Undergraduate Worker Unionization

by

Emma Rose Borzekowski
Class of 2019

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors from the College of Social Studies

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2019
This thesis is dedicated to student labor organizers - those that I have spoken with and those that are yet to come. Solidarity!
Acknowledgements

First, this thesis would not have been possible without the generosity of all of the student workers who shared their stories, lessons, challenges, and dreams with me. Thank you to all the members of the Student Worker Coalition, UAW 2865, UAW 2322, the UGSDW, UAW 1596 and everyone I have met through CGEU for letting me into your meeting halls and homes. You have shown me that another world is possible.

Professor Boggs, I remember how giddy I felt leaving our first meeting. A year ago, after talking to you for the first time, I was overflowing with ideas about student labor. I feel so, so lucky that after every meeting, our conversations still leave me with that same excitement. Thank you for your questions, for asking me to dig deeper, for your encouragement, and for the passion you have brought to this project. Thank you for believing in the thesis and in me when I’ve needed it most. I appreciate how considerate and thoughtful you have been throughout this process, how kind you have been in pushing me. Thank you for always finding, and teaching me, just the right balance. You inspire me constantly.

To everyone who has graciously taken the time to edit this thesis: thank you. Professor Vermeulen your comments and words have meant so much and I hope I do them justice. Thank you for showing me what teaching can be. Anna Apostolidis, thank you for asking just the right questions, keeping me on track, and all your patience! Anna Fox, thank you for triaging when I needed it most. Mika, you edits were some of the most clear and encouraging I’ve ever read and I cannot express how grateful I am for your friendship. Yael, your time and thought have meant so much. Spencer, thank you for demanding clarity and for being the friend I can talk about utopias with. To everyone at the Writing Workshop, every minute of you hour has been so helpful and such a blessing. In compliance with the Honor Code, I am proud to acknowledge that I worked with you.

To the CSS: just saying thank you does not feel like even remotely enough. Martha, your care and kindness has made this year possible. Thank you for all of your time, effort and energy, and, most of all, thank you for the updates on the giant amaryllis! Richie, your
advice has meant the world to me. Thank you for guiding me through the past three years here. Tutors, thank you for your wisdom and for helping me develop the perspective to write this thesis. Thank you to the Davenport Committee for making my research possible. Professor Skillman, thank you for letting me also be your student, for believing in me even when I didn’t know derivatives, and for never letting me get away without answering the question. Thank you for sharing your class with me. Sophomores, your curiosity and earnestness, your willingness to engage and work through, always astound and motivate me. Rosanne, Asa, Katie: thank you for teaching me how to be brave. Finally, to my class and to all the lounge rats, thank you for being expected and unexpected in class, for making brunch when we needed a break, for always being willing to host, and for making PAC a home.

To all of the incredible organizers in USLAC, this thesis is a love letter. Thank you for teaching me and being there as I’ve grown. To PAWS, to Tay-Shaun, Tammy, Dani, Aiti, Kaci, and Nathan, this has been and will always be for you. You have taken on an impossible task and shown that we can win. I am so grateful for your energy and drive. I can’t wait to see what you do here.

To everyone in 63B, I could not have dreamed of a better home. Aviv, thank you for being my partner in crime, at home and in the thesis meeting. Your ideas have been so valuable to this project so thank you -for all the late-night popcorn, sources about the ideal man, insights and questions, and most of all for modeling what it looks like to write a critical university studies thesis. Selene, thank you for explaining your thesis to me the thousand times I’ve asked and for teaching me how to talk about my own. Thank you for explaining Foucault and everything else to me. Thanks for sharing chocolate with me while we work. I am so grateful to you for so much, but I can’t express it here because its [ineffable]. Van, thank you for being our vanguard in this process and showing me what it is like to finish a project with grace. Thank you for your patience and enthusiasm. To our fifth housemate – Will, Home is where the heart is. I love you all so much.

Finally, to my family, thank you! Your passion for this project has helped me believe in it. I have been so grateful, Mom and Dad, for your check-ins, edits and ideas. Thank you for the graphs (that will be made!) and for giving me a flower in the winter. Ruby and Ben, thank you for asking about my thesis all the way across the ocean (or across a sound). This project would not be done without you.
Introduction

On February 14, 2019 Amanda,¹ a 19-year-old sophomore at Wesleyan University, began her Valentine’s Day on an unromantic note. After waking up for an 8:50am statistics class, she went to her weekly office meeting. Amanda is a Residential Advisor (RA) working for the Residential Life department at Wesleyan University and while she mostly works on her own, she goes each week to check-in with her boss and other RAs in the basement of a campus administrative building. After talking about the upcoming programs each RA was planning for their residents (other first- and second-year students living in on-campus dorms) the conversation turned to the outcry that had followed a recent email that the ResLife department had sent out to seniors living in university-owned houses. The email, which began with a patronizing admonition of disappointment, informed senior residents that if they were caught with their houses over capacity, they would potentially be relocated to doubles in first year dorms.

Amanda remembers her boss, a Wesleyan alum, telling her employees about her disappointment with this outcry, how she expected protests about greater issues on campus and that she felt students were becoming “soft.” Hearing this, Amanda reflected on her own critiques of the university, especially in its capacity as her employer. As an

¹ Names have been changed to protect anonymity.
RA, Amanda lives full time in the area where she works. She must be available to the 25 other students on her hall as a mentor and mediator, often answering questions, intervening in student problems, and negotiating roommate disputes. She builds community by running regular programs for her hall and serves as a cross between a guidance counselor and an event planner. She must also police her resident’s behavior. Most weeks, Amanda is “on-duty” for two days, which requires that she be on call if any emergencies occur and to do rounds of her dormitory, during which, if she detects marijuana or sees underage drinking, she is required to report the offenders to her boss and potentially campus security. While on-duty, from 8:00pm to midnight weekdays and 8:00pm to 2:00am weekends, Amanda is not allowed to leave her dorm or fall asleep.

Listening to her boss ask about the state of campus protests, Amanda remembered feeling a bit duped by ResLife. She applied assuming she would receive free housing, but her wages only cover half of her housing. Emboldened by the conversation, she brought up this frustration, saying she felt her work should be compensated more and that she had heard that other schools have better salaries for their RAs. Her boss told her that if she wanted higher wages or more power in her workplace, she should “go somewhere else.”

