unionizing over.²⁸⁶ Several women working in the Downey House dining hall led the drive by tracking down the union to help them organize.²⁸⁷ In typical HERE style, these women and a few other workers became the organizing committee, and, according to Tamarin, they were an especially strong one.²⁸⁸ They organized the forty-five food service workers undercover, meeting outside of work, and ultimately went public with seventy percent of the union authorization cards signed.²⁸⁹

To gain recognition of the union in a timely manner, Tamarin conceived an experimental plan to get the Saga director at Wesleyan, Mark Fagan, to sign a recognition agreement. On April 16, 1982, in a dramatic fashion, accompanied by the press, the food service workers marched up to his office. As committee member Jeffery Hill described:

It was a little skinny hall, we all had to stand there all packed in... So we knock on his door, he [Fagan] was a nice guy. He's like 'what's going on?' And we're like, 'Mark we need to talk to you.' And all of a sudden it's like ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty people are all coming in. We couldn't even fit all the people.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁶ Ted Funsten, "Wesleyan Food Workers Gain Union Membership," *Middletown Press*, April 16, 1982.; Randy Siegel, "Argus Unhappy Saga Workers Vote to Join Union Ranks," *Wesleyan Argus*, April 16, 1982, 1.

²⁸⁷ Tamarin, interview by author, January 9, 2016.; Jeffery Hill, interview by author, Wesleyan University Usdan University Center, January 8, 2016.

²⁸⁸ Tamarin, interview by author, January 9, 2016.

²⁸⁹ Randy Siegel, "Argus Unhappy Saga Workers Vote to Join Union Ranks," *Wesleyan Argus*, April 16, 1982, 1.

²⁹⁰ Hill, interview by author, January 8, 2016.

Tamarin presented the authorization cards to Fagan, who offered no resistance; he immediately signed the agreement recognizing Local 217 as the official collective bargaining agent for Wesleyan's food service workers.²⁹¹

After the breezy recognition of the union, the situation changed drastically to a difficult series of negotiations. Tamarin admits that Saga was not being particularly obstinate, but, because of this unit's strength, the union was, in his words, "looking for a great deal" that was not "the routine level first contract."²⁹² They were able to ask for so much because of the worker strength and student support. Hill describes the extreme unity of the group, recalling, "We promised each other that we would stick together if the company was going to push us and threaten us, we would stick together and all act as one."²⁹³ This stemmed from the strong leadership capabilities of the organizing committee, the bonds of some workers who socialized outside of work, and the nature of the work that required much collaboration. Moreover, the workers were bolstered by student support, another important aspect of HERE's strategy at universities. Wesleyan students formed a small committee to collaborate with the workers, collected over 1,000 signatures on a petition to support a strike, and circulated notices about how to prepare for a boycott of the food service facilities if necessary.²⁹⁴ The important role of the students to the Wesleyan administration and

²⁹¹ Tamarin, interview by author, January 9, 2016.; Hill, interview by author, January 8, 2016.; Ted Funsten, "Wesleyan Food Workers Gain Union Membership," *Middletown Press*, April 16, 1982.; Randy Siegel, "Unhappy Saga Workers Vote to Join Union Ranks," April 16, 1982, 1.

²⁹² Tamarin, interview by author, January 9, 2016.

²⁹³ Hill, interview by author, January 8, 2016.

²⁹⁴ "Pressure Saga Now," *Wesleyan Argus*, February 22, 1983, 2.; Jon Davidoff, "At Wes Dining Halls Students Worry as Strike Looms," *Middletown Press*, February 24, 1983; "We, the undersigned," January/February 1983, Food/Dining Halls/Restaurants Vertical Files, Wesleyan University Special Collections and Archives (hereafter referred to as Food Vertical Files.)

its educational mission made this support significant as it pressured the company and gave moral support to the workers.

This strength, from the students and the workers themselves, was crucial, because the negotiations were challenging and even reached the point of the union setting a strike deadline.²⁹⁵ Despite the presence of a federal mediator, negotiations continued right up to this deadline, culminating in a final forty-four-hour bargaining session that truly demonstrated the tenacity required of both sides. This dramatic final session included the rank-and-file committee members taking turns napping in a single hotel room rented by the union, the Saga chief negotiator breaking down in tears, and, finally, a tentative agreement reached at 5:30am on March 1, 1983.²⁹⁶

The agreement, which was ultimately approved unanimously by the workers on March 4, was a remarkably strong first contract, which included fully paid health insurance, large raises especially for the lowest paid employees, and other details the union wanted, such as life insurance, a pension fund, consideration of seniority in layoffs and promotions, and a one year duration. Although the union did make some concessions, such as accepting a less-preferred insurance provider, the company conceded more.²⁹⁷ Overall, the workers were pleased, because, as Tamarin reflected, “it’s still [to this day] one of the outstanding first food service contracts in the

²⁹⁵ Anne McGrath, “Strike Possible at Wesleyan,” *Hartford Courant*, February 11, 1983, B5A; Anne McGrath, “Food Service Talks Still Face Obstacles,” *Hartford Courant*, February 12, 1983, B5A.; “Strike Deadline set Friday,” *Wesleyan Argus*, Feb 11, 1983.; Tom Frank, “Saga Union will Strike on February 28 if New Contract Not Reached,” *Wesleyan Argus*, February 11, 1983, 1.

²⁹⁶ Jonathan Yeo, “Argus Saga, Union Reach Settlement in 44th Hour of Continuous Negotiation,” *Wesleyan Argus*, March 1, 1983, 1.; Hill, interview by author, January 8, 2016.; Tamarin, interview by author, January 9, 2016.

²⁹⁷ “Wes Kitchen, Dining Hall Workers Approve Contract,” *Middletown Press*, March 3, 1983, 10; Anne McGrath, “Food-Service Pact Disputed,” *Hartford Courant*, March 4, 1983, B5A.

industry. It was always a very rich contract,”²⁹⁸ an observation that is confirmed by an analysis of the contracts of Wesleyan and nearby universities.²⁹⁹

All in all, although the food service workers did not feed off of the momentum of the secretarial/clerical strike in order to unionize, they did tap into the energy of the local food service organizing movement and the organizational tactics developed by HERE. Ultimately, with a smart union, a strong unit, and student support, they were able to establish a high standard and contribute to making Wesleyan a campus that was a quality place to work.

Conclusion

Provoked by their disappointment in the administration’s ability to treat them well and adhere to its supposed familial values, workers of Wesleyan University in the late 1970s and early 1980s made strides towards improving their jobs themselves. Although not every effort was successful, the example of the secretarial/clerical workers bravely striking for better compensation and working conditions set off a wave of unionization attempts. Even when the efforts failed, the mere push for a union made a positive impact, as shown by the faculty’s gains after threats of unionization. Through campus community support and inter-sector inspiration, this period saw a frenzy of union activity that appears to be unique to Wesleyan’s campus.

²⁹⁸ Tamarin, interview by author, January 9, 2016.

²⁹⁹ Collective Bargaining Agreement between Bon Appétit, a Division of Compass Group USA for its employees at Wesleyan University and UNITE HERE Local 217, June 13, 2014.; Agreement between ARAMARK Educational Services, LLC for its Food Service employees at University of Hartford and UNITE HERE Local 217, April 1, 2011.; Collective Bargaining Agreement between Chartwells at Trinity College Food Service Department and UNITE HERE Local 217, July 1, 2012.

Throughout the half decade, Wesleyan's culture of creating change, the central role of the educational mission, and the rhetoric of familial values created this unique burst of unionization. Firstly, the power of being surrounded by others striving to make change cannot be discounted, as workers at Wesleyan tapped into the campus culture of creating social change and the larger trends of the labor movement. This story contains countless examples of this benefit, from clerical union movement's strength in southern New England and the way the secretarial/clerical strike moved the physical plant workers and faculty to consider unionization, to the wave of food service organizing in Connecticut that propelled the Saga employees into an excellent contract. The power of these connections was evident when compared to the failed campaign of the public safety workers, which, despite being triggered by the campus culture of social change, was isolated at night, inspired only by theoretical ideals, and lacked the heightened morale and support that movements brought other sectors.