Being told to “go somewhere else” stuck with Amanda. She is black and was born in America, but grew up in Jamaica. Hearing her boss tell her that if she wanted better treatment or compensation, then she should go somewhere else felt reminiscent of the ways that such a phrase is used as a racist invocation against black Americans. Amanda’s boss emphasized that Amanda and the other RAs should be grateful to be an RA. Recounting this, Amanda shook her head and told me “she wanted us to be grateful for the opportunity to do work.”
This thesis will analyze the figure of the “student worker,” tracing its history, analyzing its conditions, and studying a case of student worker organization. I am specifically interested undergraduates at small, liberal arts colleges and universities. I study these student workers as they unionize because through an analysis of workers’ movement and mobilization, one can see the emergence of class and worker identity. As this thesis examines the figure of the student worker, it follows two related themes: the antagonism between militancy and politics of civility or compromise, and the methods and modalities of identity formation.

Amanda’s story of asking about her wages and being told, effectively, that there isn’t a place in the university for this kind of question demonstrates the themes that run through student worker development and organization. Even in the brief conversation between Amanda and her boss, the pervasion of university control, into housing, work, and student activity, is apparent. Her boss’ questions about protests, and Amanda’s own reflection of what she could and could not discuss, point towards broader questions of how militant student workers are and why they take the kinds of actions or employ the tactics they use in organizing. Her boss’s rhetoric that she should be grateful is indicative of the kinds of tactics universities use against student workers and reflects a hypocrisy of the liberal university. As universities deny that their student workers are employees, many preach their own progressivism and educational mission, eluding the ways that the private nonprofit university acts very much like a corporation. This thesis explores this tension, asking how student workers, as connected and distinct from both students and other workers, develop and operate in such conditions. Following these themes of militancy and university control and discipline, I study and theorize who the student
worker is when they don’t “go somewhere else” but stays in and create surplus value for the nonprofit, private elite university.

From the late 1980s until 2008, between 70 to 80 percent of all undergraduate students at U.S. colleges and universities were employed either on or off campus. Since the middle of the 20th century, the population of college students has ballooned, rising from 2.4 million people in 1949 to 20 million people in 2014, with people across class backgrounds enrolling in higher education. At the same time the cost of tuition has risen exponentially, and more and more students have worked full or part time as they take classes. A 2015 Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce report found that around 14 million college students were working while enrolled in school in the United State. These working students made up eight percent of the total American labor force.

Students and workers are often conceptualized or portrayed as entirely separate figures, an elite intelligentsia versus a mass of laborers, but increasingly people inhabit both positions simultaneously. Working students are a critical part of the economy and

---

2 This number dropped briefly to around 62% following the 2007-2009 recession but has since rebounded.
3 Yet, almost regardless of where, for whom, or how much a student labors, their work is no longer sufficient to pay for an education. Though more and more students are working during the academic year, whereas in previous generations summertime and part time work would contribute significantly to the costs of higher education, very few students make enough to cover tuition currently. Working full time at federal minimum wage would earn a worker $15,080 annually before taxes and would not cover the costs of tuition (in 2015) at an average in-state public university ($19,000) or a private four-year college ($43,000). In 2015, 23% of workers ages 16-29, encompassing high school and traditionally aged undergraduates, made less than $7,500 a year. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the average number of hours worked across all student workers remained consistent around 30 hours a week. Their work was clearly significant (not just “pocket money”) and yet very few workers are making large amounts of money, many of them working for minimum wage. (“Learning While Earning,” 13, 22).
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid, 10.
for a large majority of students, working is a key part of their educational experience. Student workers are workers – this thesis studies their self-actualization as such.

**Students, Work and Student Workers**

**Students**

It is in these conditions, with significant numbers of students working, that I am interested in undergraduate student worker unions and unionization efforts. In the 1990s and early 2000s, graduate students began unionizing en masse across the United States (although the earliest American graduate unions date to the late 1960s). Graduate students often perform academic work, serving as teaching assistants and researchers as part of their tuition packages. Their unionization efforts have garnered some academic attention including notable work by Gary Rhoades and Rob Rhoads and others associated with the higher education studies and, in the last two decades, critical university studies. This nascent area of study suggests that graduate students believe their unionization has resulted in wage gains and protections and there is consistent research that graduate unionization does not damage student-faculty relationships or hurt student education.

My research builds on this work, taking a critical turn to study undergraduate workers who, previously, have not been viewed, both in academia and in mainstream American discourse, as workers. Through studying the organization of undergraduates, who work in a broad range of fields, from blue collar work in dining or maintenance, to

---


professionalized service in admissions or ResLife, to academic work like teaching or researching, I both build off the literature on graduate workers and expand to theorize a new category of work and worker.

In 2016 undergraduate students working at Grinnell College in Iowa voted with a 91% margin to unionize.\(^9\) Over the last decade more and more undergraduate workers have organized into existent graduate unions or around issue-based campaigns, but the Grinnell union marked the first independent, recognized, undergraduate student workers union in the country. Since then, student workers at dozens of campuses have reached out to the Union of Grinnell Student Dining Workers asking for advice about how to begin to organize, and student workers at a handful of other campuses have launched their own unionization campaigns. This move marks an important turning point in academic labor. In this thesis, I argue that undergraduate worker organization is critical to the development of student worker identity and class action. Through struggle, undergraduate workers define themselves and reiterate the conditions not just of their work but also of the economic systems determining their work in the context of the contemporary university.

There is almost no scholarship on this undergraduate unionization push, and in this thesis, I aim to make the crucial intervention that undergraduate workers deserve study as a critical part of the American labor force and as a new expansion of capital. I attempt to begin a field of study of these workers, understanding both their continuities and discontinuities with other workers.

Critically, this thesis focuses primarily on undergraduate student workers who work on-campus at four-year private nonprofit schools. Nationally, 52% of American

Indian/Alaskan native full-time undergraduates, 46% of white full-time undergraduates, 43% of black full-time undergraduates, and 41% of Hispanic full-time undergraduates worked while in school.\textsuperscript{10} Student workers at elite schools are younger, whiter and wealthier than other student workers largely because the schools they attend are wealthier and whiter.\textsuperscript{11} Regardless of their precarity at home, these workers have some security in the significance of their degree. But they also have many shared characteristics with students in less elite four-year schools, two-year institutions and community colleges: across schools, all student workers tend to be less wealthy than their non-working peers and they similarly have to balance their school and work responsibilities. Student workers, even at elite schools, often face significant financial strain and come from a diverse array of backgrounds in terms of citizenship, socioeconomic status, and race.

I look at student workers at elite private schools not because these students are necessarily representative of the larger student worker population but because of their role in the broader cultural imagination. In popular culture, the image of the “college student” is defined by the figure of a youth at a secluded elite campus. Such portrayals are reproduced in books such as \textit{Love Story} (1970) and contemporary movies including College (2008), Pitch Perfect (2012), and Admission (2013), all of which center on young white students. I am interested in student workers as a cultural figure and so I want to begin the study of these workers in the ways that they interact with and modify the cultural icon of the quintessential “student.” By examining the student worker in the context of the popular image of what a college and what a student looks like, I hope to reveal some of the theoretical implications of the capital relations of this world. I focus

\textsuperscript{10} “College Student Employment,” 2016, 5.
on student workers that are already centered and made into a norm not to replicate structures that produce them as a defaulted neutral but to examine what that position of being a “neutral” subject can reveal.

**Work**

In his book *How the University Works*, Marc Bousquet includes a chapter titled “Students Are Already Workers.” This chapter begins by chronicling the lives of students at Jefferson Community College and the University of Louisville who commute often an hour away to work at an UPS shipping plant. They work hard jobs at strenuous hours. Bousquet uses this example to illustrate that millions of students are doing serious and exploitative labor across the country. While his example and the analysis that follows provide an important intervention into the dichotomization of students and workers, they do so by reinforcing a view of the worker solely as an industrial figure. Bousquet’s explains that students are already workers but does not explain that students working non-traditional jobs or looking like the historical figure of the “worker” are also workers. Students work on and off-campus in industry, service, and nonprofit sectors and they often hold part-time jobs that do not have to take place in the dead of night or require heavy lifting to be extraordinarily difficult.

Responding to Bousquet, I study on-campus student workers who aren’t commuting to a distinct or traditionally recognized place of work. Student workers on campus tend either to be dismissed as not being workers, because of their educational position, or recognized only when, like in Bousquet’s work, they leave campus. I am

---

interested in how students operate within the campus setting, how the enclosed university structure dictates particular conditions for work and organizing, and how they form the person studying and working within them. I find on-campus student workers at elite schools useful subjects because of the ways that, unlike Bousquet’s portrait of students working in traditionally industrial, off-campus jobs, they can make quite explicit the role of labor in the knowledge economy. As the United States shifted over the last century from an industrial to a service-based to a knowledge economy, the role of student worker at the heart of this economy has become crucial. Student workers at the center of knowledge production sites balance between their dual roles. In this pure state they both reveal key techniques and modalities of the knowledge economy and also are able to, through their image, obscure some of the functions of this system.

I have not in this definition or throughout the thesis distinguished between work and labor. I use both terms because I was inspired by feminist antiwork scholar Kathi Weeks’ “gamble of sorts.” She writes

by blocking access to a vision of unalienated and unexploited work in the guise of living labor, one that could hope to live up to the work ethic’s ideals about labor’s necessity and virtues and would be worthy of extravagant praise the ethic bestows, I hope to concentrate and amplify the critique of work as well as to inspire what I hope will be a more radical imagination of postwork futures.13

As Weeks explains, “the label ‘work’ will refer to productive cooperation organized around, but not necessarily confined to, the privileged model of waged labor.”14 I write about student workers who perform recognizable forms of waged labor but this thesis is hopefully a starting point to consider broader imaginings of “student work” and whether the student is always, in and out of the cafeteria or classroom,

---

14 Weeks, 14.
performing work. In my attempt to move past Bousquet’s imagining only of industrial labor, I do not want my specific focus here to reconfigure similar constraints as to what student work is or to replicate the work ethic that binds student workers to their jobs. This study of work is not an endorsement of labor.

**Student Workers**

Throughout the thesis I refer to people enrolled in an institution of higher education who also receive a paycheck for labor done outside of their schoolwork as student workers. I choose this term to emphasize the dual role of both being a student and being a worker. I do no hyphenate this term because rather than create the “student-worker” as its own distinct entity I am interested in the merging of “student” and “worker.” What is retained in each identity, and what is lost? What links these student workers to other workers? I have explicitly not chosen to use the term “working learner” which emphasizes actions and verbs and avoids fixed identity but, in doing so, also prevents identification with histories and cultural significance of both student and worker. I also have avoided referring to student workers as academic workers to avoid confusion with other people in academia who use the term, such as faculty, and to avoid limiting the conception of student labor to academic work, given that many student workers are employed in places like dining halls and residences. I will specify when I wish to refer to undergraduate student workers.

---

15 In this thesis I do not explore the question of whether all student schoolwork is work. There are streams of labor scholars and activists who have argued that not only is student work producing research or writing work but that studying and the consumption of teaching should also be considered work. This thesis focuses on paid hourly labor that has socially necessary productive qualities but for more information on study as work, I urge readers to read Wages for Students, a pamphlet by a 1960s student movement.
In particular, I am interested in the category of the militant student worker because I define student workers in part through how and why they take action. I use militancy to refer to an ideology around tactics and strategy. I define it as an approach that recognizes the revolutionary potential of organized labor and stresses combative labor action to both win a better workplace and to build a movement. It employs aggressive rank and file engagement, a willingness to fight back, and agitation. I contrast this militancy with conciliatory action, business unionism, or centrist and liberal political ideologies which embrace noncombative tactics. Throughout the thesis, I also try to distinguish between militant labor and a legal approach to solving labor disputes, looking at the key role of the National Labor Relations Act and the effects it had on labor strategies. Though I am aware of the connotations militancy has in invoking armed struggle or military violence, I use it to express anger and labor tactics, which while they can include physical violence, more commonly focus on the strike and collective action.\textsuperscript{16}

This militancy, when found, exists in the context of the neoliberal university. I draw throughout the thesis on Kate Bedford and Janet Jakobsen’s, who define neoliberalism as a set of economic and political policy and ideology. Like Bedford and Jakobsen, I stress neoliberal turns towards the individual and precarity, and use neoliberalism as a historical development starting in the 1970s and 1980s that created a new set of conditions within the university and in the broader economy.\textsuperscript{17} This reading of neoliberalism informs the perception and (attempted) creation of the imagined subject

\textsuperscript{16} I do not go into great depth in this thesis about the connections between militancy and student worker race or the ways blackness impacts who is able to express and leverage anger safely. More work must be done though on the question of who and what looks combative to authority and the university in the context of labor struggles.