Secondly, the role of the campus community was paramount in these events. The Wesleyan University administration highly valued the students and faculty, as the college's focus remained undergraduate education even in an age when research was supreme at other universities. Thus, having community support, especially that of the academic community, gave the negotiating workers a boost in the power dynamic that was often the key to success. The secretarial/clerical and food service workers more than any other category solicited and received support from students, and they achieved great success while the faculty and the public safety advocates for unions, who did not reach out for community support, met failure. Thus, campus support

gave the workers the power to push the administration, even when it claimed it had reached its bottom line.

Additionally, this community support was vital in mediating the response from the administration, which valued the idea of maintaining the harmony of the campus community just as highly as it valued the educational mission. The Wesleyan administration opted not to hire anti-union consultants for any of the workers' campaigns, though some individual administrators discouraged unionization and many lower-level managers pressured workers not to unionize. In this situation, the importance of keeping the community intact convinced the administration that a full-blown anti-union attack against its own employees would disrupt the atmosphere and the University's image too much, causing it to act with restraint.

In this exceptional wave of labor organizing on a campus, Wesleyan workers made efforts to press the administration to enact the talk of community and several groups were able to realize the image of Wesleyan as praiseworthy workplace. In this period of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the workers managed to make social change happen in their own jobs and lives. While this was a period of strength, the question that follows is, as the rhetoric of family on campus waned in the decades to come, did the workers have the force to defend and raise the quality of their jobs? Or was this merely a passing moment that faded off, ultimately returning power to the administration?

Chapter Four

Then What? Wesleyan Workers in the Corporate Age

“[The administration] sort of leaves us out of the family. But we’re really strong willed, so we stay in the family anyway. And the students really accept us.”
– Food Service Worker Mark Bousquet³⁰⁰

In this quote, Mark Bousquet speaks to the exclusion that he and the other subcontracted workers on Wesleyan University’s campus felt from the administration’s construction of the campus community.³⁰¹ Bousquet and the food service workers had long been subcontracted and had felt this sense of exclusion for decades, but, in the period following the surge of unionization attempts, workers across the spectrum began to feel more and more excluded from the family. For, following a decade of improvements for the newly unionized workers in the 1980s, Wesleyan’s administration starkly changed its behavior. It backed away from the rhetoric of family and community, in keeping with the trend of university administrations nationwide adopting business-like mentalities. This new attitude resulted in a counterattack against the campus workers in order to keep the University budgets balanced; the administration pressured unionized workers to accept minimal raises and benefit cutbacks while weakening their bargaining units by bringing in non-union subcontractors for the janitorial and grounds keeping work. Fortunately, as the quote illustrates, through student support and union strength, Wesleyan workers

³⁰⁰ Mark Bousquet, Interview by author, Wesleyan University Usdan University Center, January 28, 2016.

³⁰¹ There were several changes at the top in this time period. 1988 witnessed the departure of Colin Campbell. Following him, William Chace served as President until 1994, then Douglas Bennet from 1995 to 2007, and, finally, Michael Roth currently serves as University President. In addition, the food service contractors changed; in 1987 Marriott Hotel Corporation bought out Saga, in 1989, ARA Corporation (later ARAMARK) replaced Saga-Marriott, and in 2007 Bon Appétit won the food service contract which it now holds.

were able to resist these changes and maintain high-quality jobs to keep for the entirety of their careers.

A Decade of Growth

Immediately, the presence of unions on Wesleyan University's campus created significant changes. Admittedly, though, joining a union and gaining the first contract was only part of the workers' journey, as their contracts needed to be defended, enforced, and re-negotiated every few years. Regardless, work at Wesleyan improved steadily for about a decade for the newly unionized secretarial/clerical, physical plant, and food service workers, both in terms of material gains and having a voice on the job.

This initial period of growth occurred for several reasons, including the large numbers of improvements that remained to be made, the initial enthusiasm for the unions, and, for some, a positive relationship with the administration. Despite attaining first contracts that were largely successful, campus union workers still had major deficits to fill, as will become clear later in the chapter. These gaps provided room to grow quickly in the first few years. Moreover, immediately following unionization, workers still had enthusiasm for their unions; long-time members later recalled high attendance in membership meetings and a readiness to fight that made union involvement in later periods pale in comparison. For example, in addition to the near strike by the secretarial/clerical and physical plant workers in 1979, negotiations for these groups butted against their strike deadline in 1985, just as it did for the food

service workers in 1987.³⁰² These close calls illustrate that the workers were prepared to hold their ground to achieve strong contracts. Lastly, the OPEIU Business Representative from that time, Michael Thompson, suggested that the University administration came to accept the presence of the OPEIU union on campus, making it much more amenable to the union's requests.³⁰³ In support of this, one physical plant union member claimed that in this period, "negotiations were simple and they lasted about three or four days. Everything was status quo; you got your four percent raise and that was it."³⁰⁴ Although this retrospective account may oversimplify the situation, it illustrates the relatively agreeable relationship between workers and the University in this period.

These factors allowed Wesleyan workers to attain substantial improvements in their contracts. Initially, as outlined in the previous chapter, food service workers gained substantial raises and the Wesleyan employed physical plant and secretarial/clerical workers achieved new pay scale systems. Additionally, across the board the newly unionized staff gained better health insurance, retirement contributions, life insurance, and disability insurance. Furthermore, during this decade, the workers pushed to fill in the gaps in their original contracts—in 1984, the food service workers successfully fought for inclusion of the Blue Cross Blue Shield health insurance program in their second contract.³⁰⁵ In their third contract, in 1982,

³⁰² Charlotte Crystal, "Wesleyan Workers' Last Minute Vote Approves Contract," *Middletown Press*, August 14, 1985, 1.; Andrew Julien, "Food Service Union, Wes Reach Accord," *Middletown Press*, March 25, 1987.

³⁰³ Thompson, interview by author, February 17, 2016.

³⁰⁴ Anonymous Physical Plant worker, interview by author, Wesleyan University Hall-Atwater, February 18, 2016.

³⁰⁵ Danny Kelly, "Saga union wins contract," *Wesleyan University*, March 2, 1984, 1.

the secretarial/clerical workers pushed their medical insurance contribution down to twenty percent of the total cost and achieved an agency shop—in which all workers who chose not to join the union had to pay the equivalence of union dues to a charity of their choice.³⁰⁶ These improvements were augmented in 1985, alongside physical plant, when both groups reduced medical insurance contributions to fifteen percent and achieved the long-desired union shop requiring all employees to be members of the union.³⁰⁷

In addition to material gains, empowerment on the job was an equally crucial result of unionization. Sociologist Dan Clawson emphasizes the importance of day-to-day worker power over simple contract stipulations, writing that unions allow “workers to democratically organize and win a say, not just once every four years in a voting booth, but every day at work.”³⁰⁸ In other words, in order to avoid protracted formal grievance procedures, workers needed to stand up to their bosses personally, because, despite the existence of a contract, employers did not always respect the rules.³⁰⁹ At Wesleyan, either on their own or with the assistance or representation of a respected colleague serving as a union steward, workers reported feeling more secure speaking up about issues at work after unionizing. For example, food service workers often confronted their supervisors whenever they noticed unfair treatment or a

³⁰⁶ Stewards to Secretarial/Clerical members, August 24, 1982, OPEIU Vertical File.

³⁰⁷ Charlotte Crystal, “Wesleyan Workers’ Last Minute Vote Approves Contract,” *Middletown Press*, August 14, 1985, 1.

³⁰⁸ Dan Clawson, *The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2003), 12.