\textsuperscript{17} Kate Bedford and Janet Jakobseon, “Towards a Vision of Sexual and Economic Justice,” 2009, 5.
of the “liberal arts experience” as one whose identity and narrative fits with conformity to the market.

This project of understanding the figure of the student worker in their history, conditions and organization, has a dual purpose. It is expressly political, and, in describing, contextualizing, and analyzing unionization campaigns, I will be beginning to shape a body of data that student workers and others in the labor movement can use to build stronger and better campaigns. Contemporary student workers, specifically student workers at private nonprofit four-year colleges and universities, as well as labor historians, sociologists, economists, and critical university scholars, can use the information gathered in this thesis to more pointedly critique the university and the ways in which it is able to exercise power. Studying the nascent student worker movement has an immediate practical element of enabling student workers to critically evaluate strategies and ideological approaches to their organizing in ways that I hope will promote more effective and radical attempts to build worker power.

At the same time, I believe that this thesis has broader implications. Beyond the practical implications of understanding student worker actions, analyzing the development of the figure of the undergraduate student worker offers a glimpse into the fluid process of capitalism reforming, expanding and redefining itself in the late 20th and early 21st century. I view the student worker as a new site of capital accumulation. Understanding how and why student work becomes commodified, how the student becomes a figure that is ‘doubly free,’ and how these doubly free student workers are constrained and informed by the development of labor law and the modern university, we can learn more about what it means to do work and be a worker in the 21st century.
knowledge economy. Thus, this thesis is both the start of a template for student work and an exploration of the meaning of work and the worker.

**Approach**

This thesis takes an intentionally interdisciplinary approach to examine the student worker through their political, economic, social and cultural relations. I source from a variety of areas: I've studied university and movement history, legal cases, and organizing theory. I also conducted ethnographic work with current organizers at Wesleyan University, Grinnell College, Reed College, the University of Massachusetts Amherst, University of California Berkeley and at the LaborNotes and Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions (CGEU) 2019 conferences. I use these interdisciplinary tactics to contribute to the emerging field of critical university studies in an effort to make transparent the workings of the university and the labor it both requires and produces.

Critical university studies takes an oppositional stance, focusing “on the ways in which current practices [in the university] serve power or wealth and contribute to injustice or inequality rather than social hope.” My thesis follows suit, critiquing the university both as it is, and as it is imagined to be. I am particularly intrigued by this aspect of the imaginary in critical university studies because this project simultaneously looks historically and material at the actual practice and diversity of student workers, while constructing them as a figure and a class actor. In a *Chronicle of Higher Education*

---

20 Williams.
article inaugurating the field, Jeffrey Williams outline’s its parameters, explicating the connections between its emergence in the 1990s and the emergence of the graduate student movement in the same historical moment. Labor activism has been critical to and relies on articulating the internal and hidden mechanisms of university operation and making public the work that builds and sustains it (i.e. “the [university] doesn’t work unless we do” as a popular slogan).

As such, labor studies is an integral part of critical university studies. Previous work in the field has identified the development of “Academic Capitalism” (Slaughter and Rhoades and Leslie). It has critiqued the recent developments in universities that commodify knowledge production and capitalize off of student labor. These authors, however, fail to fully interrogate the role of the student as simultaneously a consumer, product, and producer in the university. By approaching undergraduate students and the university through labor studies, I hope to articulate this development more clearly. In doing so, I aim not simply to further the field of critical university studies but also to contribute to labor histories, labor relations, and political economy as disciplines that can learn from the study of new workers in new contexts.

I begin by historicizing student workers to outline the structures they operate within and identify the way this group of workers has developed. Contemporary student worker struggles are transformative but integrally shaped by the history of American universities and labor. I am interested in student workers as historical products and approach this history materially. As I track the ideologies that inform student workers, I chronicle the base material conditions that create this superstructure.

To study contemporary student workers, I take this same historical materialist approach and also am informed by militant ethnographies. As a labor activist in my own
university, visiting, interviewing, and collecting student workers oral histories and
perspectives has been both an academic and personal project. I have combined these
personal accounts with analysis of journalism about student worker actions, internal
documents, press releases and legal filings. Because this thesis looks at the tactics of
student workers and the legal and extralegal routes to unionization that they can pursue,
I use legal decisions extensively as both a subject and mode of analysis.

Kathi Weeks cites Michael Buroway (1979) explaining that “exploitable subjects
are not just found; they are … made at the point of production.”21 This thesis examines
the university to understand how students are produced as exploitable subjects within it,
first by examining the development and history of student workers and then the
strategies and tools used to exploit them. Their development as exploitable subject is
also a process of struggling against that exploitation and so I follow by studying a case of
failed student worker organization to learn how student workers do and don’t
conceptualize themselves.

Assumptions

This thesis asks what tactics undergraduate student workers in elite schools
employ when they try to unionize. Why do they take certain approaches to organizing
and certain actions? What, from employer constraints to student attitudes, produces
these tactics? How has the identity and role of student worker developed and how does
it shape and is in turn informed by student worker organization? Asking these questions
about undergraduate student workers requires making certain assumptions. I am
choosing to enter the study of student workers in media res. I believe that through

21 Weeks, 10.
studying their movement and action more preliminary questions can be worked towards backwards. For example, this thesis doesn’t ask if student workers are workers but instead assumes that through studying their labor organizing, their role as workers can then be unraveled. Studying their organizing tactics is an academic demonstration of belief that students are workers.

Similarly, I am not approaching the questions of whether student workers should unionize. I address this perfunctorily in that academic worker unionization has shown to have no negative effects on student’s educational outcomes, and that there is a broad literature on the role of collective bargaining as a tool for economic improvement. But this question does deserve further study with specific regard to undergraduate student workers. However, before it can be answered the goals of student workers need to be identified. Only then can unionization be evaluated against their goals, which are expressed both explicitly in student’s statements and implicitly in their tactics.\(^\text{22}\) In addition to student workers goals, through their tactics, I begin to collect information not just on specific unionization outcomes but also on the larger revolutionary potential of student workers. The question of whether student workers should unionize can be answered from a movement perspective and requires understanding if undergraduate unionization can transcend trade unionism to build new forms of power.

Following is the question of with whom student workers should unionize. Again, I believe that looking at the current practice and history of development is a way to begin answering this because there are a number of choices student workers can make around who they organize with. In this thesis, I look specifically at case studies in which

\(^{22}\) “Should student workers unionized” can be answered in a number of ways depending on who is asking. Universities and employers may clearly have different answers than workers or members of a national
students have chosen not to affiliate, but student workers have and can join larger national and international unions. They also have to decide how to draw their bargaining unit, whether to specialize by workplace, and whether to affiliate with non-student workers in those workplaces, in which case the primary form of unity would be student status. These decisions are integral to defining the student worker and determine tactics, but I work backwards to answer them by looking at how student workers are affiliating.

Chapter Outline

Over the course of this thesis, I aim to trace how student workers as a class or specific identity develops and how they mobilize, noting the key movements in capitalism and the relationship of the government to higher education that lead to and are created by student workers. To do so, I begin in my first chapter by examining the historical processes that create contemporary student workers and their workplace conditions. In the second chapter, I build off this historical analysis to offer a theoretical framework for viewing the organizing structures and challenges student workers face, using the model of the company town to analyze student workers as they fit into different economic forms and as participants in different industries. In the third chapter, I apply these contextualizations to chronicle an ongoing union effort at Reed College. I use this case study to question student worker tactics and to identify a key moment in the class development process, which I trace back to the colonial era.

The first chapter asks how the work systems and financial aid structures that both create and limit the modern student worker developed. I combine this history with a cataloging of the development of youth activism and the relationship between students labor movement and different political ideologies will differ in how they answer. By identifying one set of
and workers. To ground my analysis of contemporary student workers, I find it necessary to explore the transition from 18th century ideas of intelligentsia and workers as separate and distinct forces to the late 20th century New Left that emphasized collaboration between students and workers and led to the rise of labor activism by and for students. In developing this historical background, I pay particular attention to the emergent theme of tension between militancy and legal support for labor, and to the question of who, across different time periods and in different economic systems, the revolutionary actors and classes are considered to be.

These themes continue in my second chapter, in which I propose that to understand labor struggles at the contemporary university, the university should be viewed as a contemporary company town. I demonstrate what this model means for labor organizing strategies and how the university as company town differs from traditional company towns. In doing so, I draw on shifts in economic systems throughout the twentieth century to understand the stakes and conditions for labor organizing and how contemporary organizers can relate to the militant/legal tension that labor has always contended with.

I then apply this history and strategic analysis to a case study of a failed attempt to win union recognition at Reed College. This third chapter is the first written scholarly history of the 2017-2018 labor struggle. It analyzes the unionization fight in the context of the twin themes I have been tracing, looking both at the tensions between militancy and legal strategies and at how this struggle was part of a larger development in capitalism to redefine the worker and revolutionary subject. This chapter draws on the constraints and opportunities of student worker organizing developed in the previous stakeholder’s interests in this question – student workers themselves- I hope to work backwards to it.
two chapters both historically and theoretically. It identifies student perspective, university power and distinct modes of organizing that were practiced at a private liberal arts school in Portland, Oregon. By using a case study of a failed campaign, I do not mean to imply that undergraduate workers cannot unionize. I am instead interested in the Reed case because of what it can teach in contrast to successful cases like the Grinnell unionization campaign. By studying failure, I aim to understand how the (student) labor movement can grow.

I conclude by drawing on this case study and history to note how the student worker is an expansion and reinvention of capitalism. As capitalism has progressed from its early stages until now, it has continuously redefined itself and its subjects. I look at student workers as a new economic frontier. I offer research questions about this new expression of the knowledge economy and suggest ways we can learn from organizing strategies student workers have employed. I reflect personally as a student worker activist on how this research has informed my own work and what lessons I have learned from organizing on my campus.
Chapter 1: Genealogy of the Student Worker

On January 12th, 1912, thirty thousand textile workers walked off the job and went on strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Most of the workers were immigrant women and children protesting wage cuts, long 54-hour weeks, and toxic conditions, where workers were regularly killed and injured on the job. The strike lasted two months and won mill workers raises of up to twenty percent. It became known as the Bread and Roses Strike after the slogan “we want bread but we want roses, too” and became an iconic moment of American labor history. But as workers were striking, the close by Harvard University encouraged its students be strikebreakers, offering students class credit for serving in the Lawrence militia. In 1912, around 83% of Harvard’s students had family incomes greater than 90% of all American’s incomes. Almost all of the students were white and mainly native born and all of them were male. As they marched on the Lawrence strikers, they created an arresting portrait of the divide between academia and the workers movement.

This chapter will explore and deconstruct how, since that 1912 confrontation between the Harvard man, the iconic figure of the American college student, and Lawrence striker, the figure of the student worker has emerged. Long before 1912,
students worked on and off the college campus but have been thought of as either a conservative social force or as a leftist intelligentsia divorced from the worker. I explore the history of American student workers, with specific attention to student workers at private non-profit four-year colleges and universities, to identify how and why students have worked and how the bridge between the iconic student and worker has begun to emerge in an increasingly prominent student worker.

Student workers are currently at a pivotal point of organization and class definition. They are beginning to organize into specific labor formulations that are conscious both of their status as students and as workers. By tracing a genealogy of the contemporary private school worker, this chapter will contextualize and situate current student worker struggles.