³⁰⁹ Fran Quigley, *If We Can Win Here: The New Front Lines of the Labor Movement* (Cornell University Press, 2015), 22.

potential breach of contract in order to resolve the problem quickly.³¹⁰ Mark

Bousquet recounted one occasion in which they asserted themselves:

When this company first got here, they tried to skimp all of us right down and out, and we walked right off the job to the boss's office, knocked on the door, and said we wanted to talk to him. He came out. [One woman] stood right there and said 'you're a bold-faced liar.' And that's when we got to sit down, talk, and say this is what we wanted.³¹¹

In this case, the food service workers were reaping the benefits of unionization: having their voices heard in order to improve their material conditions. Fortunately, although the combative energy did fade over time, with the support of their unions and the campus community, the workers maintained the ability to fight these changes and uphold their standards.

Employers Push Back

This period of upward progress came to an end when, in the late-1980s, the Wesleyan University administration shifted its behavior away from cultivating community towards a more business-minded approach; it began to subcontract out previously union jobs and mount attacks on the compensation of the remaining university employees. Although primary sources do not reveal the exact motives of Wesleyan's administration, its actions fell squarely in line with labor-management trends: by the late-1980s, employers began to attack labor standards—that is the quality of compensation, benefits, and working conditions—and, simultaneously,

³¹⁰ Hill, Interview by author, January 8, 2016.; "Interview of Five Wesleyan Employees," *Hermes*, September 29, 1981, 6-7.

³¹¹ Bousquet, Interview by author, January 28, 2016.

universities were becoming more business-like, just in time to participate in this assault alongside corporate employers.

Furthering trends that began in the mid-1970s with the end of Christmas parties and family picnics, workers in the 1980s began to feel that the administration no longer considered them part of the Wesleyan family. To be clear, many Wesleyan staff members generally still felt part of a community but mostly because of the students. For instance, forty three-year Wesleyan employee Georgianne Leone, described her efforts as an administrative assistant in the Center for African American Studies saying, “I was doing it for my own people, for my family. That was my second family. I loved working there.”³¹² Despite the continued close relationship between students and workers, many employees saw a decreased community from above. Deborah Sierpinski, observed that “like a lot of universities, I think they were pushing it to be more corporate here, and that’s where I think things started changing.”³¹³ Another administrative assistant was quoted in the newspaper charging “the human element has been taken out of this university.”³¹⁴

These changes at Wesleyan corresponded with similar shifts at colleges and universities throughout the country. Authors in *Campus, Inc.* describe how these institutions—which previously were expected to behave with educational, rather than financial, priorities in mind—increasingly adopted corporate or business-like mentalities.³¹⁵ A 1997 *Businessweek* article echoed this, proposing that in response to

³¹² Leone, Interview by author, January 25, 2016.

³¹³ Sierpinski, interview by author, November 15, 2015.

³¹⁴ Derek F. DiMatteo, “Secretaries Dispute Contract,” *Wesleyan Argus*, April 12, 1995, 1.

³¹⁵ Henry Steck and Michael Zweig, “Take Back the University: Only Unions Can Save Academic Life,” in *Campus, Inc* (2000), 297.

previous unsustainable financial practices, “higher education is changing profoundly, retreating from the ideals of liberal arts and the leading-edge research it always has cherished. Instead, it is behaving more like the \$250 billion business it has become.”³¹⁶ Lawrence Soley in *Leasing the Ivory Tower* suggests a further explanation for this, attributing the new prioritization of finances over scholarship to corporate research funding.³¹⁷ Although Wesleyan was never funded by large research corporations, as Professor Emeritus Richard Ohmann contended, the University changed in the 2000s, by which point “business principles [were] at work.”³¹⁸ As such, employer behaviors that drove down the labor standards in other industries made their way to the Ivory Tower, even to liberal Wesleyan.

One significant example of business principles at Wesleyan was the introduction of more subcontracted companies; in addition to food services, janitorial and grounds keeping operations were subcontracted to Initial Cleaning Services in 1989 and Stonehedge Landscaping in 1993, respectively.³¹⁹ The example of the janitorial workers perfectly illustrated the standard practices of the subcontracting explosion that took place in both the private and public sector beginning in the 1980s. Essentially, subcontracting was the act of a company or institution contracting out auxiliary operational functions, such as food service, janitorial work, or laundry services, in order to reduce costs.³²⁰ At Wesleyan, the Director of Public Information,

³¹⁶ Keith H. Hammonds and Susan Jackson, “The New University,” *Businessweek*, December 22, 1997.

³¹⁷ Lawrence C. Soley, *Leasing the Ivory Tower: The Corporate Takeover of Academia* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1995).

³¹⁸ Richard Ohmann, interview by Nancy Smith, April 15, 2014.

³¹⁹ Andrew Schell, “Contractor May Replace Grounds Crew,” *Wesleyan Argus*, April 7, 1993.

³²⁰ Corey Dolgon, “Justice for Janitors: Organizing against Outsourcing at Southhampton College,” in *Campus, Inc: Corporate Power in the Ivory Tower*, ed. Geoffrey D. White and Flannery C. Hauck (Amherst, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 2000), 346; David Weil, *Fissured Workplace : Why Work Became*

William Holder, made this aim clear, stating, “Wesleyan University’s policy is to receive quality service at competitive costs from each contractor in order to maximize the resources available to support our educational mission.”³²¹ How did subcontracting achieve this? By utilizing non-union labor, lowering standards, complicating the employer-employee relationship, and employing vulnerable populations this arrangement reduced costs for the client institution.

First, as was common, at Wesleyan the administration selected a non-union subcontractor to replace the unionized physical plant janitors. This allowed the subcontractor to spend less on labor costs and, subsequently, pass on those savings to the University.³²² Admirably, for both the janitorial and grounds workers, the administration did not simply lay off the existing union physical plant workers, as companies often did; rather it reduced the Wesleyan employed staff through attrition (that is, not replacing workers who retired) and it transferred some workers to other divisions of the physical plant department.

Despite the administration’s generosity towards its physical plant workers, subcontracting set up a situation in which the new janitors’ working conditions were much worse than before. It is well documented that subcontracted companies engage in a “race to the bottom” whereby they try to underbid their competitors to gain the contract. They achieve this by reducing worker safety standards, hiring fewer

So Bad for So Many and What Can Be Done to Improve It (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 18.

³²¹ Sudhin Thanawala, “USLAC continues union push,” *Wesleyan Argus*, December 10, 1999, 1.

³²² Jess Walsh, “Living Wage Campaigns Storm the Ivory Tower: Low Wage Workers on Campus,” *New Labor Forum*, no. 6 (2000): 82; Weil, *Fissured Workplace : Why Work Became So Bad for So Many and What Can Be Done to Improve It*, 676.

workers, cutting benefits, and decreasing compensation.³²³ This occurred Wesleyan, and the result was that, in 1999, the Initial janitorial staff had no benefits and pay started at only \$6.50 an hour in contrast with the Wesleyan employed physical plant workers who then earned \$11.62 per hour at minimum. One janitor denounced the impossibility of this situation saying, “I have a dentist bill for \$400, and that’s just for one molar. So I have not been able to go to the dentist, because \$400 in order to fix only one molar is a lot of money. We don’t even earn that much in a week.”³²⁴ A student journalist for the *Hermes* pointed out this contradiction in 2000 writing:

[Norma] works at Wesleyan, she cleans *Wesleyan’s* library, but she works for a company called Initial. Wesleyan has a contract with Initial for janitorial services, which means Wesleyan pays Initial and Initial pays the janitors. And because the name on the paychecks is Initial, not Wesleyan, workers like Norma aren’t entitled to Wesleyan wages or Wesleyan benefits.³²⁵

Moreover, the situation in which the employer paid the worker and the client university paid the employer meant that both entities had some control over the workers. However, the subcontractor insulated the administration from the workers, making it harder for them to speak out against these injustices to those in power.³²⁶ This disconnect allowed the Wesleyan administration to push subcontracted workers

³²³ Richard Freeman, "The Subcontracted Labor Market: David Weil's Book, the Fissured Workplace, Describes a Disturbing Trend for Workers" (2014), 39; Angela Coyle, "Going Private: The Implications of Privatization for Women's Work," *Feminist Review*, no. 21 (1985): 12; Weil, *Fissured Workplace : Why Work Became So Bad for So Many and What Can Be Done to Improve It*, 26.