Tracing all the roots of the contemporary student worker is beyond the scope of this thesis. To understand the potential and the limits of contemporary student worker organizing, however, it is critical to identify certain points of contextualization. I focus on the emergence of the private university in America; the growth and decline of the labor movement and its varying inclusions of “unconventional” workers; namely the shifts in relationships to skilled and unskilled workers, which will have profound impacts on how academic labor and labor within the university is viewed; the growth of student movements, student activism and student identity; and the changing nature of student work, particularly in relation to work study programs. These areas bridge ongoing developments, though the American student movement and student workers have been informed by international changes and politics. Future work must be done to understand the strangely unique lack of American student power through comparative international study and the role that international events, movements and global relations effected the development of American student-workers.
tensions in American labor history between militancy and legal reformism that are central to contemporary student-worker struggles.

This chapter chronicles the process by which student workers, as social actors with a distinct identity, emerged out of the historical and ideological formations of “the student” and “the worker.” I focus on a set of distinct but related phenomenon that occurred from the decades after World War II to the early 2000s: the growth and expansion of American universities, the creation of financial aid and work study as federal programs, the growth of global student movements, and the creation of student to labor movement pipelines. I move roughly chronologically from America’s colonial era to the postwar period and the last fifty years to sketch a history of the overlapping shifts in legal, political, labor and student movement histories through which the student worker emerges. Student workers and the challenges they encounter exist at the intersection of numerous other identities and social factors, firmly separating their legal history from their history in the labor movement from the history of private education impossible.

**Early America: Colonial Era to the Great Depression**

The histories of American labor, universities, and student work stretch back to before the founding of the United States. This chapter begins by broadly addressing from the earliest colonization of America to the Great Depression to establish the context in which the labor laws and fights of the 20th century and in which student movements happen must be understood. The student labor movements of the late 1990s and early 2000s operate within and against structures with deep roots.
I will trace labor relations from early settlers and the founding of Harvard through the growth of labor power after the Civil War and industrialization. From the railway strikes in the 1880s to immigrant labor activism in urban centers in the early 1900s, workers gained power and fought not just against management but against the state. During this time, the university system grew, similarly experiencing rapid expansion with industrialization and westward expansion in the antebellum era. This section closes on the cusp of the Great Depression, as a signpost of labor entering a new era of reform, deeper organization, and the beginning of a new moment in student organizing. Throughout this early American history, as the country grappled with what the role of the state would be, specific questions emerged over the state’s power in realms of labor and higher education.

Most notably, in this period, this question was fought over the context of slavery and whether the federal government had a right to interfere on behalf of enslaved people. The history of colonized America is deeply linked to the history of the slave trade, both of which served as the context for the emergence, building and funding of early US higher education. As early as 1619, British settlers brought enslaved Africans to do forced labor in the newly founded colonies. Much of early American labor history is thus concerned with establishing race and racism in the wake of events like the 1676 Bacon Rebellion which united poor white indentured servants and black slaves. Post-independence, as racial division became increasingly established, many of the central questions of labor organizing centered around how to integrate new waves of immigrants and foreign-born workers into organized labor.25

The development of higher education in America mirrored this history in many ways. Almost as soon as colonists arrived in America, just as the slave trade was beginning in the Southern colonies, in 1636, Puritans in New England began building what would come to be known as Harvard University. Harvard, as well as many of the other institutions of higher education that were founded in the next several decades, was a religious institution, established to train ministers, especially after the religious revivalism of the mid 1700s and early 1800s took hold. Along with the development of these religious institutions, there was a call for the development of secular, national university, led by many of the early US presidents including Thomas Jefferson. This never manifested but the public debate did succeed in producing federal military academies and in the late 1700s the first public universities run by states opened. The distinction between public and private schools though would not become clear or particularly important until later in the 19th century.

In the earliest years of the American college system, most of the students attending university were sons of clergymen, wealthy farmers, or attorneys, although many sons of poorer farmers and artisans attended as well. After 1703, tuition costs began to rise at Harvard and at the other institutions opening, and universities were increasingly restricted to the sons of elite and wealthy families. Though exclusively

26 Donald G. Tewksbury, in The Founding of American Colleges and Universities, suggests that before the Civil War around a quarter of all college graduates became ministers.
28 Both the University of Georgia and the University of North Carolina claim the title of the first public university. The university of Georgia was charted in 1785 but opened in 1801 whereas the University of North Carolina was chartered in 1789 and opened in 1795. The university of Virginia also claims that it is the first university we might recognize as such when it opened in 1819 as a secular institution with advanced instruction. (Margaret Cain McCarthy, History of American Higher Education, Peter Lang Primers (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 57.)
white and male, there was a degree of class difference in early American universities that reflected the shifting settler economy in the country. Even as tuition costs rose, less affluent students attended university on scholarship and schools created schedules that would allow students to work part time. At Wesleyan University in 1836, “there [was] a mechanic’s shop, connected with the University, where a few students meet part of their expenses by manual labor.” Students unable to afford the university were able to work in local Middletown industries to pay for tuition. By one estimate, at the time, roughly half of the students at Wesleyan were unable to afford the university’s boarding costs and lived in town, not on-campus, with Middletown families or commuted from home.

One of the first financial aid systems emerged in 1838 when Harvard created a private lending agency for students, foreshadowing contemporary loan and grant programs at private schools. Despite the relative economic diversity of very early higher educational institutes, early universities only every taught tiny percentages of the population and, as more universities were created and the country grew, they became increasingly the domain of the wealthy.

This shift was in part driven by the emergence of private universities as distinct entities. Though the earliest higher educational institutions had been formed privately, often with large donations, church and community support, they often acted in concert with local and state governments and accepted public funding, though they attempted to maintain control over policy decisions. Only in 1819 were clear divisions drawn legally

---

32 Though all universities until 1833 were only open to men, in 1823 the first normal school opened to prepare teachers. These schools typically offered two-year degrees and often were open to women as well as men. Other women’s seminaries were founded in the 1820s and 1830s as well.
between public and private institutions in the *Dartmouth College v. Woodward* Supreme Court case. After conflict within the college between the Board of Trustees and the President prompted state intervention and produced two dueling institutions, Dartmouth College and Dartmouth University, the lower courts ruled in 1817 that Dartmouth was a public organization whose founding charter was liable to amendment by the state legislature. On February 2, 1819 the Supreme Court reversed this ruling and established a distinct legal category of private colleges and universities, finding that Dartmouth was neither a civil institution nor public property. The consequences of this ruling are still being debated but it prompted a boom in donors founding private colleges in the 1820s and 1830s and has led to a decrease in state subsidies. Contemporary divisions in legal treatments of public and private schools in both discrimination cases and labor law originate in this 1819 distinction and popular culture depictions of college campuses continue to reflect a distinction in attendees and attitudes between public and private colleges that began in 1819 and developed throughout the course of the 1800s.

Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century and into the first half of the twentieth century, from roughly 1870 – 1945, there were huge shifts in higher education. The country rapidly industrialized and expanded westward, using the university to enclose new land. The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 created the land grant universities created and enrollment in these new more accessible forms of higher education grew. More and more campuses and buildings were built for the new mass of students studying industrialized education. As psychology emerged as a field and the US emerged from

---

38 Ibid, 116.
World War I, the army began to play a greater role in schooling, creating tests and psychological profiles as part of scholarship and recruitment programs.40

During this same period of industrialization in the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, labor organizing became increasingly militant and powerful. Throughout the 1830s and 40s in fights across different states, workers organized for the 10-hour work day with New Hampshire enacting the first state 10-Hour Day law in 1847.41 Female mill workers across the northeast organized in the mid-1830s, bringing national attention to women workers. Abolition movements grew, and in the wake of the Civil War, newly emancipated black workers began organizing politically and, in 1869, into the Colored National Labor Union.42 Prior to the Civil War, there had been scattered cases of black students graduating and receiving degrees. Oberlin College began admitting both men and women of color in 1835.43 In 1849, the first black college Avery College, was founded in Pennsylvania and in 1851 Milner Academy was established in Washington D.C.44 But during and after Reconstruction, there was exponential growth in the number of black universities and in black students receiving degrees.

Post-Civil War, the rise of Populism paralleled organizing in the railroads and mines, producing both figures like Mother Jones and the 1894 Pullman strikes (see Chapter Two). Labor organizing efforts prior to the late 1800s were concerned with fighting for higher wages and better working conditions as well as other, more broad social issues such as creating a public education system to strengthen literacy rates

40 Ibid, 8.
41 “Our Labor History Timeline | AFL-CIO,” accessed December 12, 2018, /about/history.
42 Ibid.
44 Lucas, American Higher Education, 121.
amongst workers.\textsuperscript{45} Throughout the colonial period until the Civil War there were several attempts at national unions but none of them were successful until the Knights of Labor became a powerful force in the 1870s-1890s.

The labor movement was both spurred and co-opted by Populist and Progressive movements in the late 1800s and early 1900s respectively. Progressive champions especially pushed for labor reforms and workers mobilized massive strikes (although were briefly inhibited by World War I) in the 1910s but once the reforms passed, liberal compromise and policy often took energy away from aggressive workplace action. Throughout the 1920s the labor movement grew in power and faced significant backlash. In 1918 the leadership of the Industrial Workers of the World were sentenced to prison on charges of disloyalty to the United States but just a year later, unimpeded, twenty percent of workers walked off their jobs in a wave of strikes that included national clothing, coal and steel strikes and a general strike in Seattle.\textsuperscript{46} That same year, unionization of academic workers began when a small group of faculty at Howard University affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers.\textsuperscript{47} The unionizing faculty were organizing both for better conditions and to secure federal funding for Howard. A few other schools followed suit but widespread campus organizing pushes would not become prevalent until the 1960s. In the meantime, workers across industry continued to become increasingly militant.

\textsuperscript{46} “Our Labor History Timeline | AFL-CIO.”
\textsuperscript{47} Timothy Reese Cain, “Campus Unions: Organized Faculty and Graduate Students in U.S. Higher Education,” \textit{ASHE Higher Education Report} 43, no. 3 (September 2017): 2.
The Great Depression and the NLRA

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, as the economy rapidly cycled between extreme growth and depression and as the US entered in and out of foreign war, the labor movement went through large swings in its power and tactics. Following the early part of American history, labor activists continued to grapple with what the role of the state should be. The New Deal and Keynesian policy turns of the federal government forced the left to ask if the state inevitably serves the interests of capital and if these programs were simply a preservation or furthering of capitalism. Or can there be state expansion of juridical power with regard to labor that empowers it? This thesis and contemporary student-workers grapple with the same questions, and I will ultimately argue for a Marxist suspicion on the bourgeoisie state with an openness to reforms and pro-labor policy being necessary. In the 1930s, this question prompted sectarian splits between broad tents of Progressives, Communists, Socialists, labor activists and others, as they debated what tactics must be used in the context of a “friendly” Roosevelt administration.48 This section will seek to explore key parts of the federal labor law, namely the NLRA, to situate the impact of juridically sanctioned labor. I find that it has a mixed legacy, as immediately after NLRA was passed, there was a strong and varyingly revolutionary labor movement, but in the decades after, this movement was weakened by policy reversals and potentially an overreliance on state protection and juridical tactics.

The labor movement arguably reached its apex in the 1930s and 40s.49 Following big general strikes in 1933 and 1934, in 1935, as part of the New Deal, the Roosevelt

---

49 “A Brief History of the Labor Movement.”
administration signed the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). Some labor historians like Stanley Aronowitz point to this formal regulation of unionization and crucially of strike as the beginning of the decline of the labor movement as it began to take on increasingly corporate models and work through regulatory mechanisms and compromise rather than the militancy of the early 1900s. The impact of the NLRA and the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) it established wouldn’t be felt though for several years. In 1937 autoworkers won a massive sit-down strike against General Motors and in 1938 the Fair Labor Standards Act established the first federal minimum wage and 40-hour work week. In 1938 the CIO formed as an independent federation. William B Gould IV, a former chairman of the NLRB, argues that a key factor shaping American labor movements was that they gained political power before holding industrial power - unlike in Britain. Much of the American labor movement grew out of and in response to the NLRA, so rather than shunning state involvement in labor disputes, American labor has been more open to labor protections. Many of the CIO unions developed around or after the passage of the NLRA and looked to federal arbitration to gain recognition.