³²⁴ "Ana translated interview transcript," April 2000, Wesleyan University Special Collections and Archives Justice for Janitors Records (hereafter referred to as Justice for Janitors Records).

³²⁵ Brian Edwards-Tiekert, "Justice for Janitors: Fighting Wesleyan's Service Sector," *Hermes*, February 2000.

³²⁶ Coyle, "Going Private: The Implications of Privatization for Women's Work," 5; Steven Greenhouse, *The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker*, vol. 1 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 245.

outside the campus community and, thus, deny responsibility for their well-being.³²⁷

Cook Jeffery Hill, a long time subcontracted worker, decried this exclusion, commenting about his own sector:

We're a subcontractor on this campus, so we're not recognized. ... You got to recognize that this has been my career at this place, and I've put a lot of stock into it. I met my wife here...This is a great deal of my adult life... Nobody knows I've been here thirty-six years, and they don't care. As long as there's food in the dining room, and the students have enough to eat, and the catering events get dropped off on time... It doesn't anger me that they don't, but it saddens me.³²⁸

Lastly, this exploitation and exclusion of subcontractors was more pronounced for the janitors at Wesleyan, like in most subcontracted cleaning operations, due to the ethnic composition of the new labor force. Twenty-seven of twenty-nine janitors were Latino, few spoke fluent English, some were immigrants, and several were undocumented. Because of xenophobic images of immigrants, discriminatory laws against undocumented people, structures that disempowered non-English speakers, and racist attitudes towards Latinos, these workers were part of a marginalized population in the U.S. As such, they were even less able to denounce their poor conditions than the whiter physical plant workforce they replaced, making them more vulnerable to economic exploitation.³²⁹ Overall, the result of subcontracting, as Angela Coyle describes of the nation as a whole, was: "the already poor pay and conditions found in this [janitorial] work [could] be seen to be deteriorating even

³²⁷ Weil, *Fissured Workplace : Why Work Became So Bad for So Many and What Can Be Done to Improve It*; Christian Zolniski, "Labor Control and Resistance of Mexican Immigrant Janitors in Silicon Valley," *Human Organization* 62, no. 1 (2003): 41.

³²⁸ Jeff Hill, interview by author, January 8, 2016.

³²⁹ Herminia Duran, Henry Meneces, Enoe Mercedes, and Henry Gonzales, translated interview transcripts, April 2000, Justice for Janitors Records.; Clawson, *The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements*, 181.

further.”³³⁰ This decline in labor standards was a direct result of the Wesleyan administration’s participation in market-minded management practices.

The second result of the business-minded management at Wesleyan University was the administration pushing the direct employees to do more work for less money. By the administration’s own admission, cutbacks during this period created higher workloads; Human Resources Director David Landsberg told the *Wesleyan Argus* in 1995, “I wouldn’t deny for a minute that as staff have left the University, demands on some have gone up.”³³¹ More than simply implementing cutbacks, the administration often tried to take back benefits and reduce wages, all while expecting more work. Georgianne Leone described this saying, “every time [the contract] came up for negotiations is when things got tough. Because right away, the University was going to take this away and take that away.”³³²

Just as Wesleyan’s administration attempted to do, beginning in the 1980s, employers across the U.S. moved to take away existing compensation and benefits. The origins of these changes have been attributed by most scholars to the newly popularized employer focus on economics above all else, driven by increased conservative politics, decreased regulation, and competitive pressures from advanced technology and globalization that encouraged companies to keep costs low.³³³ Although these trends affected non-unionized, corporate workers most, as the public

³³⁰Coyle, "Going Private: The Implications of Privatization for Women's Work," 5; Andrew Herod and Luis L. M. Aguiar, "Introduction: Cleaners and the Dirty Work of Neoliberalism," *Antipode* 38, no. 3 (2006): 426.

³³¹ Derek F. DiMatteo, "Secretaries Dispute Contract," *Wesleyan Argus*, April 12, 1995, 1.

³³² Leone, Interview by author, January 25, 2016.

³³³ See: Eileen Appelbaum, Annette Bernhardt, and Richard J. Murnane, *Low-Wage America: How Employers Are Reshaping Opportunity in the Workplace* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003).

sector and universities began to mimic the behavior of businesses, subcontracting and employer take-backs became common practice across the board.

Nationally, the result was that health insurance, pensions, job security, workloads, and working hours decreased; corporations pocketed more money; and income inequality rose, even when the economy and worker productivity improved in the 1990s.³³⁴ For instance, the portion of workers receiving employer-sponsored health insurance fell from sixty-nine percent in 1979 to fifty-six percent in 2004. The pattern for pensions was similar, as the percentage of workers holding one fell from ninety-one percent in 1985 to sixty-five percent in 2003.³³⁵ Although the Wesleyan University administration attempted to follow the trends and push campus labor standards down as well, the workers fought back.

Workers and Students Fight Back

Fortunately for Wesleyan University employees, even though some work was subcontracted out and the administration went on the offensive during negotiations, two factors prevented their labor standards from reaching the abysmal levels of their nonunionized counterparts elsewhere: union protection and student activist backing. Although the experiences of the faculty defied this pattern, the vast majority of Wesleyan workers relied on these supports to maintain the quality of their jobs.

³³⁴ Greenhouse, *The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker*, 1, 5; Weil, *Fissured Workplace : Why Work Became So Bad for So Many and What Can Be Done to Improve It*; Robert H. Zieger, Timothy J. Minchin, and Gilbert J. Gall, *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Centuries*, vol. 4 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

³³⁵ L. Mishel, J. Bernstein, and J. Schmitt, "The State of Working America, 2006/2007," in (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2009). Annette Bernhardt et al., *The Gloves-Off Economy : Workplace Standards at the Bottom of America's Labor Market* (2008), 11-12.

Union Power:

The actions of the public safety officers most clearly represent how Wesleyan workers continually turned to unions to prevent the degradation of their labor standards. In the fall of 2002, in response to alleged unfair treatment by supervisors, several officers reached out to the United Federation of Security Officers.³³⁶ As with previous unionization attempts, the administration did not hire anti-union consultants to lead a campaign. However, in keeping with the ever-growing anti-union climate in the country, the administration did fight the workers' efforts. Its challenge took the form of memos claiming a union would hurt the officers' finances and disparaging the personal reputations of union officials. For instance, a November 24, 2002 memo from the Human Resources department leaked to the press ridiculed the union president, Ralph Purdy, and claimed, his "employment as a town police officer for conduct involving the solicitation of contributions... seriously affects his general character."³³⁷

Despite this discouragement, the NLRB election held in December was in favor of unionizing.³³⁸ Nonetheless, the administration continued the fight against the union by utilizing the same stalling tactic it had used in 1974 against the Secretarial/Clerical Forum: disputing the bargaining unit. This time, it challenged the votes of several part-time officers that tipped the balance, saying their part-time status excluded them from the unit. The labor board, however, dismissed this charge. As a

³³⁶ David Martin, "Public Safety to unionize," *Wesleyan Argus*, April 15, 2003.

³³⁷ Jim Hickey, "Wesleyan officers win fights for union," *Middletown Press*, April, 4, 2003

³³⁸ *Ibid.*

result, twenty years after the public safety officers' initial attempt to unionize, they finally gained union representation to counteract university pressure.

Similarly, the workers represented by OPEIU Local 153—the physical plant and secretarial/clerical workers—also relied on union power to bolster their situation against attacks from the administration. It is important to note that Local 153 tended to take a more collaborative stance in its operations than the food service workers' union, HERE. Former OPEIU Business Representative Michael Thompson expressed this idea saying, “Our union prides itself on problem solving and not going to the barricades every time a problem comes up” and, further, “the relationship between us and the Wesleyan [administration] has become very strong... we like each other and we really respect each other.”³³⁹ This attitude was echoed by several members, who described their union as eager to collaborate on solutions with the employer. One longtime physical plant worker explained that, “We’re a unique union in that we kind of go with the flow.... We’re very flexible and are willing to do different tasks.”³⁴⁰ Although there certainly were always some members who were more militant in their stance, after the strike, Local 153 mostly managed to avoid public conflict with the administration. Thus, because of this union’s cooperative mentality, when tension arose between the two sides in the late 2010s, it was most likely due to the hardline stance of the administration.

Previously, both the physical plant and secretarial/clerical workers experienced gradual workforce cutbacks over the course of several decades, especially physical plant when the grounds and janitorial units were subcontracted.

³³⁹ Thompson, Interview by author, February 17, 2016.

³⁴⁰ Anonymous Physical Plant worker, Interview by author, February 18, 2016.

However, it was after the financial crises of 2007/08 that the administration made its most hard-hitting moves. In the 2008/09 and 2010 negotiations, the secretarial/clerical and physical plant units each agreed to increase their insurance contributions from fifteen percent to thirty-three percent in exchange for moderate raises.³⁴¹

By accepting this step backwards, the workers seemingly whet the administration's appetite for savings, because one week following the conclusion of physical plant negotiations in 2010, the administration announced a further increase of 14.5 percent for all staff insurance contributions, something it was entitled to do according to the contract. By the union's estimations this represented a colossal 160 percent increase from \$193.38 to \$501.60 per month for a family plan, factoring in the increase negotiated in the contracts.

Union members were quick to point out that this would cause major hardship for themselves and other low paid employees of the University. Several brave workers shared statements in the campus paper about the impact on their lives; for instance, one secretarial/clerical leader, Virginia Harris, explained her personal situation writing: "I am unable to find the money in my personal budget to keep my family on Wesleyan's health insurance plan. I have just completed the application to put my youngest daughter on Connecticut's taxpayer-funded Husky health insurance plan."³⁴²

³⁴¹ Erin Newport, "Phys. Plant Struggles in Union Negotiations," *Wesleyan Argus*, October 2, 2010.; Rob Wohl, "'No Wesploitation': Physical Plant workers protest contract," *Wesleyan Argus*, April 22, 2008.

³⁴² Virginia Harris, "Affordable Health Insurance Eludes Wes Employees," *Wesleyan Argus*, November 16, 2010, 2.

This dire situation produced one of the few job actions taken by Local 153 at Wesleyan since the secretarial/clerical strike of 1978: a public protest in the student center featuring the stories of physical plant and secretarial/clerical workers read by student allies. One worker's account stated that, "I used to be proud and excited to brag about my great benefits and the wonderful place I worked... Now it's embarrassing because in order to protect my family's health and afford things like rent and food I have to accept state aid."³⁴³ Students, faculty, and workers from other sectors filled the room to hear these workers' experience and applauded their demands for a solution. This action provoked a concession from the administration, as it ultimately agreed to subsidize the cost of the insurance contribution for all university employees, inside and out of the union, making less than 50,000 dollars per year.³⁴⁴ Here, the attempted take-backs from the administration pushed even a union that valued cooperation to fight back to preserve the labor standard at Wesleyan for all low-wage university employees.

Contrastingly, the food service workers belonged to a union that prided itself on fighting to improve labor standards. Active union member Mark Bousquet emphasized this point, saying, "We've had a couple tough battles with the company and we do fight. You got to fight. You got to stand up for your rights."³⁴⁵ Primed by their local union's commitment to pushing the employer and furthered by the sector's pre-existing unity and strength, the food service workers were well prepared to stop

³⁴³ Miriam Berger, "Secretary's Union Surprised by Pleasant Negotiations," *Wesleyan Argus*, January 30, 2009.; Erin Newport, "P-Plant Negotiations Conclude," *Wesleyan Argus*, November 5, 2010.

³⁴⁴ Erin Newport, "Students Fight Staff Healthcare Cost Rise," *Wesleyan Argus*, November 19, 2010.; Erin Newport, "Health Insurance Subsidies to be Implemented," *Wesleyan Argus*, September 8, 2011.

³⁴⁵ Bousquet, Interview by author, January 28, 2016.

the onslaught on their wages and benefits. This was crucial, because this sector faced multiple offensives from the employers.

The pushback against the food service workers differed slightly from that directed at Wesleyan employees, as their employer had been a subcontracted for-profit company for the entire existence of the union on campus. Although the philosophies of different companies varied slightly, the corporate mentality was constant. As explained above, the administration looked for companies to do the work cheaply and the service providers tried to do it for the lowest cost. As such, the food service workers experienced the most pressure when the Wesleyan administration brought in new companies to do the work more cheaply and efficiently. In those moments, the workers had to fight against a company—be it Marriott, Aramark, or Bon Appétit—trying to fit them into their new, increasingly impersonal and more corporate policies.

The first serious confrontation arrived with the ARA Corporation (later called Aramark) in 1989. Up to this time, workers had grown accustomed to Saga-Marriott which one worker described as “a people company” due to its accommodating style of management that allowed them autonomy on the job.³⁴⁶ Immediately, they recognized the more corporate attitude of its successor, Aramark. They accused the managers of being disinterested their employees, an idea that the same worker summed up saying, “Aramark doesn’t know how to treat [us].”³⁴⁷ This sentiment was

³⁴⁶ In 1987, Marriott Hotel Corporation purchased Saga Food Services and began to run their food service operations.; Ben Popper, “Workers hold vigil for health benefits,” *Wesleyan Argus*, April 5, 2005; Karen Winegarten and Jessica Melia, “Aramark threatens workers,” *Wesleyan Argus*, November 14, 2000, 3.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

confirmed by the fact that, upon arriving at Wesleyan, Aramark management tried to switch fifteen full-time positions, which required the company to provide benefits, to thirty part-time positions, which were not eligible for company benefits.³⁴⁸ Later, when Bon Appétit, the current company, arrived in 2007, it similarly tried to reduce full time positions, by cutting twenty full time workers down to part time. Union member Jeffery Hill identified this as a corporate tactic to increase profit, arguing in a *Wesleyan Argus* article, “They cut hours for monetary gain, solely. It’s a big business thing on the back of the worker.”³⁴⁹

When they arrived, these companies may not have been aware of how strong Local 217 at Wesleyan was. The workers felt empowered to stand up to their employer, and that they did; for example, in September 2007, sixty-eight of the food service workers marched to the managerial offices and demanded an audience of the Bon Appétit manager. When he came out, the workers personally confronted him, accusing the company of violating the contract by cutting hours and sharing personal stories about the impact that decreased hours—and the resulting loss of benefits and money—had on their lives. This effort eventually forced the company to increase the workers’ hours.³⁵⁰ This kind of union strength—giving the workers the sense of empowerment to resist degradation of their standards—has no better example than the food service workers at Wesleyan. Through years of fighting and staying united, they

³⁴⁸ Brent Spodek, “Dining Employees fight for New Contract as Deadline Approaches,” *Wesleyan Argus*, February 23, 1996, 5.

³⁴⁹ Ezra Silk, “Workers unite: Union butts heads with Bon Appétit,” *Wesleyan Argus*, September 7, 2007.

³⁵⁰ Bousquet, interview by author, January 28, 2016.; Ezra Silk, “Workers unite: Union butts heads with Bon Appétit,” *Wesleyan Argus*, September 7, 2007.

managed to maintain one of the best contracts of all the UNITE HERE³⁵¹ food service units throughout the country, despite the climate of employer take backs both nationally and on Wesleyan's campus.

Student Support:

Certainly, the presence of unions on campus played a fundamental role in maintaining the quality of work at Wesleyan, but the power of the unions was augmented by another crucial weapon: student activism. The prime case of such involvement occurred in the 1999/2000 Justice for Janitors campaign when the subcontracted, non-unionized janitors received an unusual show of student support that made a critical impact in their bid for decent compensation and working conditions.

Since the arrival of unions on campus brought labor issues to their attention, student supporters were both strong and necessarily so. Union member Jeffery Hill praised the involvement of students, saying, “The one single most important strength is Wesleyan students... [They] have been our ace in the hole... They’ve always been right there with us.”³⁵² This consistent support was helpful for all workers, but it was especially important to the subcontracted workers who had no voice with the administration that wielded power over them. In several cases of labor strife, University presidents refused to intervene between the subcontractor and the workers, shut the workers out of meetings regarding their situation, and declined their visits to

³⁵¹ HERE merged with the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees in 2004 to form UNITE HERE.

³⁵² Hill, interview by author, January 8, 2016.

office hours.³⁵³ In these situations, students were able to use their status as “customers” of the University—and as a vital component of the educational mission—to make change by disrupting academic functions, having their parents (who often paid tuition and, accordingly, had influence) call the administration, and rallying alumni networks to threaten to withhold valuable donations. In this way, student involvement served as a key weapon to pressure the administration to, in turn, pressure the subcontractor to improve standards for workers on campus.³⁵⁴

This student action was the leading force behind the 1999/2000 Justice for Janitors campaign at Wesleyan. Justice for Janitors was the name of the campaign led by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s as an attempt to revitalize the labor movement. It hoped to achieve this by tapping into the growing demographics of service workers, specifically Latino, often immigrant, janitors. Typically, the campaigns succeeded by using non-conventional organizing strategies. For instance, they usually undertook corporate campaigns that researched and attacked the corporation’s other holdings and rallied support from broad-based coalitions of religious, student, non-profit, labor, and local government groups. The national campaign succeeded in organizing thousands of janitors, including on many college campuses.³⁵⁵

³⁵³ For example, President Bennet in 2000 refused visits from both food service workers and custodial workers during the Justice for Janitors campaign. Ari Yampolsky and Sarah Norr, “USLAC and Bennet sign a Code of Conduct,” *Wesleyan Argus*, May 9 2000, 15.

³⁵⁴ Quigley, *If We Can Win Here: The New Front Lines of the Labor Movement*, 146.

³⁵⁵ Walsh, “Living Wage Campaigns Storm the Ivory Tower: Low Wage Workers on Campus.”; Zieger, Minchin, and Gall, *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Centuries*, 4, 259.

The campaign at Wesleyan began in 1999 with a student reaching out to the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 351 in Hartford after speaking with a janitor about their poor working conditions and pay. The union bid gained rapid support among the janitors through the recruitment efforts of several lead workers. Although the Wesleyan administration urged Initial to request an NLRB election, a campus-wide petition with 3,400 signatures pushed the administration to declare neutrality, and the union was certified in December of 1999 after a card check agreement.³⁵⁶

However, as was clear from the secretarial/clerical battle, recognizing the union was only the beginning. Legal scholar Fran Quigley explains that “winning union recognition is, at best, only half the battle,” as after three years, thirty percent of unionized workers still do not have contracts.³⁵⁷ The second phase of the campaign included the push for the first union contract with Initial and a simultaneous effort to pressure the administration to sign a Code of Conduct for Subcontracted Labor. The goal of the Code was to get the administration to set high-quality minimum labor standards on campus, which would force Initial to settle a contract that included those high standards. Evidently, the students recognized that the administration, as the customer, had the power to require Initial Cleaning to raise the workers’ job quality and compensation. To make this point, they held “delegations” (a term union organizers use to describe small groups of workers or allies confronting those in power in their offices), rallies, marches, and, finally a thirty-three hour-long sit-in of the Admissions building in April 2000. That pressure tipped the balance of power;

³⁵⁶ Clawson, *The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements*, 181.

³⁵⁷ Quigley, *If We Can Win Here: The New Front Lines of the Labor Movement*, 99.

President Bennet agreed to sign a Code of Conduct and Initial agreed to many of the workers' contract demands.³⁵⁸

The Wesleyan University campaign subsequently received accolades from union officials, media sources, and scholars researching Justice for Janitors campaigns, being described as “exemplary” and “perhaps the most successful” campaign for gaining union recognition, a contract, and a Code of Conduct.³⁵⁹ This praise was most likely due to the immense community support that the movement garnered, even beyond the students. For instance, some faculty members exerted their position of relative importance to the administration through signing petitions and participating in a delegation to the president. Food service workers also signed a petition and attempted a support delegation to President Bennet. Notably, he refused this meeting the grounds that it was inappropriate to meet with subcontracted employees, a fact which emphasized the crucial role of students in labor action campaigns involving subcontracted workers.³⁶⁰

This student support, exemplified by the many hours of the student leader organizing and the backing in the form of petitions, rallies, and marches from the rest of the student body, swayed the administration and Initial. On the one hand, while writing about Wesleyan, Dan Clawson correctly raises the question of paternalism in the student activism, citing the fact that no workers took part in the key sit-in.³⁶¹ It is

³⁵⁸ “Rally script,” manuscript, April 2000, Justice for Janitors Records.; “Wesleyan Janitors Negotiate Fair Contract,” press release, April 2000, Justice for Janitors Records.; Karen Guzman, “Students Rally for Janitors at Wesleyan Sit-In,” *Hartford Courant*: B4. Apr 05 2000.

³⁵⁹ Liza Featherstone and United Students Against Sweatshops, *Students against Sweatshops: The Making of a Movement* (New York: Verso, 2002), 96; Richard Freeman, “Fighting for Other Folks’ Wages: The Logic and Illogic of Living Wage Campaigns,” *Industrial Relations* 44, no. 1 (2005): 16.

³⁶⁰ Abe Walker to Olivia Debree, “Bennet Versus The Faculty,” April 3, 2000, Justice for Janitors records.

³⁶¹ Clawson, *The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements*, 186.

undeniable that the white, richer, educated students should certainly have allowed Latino/a, low-wage, service workers to lead the efforts instead of taking complete charge of the planning and implementation of the campaign. On the other hand, the pattern at Wesleyan University was clear: from the time of the secretarial/clerical strike to the Justice for Janitors campaign, the administration listened only when key constituents, namely students or faculty, became agitated. In this case, student involvement was necessary to raise the labor standards for Wesleyan, or rather, Initial, janitors.

Faculty: Once Again the Exception

During the wave of unionization attempts in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the faculty and professional librarians failed to unionize because they continued to receive decent standards without going to those lengths, among other reasons. Similarly, in this period, faculty members maintained their standards to a large degree without having to take the actions that the other university employees did. Even as the administration became more business-minded and as the faculty simultaneously began to lose its influence, the administration continued to provide compensation that satisfied the faculty as a whole. Again, this seemingly unexpected situation may have occurred because of the esteemed position of the faculty within the University and its importance to the educational mission.

First, nationwide, university and college professors felt the effects of the corporatization of universities, such as increasing numbers of contingent faculty, stagnating salaries, and, what historian Larry Gerber describes as “business models

of management [that] provided an alternative to the shared-governance approach that had risen to prominence in the 1960s.”³⁶² At Wesleyan, the faculty did not escape this trend or the pattern of staff cuts on campus, as the portion of tenured faculty declined and, at one point, the Board even planned to cut fifteen tenured faculty positions.³⁶³

Concurrently with the rise of business-like management at Wesleyan, members of the faculty lost much of their ability to negotiate, even informally, for changes in their jobs. Foremost, soon after the faculty and professional librarians’ failed campaigns, the union door closed forever in the form of the Supreme Court’s decision in the 1980 *NLRB vs. Yeshiva University* case. This ruling stated that private college faculty were managerial employees and were not entitled to collective bargaining rights.³⁶⁴ Thus, the threat of unionization and the faculty having legal input in their compensation was gone.

Compounding the damage done by corporatization and the end of the union threat, the faculty also let its vehicle for informal discussions slip away. Initially, the conversations about compensation between the administration and the AAUP faded off as the leading activists tired of heading the charge and no other faculty members took their places. Eventually, as the culmination of this decrease in power, the faculty voted to replace the AAUP’s discussions with a more common mechanism among

³⁶² Gerber, *The Rise and Decline of Faculty Governance: Professionalization and the Modern American University*, 83; Sonya Huber, "Faculty Workers: Tenure on the Corporate Assembly Line," *Campus Inc.: Corporate Power in the Ivory Tower* (2000): 122.

³⁶³ Brendan Barrington, "University Must Shrink Staff Further," *Wesleyan Argus*, April 14, 1992.

³⁶⁴ Devinatz, "The Fears of Resource Standardization and the Creation of an Adversarial Workplace Climate: The Struggle to Organize a Faculty Union at Illinois State University," 151; Metchick and Singh, "Yeshiva and Faculty Unionization in Higher Education," 45.

peer institutions for faculty to influence their compensation: a committee.³⁶⁵ To some, the institution of the Compensation and Benefits standing committee represented a total loss of power. Although the committee did allow the faculty to weigh in on issues of compensation, it did not have the mandate to negotiate on behalf of the faculty, only to make recommendations. Retired Professor and AAUP leader Richard Slotkin described what he saw as a weakening of faculty power:

Faculty committees at Wesleyan are not elected in a contested election. You get tapped like a machine for jury duty. So you don't get people on the negotiating committee who are committed to negotiating faculty salaries upwards. You got people who were serving their time. So, faculty now have no say on salaries.³⁶⁶

According to Slotkin, the result was a faculty that did not have a way to exert collective power and force fair compensation from the administration. As a former union advocate, his opinion was particularly opposed to this transition, but the shift to the committee structure clearly did represent a shift in power dynamics.

Nonetheless, as was consistently the case for this sector, the faculty still continued to receive adequate compensation and working conditions, presumably because of their status at the University. Once again, Slotkin provided insight, suggesting that “the administration knows that if the morale of the faculty becomes poisonous, the institution can't run smoothly... So the administration was, and I think still is, careful of that.”³⁶⁷ Admittedly, the

³⁶⁵ For example, Middlebury College faculty weighed in through the Faculty Long-Range Planning Committee starting in 1983; Alison Byerly et al., "Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Faculty Compensation," (Middlebury College September 2010).

³⁶⁶ Slotkin, Interview by author, December 4, 2015.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

situation was not what it once was; Wesleyan's faculty salaries went from being one of the highest average salaries in the nation to the 86th highest salary by 2015, which certainly caused some dissatisfaction. However, most of the Wesleyan professoriate persisted in expressing overall satisfaction with the situation and the job.³⁶⁸ Because of the importance of the faculty to the University's key educational mission, this group continued to be afforded a decent standard of employment.

Where Are They Now?

Principally because of the union protection and community support, Wesleyan University has maintained a fairly high labor standard that satisfies most of its workers and encourages many of them to stay until retirement. Consequently, the militancy of the unionized groups has waned as they have grown accustomed to the relative financial comfort, workplace protection, and job security that comes with being unionized. Unfortunately, though, these workers must not lose this energy, because there are still many issues of compensation, benefits, and treatment that could be improved.

Generally, the workers of Wesleyan now express that they enjoy their jobs, appreciate the working environment, and feel satisfied with their compensation. From the plumber who likes the creative aspects involved in maintaining old pipes; the cook who is now allowed to exercise his cooking skills on fresh, local ingredients under *Bon Appétit*; the administrative

³⁶⁸ "2014-15 Aaup Faculty Compensation Survey," American Association of University Professors, <https://www.insidehighered.com/aaup-compensation-survey>.

assistant who loves the interactions with her work-study students; to the food service worker who has seen Desmond Tutu and Barack Obama speak at Wesleyan, the daily experience of work is positive, which workers attribute to the unusual environment of working at a small, liberal arts college.

In contrast, looking back, when it comes to compensation, benefits, and job security, the workers nearly all assigned credit to the unions and the campus community for keeping their standards high, a sentiment which administrative assistant Deborah Sierpinski voices, saying, “I would be scared to think what it would be like [without a union]. We might still be at minimum wage... With the union, I’ve done really well. I’m making a decent salary and I have job security.”³⁶⁹ Others highlight the role of the community, as cook Mark Bousquet thanked the students for their successes, saying, “the reason why we [win], again, is that the students support us. I can’t stress that enough, how important that is.”³⁷⁰ Together, the University environment, union power, and community support created a satisfactory place to work.

The flipside of this positive situation is that, as union protection settled in and contracts generally improved, the fighting energy of the workers faded. Of course, from the start, the unions had different levels of militancy; HERE, the food service union, always had a more confrontational attitude than OPEIU, a more cooperative union that was occasionally forced into situations that made it fight. However, across the different unions on campus this energy gradually declined. In part this trend at Wesleyan stemmed from unions

³⁶⁹ Sierpinski, interview by author, November 15, 2015.

³⁷⁰ Bousquet, interview by author, January 28, 2016.

becoming weaker and less popular nationally; union membership fell continuously from twenty-four percent of the workforce in 1977, when the secretarial/clerical workers joined OPEIU, to eleven percent in 2015, the year before this thesis was written.³⁷¹ Simply put, as Lawrence Richards describes it in his book *Union Free America*, Wesleyan workers are part of an “almost moribund labor movement.”³⁷² Comparing the present situation with the first days of the union Jeffery Hill, of food service, reflected, “I think there are a lot of people who’ve become apathetic to the union. They get what they get and they’ve been getting it for so long, they forget why they’re getting it.”³⁷³ This indifference towards the unions belies the fact that, throughout the campus, there remain many labor issues.

Despite the many improvements made through unionization, workers continue to identify problems in their jobs. Pay has not kept up with increased workloads, gender inequality has persisted throughout the period, and some of the subcontracted workers still deal with low wages, poor grievance procedures, and inadequate benefits. First, almost all sectors experienced increased workloads since the time they unionized, especially during the 2008 recession when most groups went down to what Virginia Harris called “bare bones mode”; the secretarial/clerical workers saw a decrease in their ranks from 140 in 2005 to 108 in 2012, physical plant fell from eighty-six in 1994 to forty-nine in 2010, and the janitorial staff decreased by several dozen since

³⁷¹ "Union Membership, Coverage, Density and Employment among All Wage and Salary Workers, 1973-2015," UnionStats.com, <http://unionstats.com>.

³⁷² Richards, *Union-Free America: Workers and Antiunion Culture*, 180.

³⁷³ Hill, interview by author, January 8, 2016.

the subcontracting process began in 1989.³⁷⁴ Given the larger responsibilities and higher stress levels experienced by campus workers from having less help, many are frustrated that their compensation did not increase in step.

Secondly, the administrative assistants (the title most secretarial/clerical workers now hold) in particular have consistently objected to gender inequity on campus. Admittedly, the form of this discrimination has shifted over time. Rather than overt sexism like workplace harassment, most administrative assistants at Wesleyan peg their issues exactly as women's researcher Cynthia Costello describes: "sexism in the office workplace is often more subtle now, manifested in pay inequities, discriminatory benefits policies, and women's exclusion from middle-and top-level management positions."³⁷⁵

In this case, many administrative assistants look to the difference in their pay and that of the mostly male physical plant workers. Deborah Sierpinski described this resentment, saying, "They are at a higher salary than we are. And they're looked at as they have a trade. But the [administrative assistants] have a degree should be equal. But I think that again, [it is] because they have a man's job and we have a woman's job."³⁷⁶ The pay discrepancies have been exacerbated by policies which historically allowed, and still allow, physical plant workers to earn more than their base wage through overtime but

³⁷⁴ Erin Newport, "ABM Contract Up for Grabs: Custodians Report Increased Workloads, Students React," *Wesleyan Argus*, February 23, 2012.

³⁷⁵ Cynthia B. Costello, *We're Worth It: Women and Collective Action in the Insurance Workplace* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 136.

³⁷⁶ Sierpinski, interview by author, November 15, 2015.

require administrative assistants to take “comp time,” or compensatory time, which gives workers time off for extra hours they work instead of pay. Many women also told stories of how they are boxed into these lower paying jobs by supervisors who “didn’t see them” in higher roles.³⁷⁷ Although this discrimination has existed for decades, the progress in this realm has been quite limited.

Lastly, while most of the employee sectors on campus have settled into decent work situations, the most recently subcontracted remain mired deep in trouble. For one, the Stonehedge Landscaping groundkeepers remain non-unionized. Further, although the janitors have been unionized for nearly two decades, under the current subcontractor Sun Services, which arrived in Fall of 2012, workers have charged the company with many exploitative practices: replacing union workers with temporary staff, giving unreasonable workloads, restructuring schedules to make cleaning locations far apart, threats and harassment from supervisors, withholding pay, and, perhaps most gravely, requiring the staff to use noxious chemical without proper gear, causing workers to fall ill.³⁷⁸ In a 2013 letter publicly written to President Roth, one janitor detailed the struggles she and her coworkers faced, writing:

These [managers] have harassed us constantly. They have also used derogatory language against us...we discovered that our positions had been reposted with three times the amount of work per custodian; for instance one position required one custodian to be in charge of

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Alex Gecan, “Wesleyan custodians decry conditions, cuts,” *Middletown Press*, June 14, 2013.; “Wesleyan’s Custodial Workers Protest Working Conditions, Employee Cuts Outside Roth’s House on Lunch Break,” *Wesleying (blog)*, June 26, 2013 <http://wesleying.org/2013/06/26/wesleyans-custodial-workers-protest-working-conditions-employee-cuts-outside-roths-house-on-lunch-break/>; Olivia Alperstein, “Custodial Workers Allege Lack of Pay,” *Wesleyan Argus*, November 15, 2012.

cleaning the entire Butterfield Colleges. These workloads are unreasonable... We are only given eight hours to complete our workloads. If we do not finish on time, we are given a warning.³⁷⁹

Throughout the letter are stories of struggles over pay, workloads, and lack of respect that ring of the obstacles faced by other workers on campus in the past and present. Although the janitors continue to face harsh circumstances while other workers enjoy better standards, they remain committed to bettering the situation, as the rest were; the worker ends the letter expressing this willingness, warning, “But do not mistake our roles as custodians for subservience, and do not mistake our lack of education for stupidity. We are willing to fight back against those who oppress us.”³⁸⁰ Here, the circumstances of the janitors shows that, despite the power of students and unions on Wesleyan University’s campus, there remain various labor issues to be tackled in the future to raise the standards of all campus jobs.

Conclusion

While enjoying the gains of their initial union contracts in the 1980s, the recently unionized workers of Wesleyan University did not foresee the onslaught that would soon hit them; low wage proposals, increased costs for benefits, decreased staffs, higher workloads, and low-wage, non-union subcontractors doing previously union work were only some of the problems

³⁷⁹ The Custodial Staff of Wesleyan University to President of Wesleyan University Michael Roth *in* Cesar Chavez, “This Is Why Not, Part 1: A Guest Post by Cesar Chavez ’15 about the Custodial Staff’s Situation,” *Wesleying (blog)*, September 17, 2013, <http://wesleying.org/2013/09/17/this-is-why-not-a-quest-post-by-cesar-chavez-15-about-the-custodial-staffs-situation/>.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

they faced. The attitude of the administrations from the late 1980s onwards was harsher in many new ways. The tides of corporate universities and get-tough business mindsets across America had reached Wesleyan University, and the employers set out to reduce costs at the workers' expense. The result for workers was a lower standard that needed to be challenged.

To combat these issues, the unionized workers of physical plant, the secretarial/clerical unit, and the food service operation were joined by the newly unionized public safety officers and janitorial staff. The strength that union representation gave all these sectors of workers was combined with the strength of a supportive community of students who the administration valued as part of the school's core mission; together these union and student forces managed to fight back against the employers. Work at Wesleyan University did *not* become the kind of work that many Americans are forced to do—that is, lower-wage, with few benefits and little job security—and the school continues to be a place where workers plan to stay at until retirement. And then use their pensions that they fought so hard for.

Conclusion

In 2013, Wesleyan University's administration launched an ambitious fundraising plan called "This is Why." The campaign encouraged alumni and other potential donors to think about the qualities that made the University unique. It encapsulated Wesleyan's conception of itself as an innovative university, citing professors who provided "trailblazing education," students and alumni who "[changed] the status quo," and an institution that "transformed higher education."³⁸¹ In many ways, this is true; Wesleyan is a distinctive university.

However, the campaign overlooked another way that Wesleyan was remarkable: an unparalleled burst of union organizing which itself says much about the institution. In the mid-1970s, the workers at Wesleyan University came to recognize that the administration, which claimed they were part of the family at this prestigious university, gave them wages they could not afford to live on, provided benefits that failed to meet their needs, and treated them in a manner that, in their eyes, revealed the administration's disregard. Years of unproductive discussions—of unsuccessfully trying to convince the administration to recognize their needs and their worth—persuaded campus workers that they needed to take bolder steps.

They took on the challenge of unionization. And it was a challenge. The physical plant workers tried four times before achieving success. The secretarial/clerical workers tried when no other campus group had succeeded before. Members of the faculty tried, defying trends that predicted they would not succeed as

³⁸¹ "This Is Why ", Wesleyan University
<https://web.archive.org/web/20140305204615/http://thisiswhy.wesleyan.edu/why>.

an atypical union demographic. Public safety workers tried despite their small numbers, and, when they failed, they tried again. Food service workers tried even after witnessing several groups of Wesleyan workers fail. The janitors tried despite language barriers and their status as subcontractors. These workers went up against great obstacles and, except the faculty, ultimately succeeded.

Alone, each of these victories or even attempts was an impressive feat. Together, they were a unique phenomenon. At no other college did virtually all the workers attempt to unionize in such a short time period. Moreover, this was the same campus where the secretarial/clerical workers were the first at a New England university to unionize, where the Justice for Janitors campaign received accolades nationwide, and where the food service contract is currently one of the best of its kind. Like the faculty and students, Wesleyan workers were different.

Why did Wesleyan's workers take these unusual actions? The ethos of family cultivated by President Victor Butterfield in the 1950s and 1960s—where students, faculty, and staff interacted at academic events and employee parties—convinced workers that they were part of the community. Compounding this belief was an idea that developed after the endowment swelled in the early 1960s that the University would forever be rich and financially stable. This was an illusion. When money ran short in the 1970s, workers experienced cutbacks, had trouble supporting their families, and became disillusioned.

The very principles and rhetoric of change-making at Wesleyan empowered the already strong rank-and-file leaders to act on this frustration. Moreover, Wesleyan's progressive reputation attracted radical students who offered support

when the workers were struck. Cook Jeffery Hill highlighted this, stating, "We come to the student body when we need help always and they've always helped, no matter when."³⁸² Because Wesleyan prioritized undergraduate education, rather than research, that support proved key, time and time again.

This consistent backing was necessary, because the Wesleyan workers' struggles with the administration to maintain their earnings and working standards did not end with unionization. The values of community, making social change, and the prominence of undergraduate education still exist today and enable the workers to fight. In some ways, though, there have been changes. It seems the national anti-union climate that Wesleyan defied for so long has arrived, and some old-time members notice increasing apathy from their coworkers towards the unions on campus. Employer pushbacks have also had their impact, as many of the sectors have made concessions, accepting lower standards for new workers or increased health insurance costs for all. This is, perhaps, the result of the administration's rhetoric of "family" being replaced by a more business-like mentality in the late 1980s.

Nonetheless, the efforts of Wesleyan University's workers had a lasting impact. Because they were able to unionize, many workers stay for a long time and enjoy and appreciate their jobs. Even after twenty-eight years, long-time union activist and cook Mark Bousquet shared that he is glad to work at Wesleyan: "A lot of people dread walking out that door in the morning. I love what I do."³⁸³ Hopefully, if workers at Wesleyan confront new challenges in the future, they will continue to fight

³⁸² Hill, Interview by author, January 8, 2016.

³⁸³ Bousquet, Interview by author, January 28, 2016.

for this—for quality working conditions, fair compensation, and a congenial work environment.

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