Before creating the NLRB, Congress already began regulating collective bargaining in the 1926 Railway Labor Act which officially recognized rail workers right to collective bargaining but not to striking. The 1935 NLRA’s establishment of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) also followed the 1933 creation of the National Labor Board and the 1934 Old National Labor Relations Board both of which had

---

51 Ibid, 35.
52 For a good description of the politics around passing the various labor boards in the mid-30s and sectarian splits over them, see 4th chapter of The Liberal Compromise, a dissertation by Laura M. Weinrib.
operated without clear labor policy to guide their mediation of labor disputes. The new NLRB, after being found constitutional in 1937 after President Roosevelt’s famous threat to pack the courts, worked to adjudicate labor disputes and, over the last 84 years, has developed a sort of case law for labor-management relations. The NLRA has remained one of the primary mechanisms of federal labor regulation to this day, but was significantly modified in 1937 following Taft-Hartley amendments, which sought to shift power towards management. The Taft-Hartley Act allowed unions as well as employers to be held liable for violating contracts and prohibited a number of labor actions including jurisdictional strikes, wildcat strikes, secondary strikes or boycotts, closed shops and union political donations. States were able to pass “right-to-work” laws and the federal government was able to legal strike break if strikes endanger national health or safety.

Since the passage of Taft-Hartley, the NLRB has had a five-member juridical board. The 1947 amendments split this juridical board from the NLRB’s investigative actions into a separate general counsel, that takes on a more prosecutorial role. As workers unionize they typically decide on a unit, demonstrate at least 30% interest in a union within that unit and present it to a regional director who can then order an election. Unit size and make up is often hotly contested between labor and management so without an agreement, the regional offices of the labor relations board might hold a hearing on unit and eligibility issues. Within seven days of the NLRB ordering an election, employers must present a list all their employees to the union organizers and a

secret ballot election can subsequently be held with votes being counted both by internal and external observers. Unions must win at least a majority of the unit to be officially recognized. If either party disagrees with part of the NLRB process, appeals travel from regional to the national board. While most workers in the United States have collective bargaining rights covered through this process, the NLRA excludes large categories of workers (who may still be able to collectively bargain, but just are not under the jurisdiction of the NLRB), including public employees at the federal, state and local level, agricultural workers, domestic servants, and supervisory employees.56 Because of these parameters, the process for undergraduate unionization at public versus private schools has been remarkably different and has involved similar discussion to the 1930’s debates between “state-centered progressive reformism (with its attendant distrust of the Constitution and the courts) on the one hand, and conservative legalism (friendly to both industry and individual autonomy) on the other.”57

The GI Bill and Human Capital Theory: expansion of higher education to the working class?

World War II presented a complicated challenge to the labor movement as several early New Deal labor benefits were rolled back and strike capabilities were limited in support of the war effort. However just after World War II, 35% of the labor force was unionized and in 1946 there was the largest strike wave in US history. Like with other earlier New Deal reforms, the Roosevelt administration responded to growing unrest and threats of growing labor power with social services and palliative reforms. This section will examine the impacts of the largest of these welfare state reforms, the

56 Ibid, 50.
Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, and the dominant inclusive human capital ideologies of the 1940s and early 1950s to argue that the expansion of universities in the postwar era brought the identities of student and worker much closer together while limiting student and universities conceptions of students as current employees.

In 1944, the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, more commonly known as the GI Bill, was passed, ushering in a new era for higher education and the American welfare system as a whole. Under the GI Bill,

any persons who served in the active military or naval forces on or after Sept. 16, 1940… shall be eligible for and entitled to such course of education or training, full-time or the equivalent thereof in part time training, as he may elect at any approved educational or training institution at which he chooses…the Administration shall pay to the educational or training institution… for each person enrolled… the customary cost of tuition …and other similar fees as are customarily charged and may pay for books,

establishing a precedent for federal support for higher education. The GI Bill laid the groundwork for the loan system that would later emerge for students in its support for military members mortgages. By approaching higher education through students rather than institutions set the stage for the network of loan programs and private financing that would emerge a few decades later. Most importantly though, the GI Bill rapidly expanded access to higher education institutions, allowing more students on financial aid into schools than ever before, and thus leading to the growth of school bureaucracies that dealt with financial aid, the mass sorting of students and the use of exams. After its passage, enrollment in American higher education institutions more than doubled,

The development of human capital theory was also spurred by the Cold War and a need to develop not just soldiers but brainpower against the USSR. Similarly, I don’t focus on the impacts of anticommunism in the 1940s and 50s on the labor movement but more attention must be paid to how anticommunist sentiments, McCarthyism and the Cold War shaped labor strategy as communists were purged from most of the major unions.
black colleges and universities, student recruitment and courses in new fields like gender studies and African American studies.

These changes and the broader Schultzian approach had important ramifications for the growing student movement. Cooper argues it was actually these liberalizations of the university that made the student movement possible - that the Berkley Free Speech protests happened specifically in the context of UC Berkley as a new model for knowledge-based institutions that wanted to invest in human capital. Conservative critiques in the 1960s and resulting backlash point to the fact that free college for students in the state created a youth that was financially independent enough to rebel against a conservative older generation and take risks. Cooper frames this as also happening in response to the idea that "public investment in human capital as serving the dual ends of domestic social justice and national security. When the student revolt erupted in the following year it was precisely this conflation that came under attack."^62

The student movement was interested in connecting the civil rights movement, anti-war protests and a push against infantilization and control in the university because of the historic shift in demographics of the student population that built this new student left.^63

**Student Movements**

Though the student movements Cooper discusses have long histories, this section focuses on the evolution of student movement beginning mainly with the 1950s and 1960s. Contemporary student worker organizers are operating in a landscape shaped by popular belief about student leftism and simultaneous student radicalism and


^62 Cooper, 229.
impotence that emerged from the chaotic and mixed legacy of the 1960s student movements. I argue that by first tracing historically different formations of student activism and identifying the interactions between students and larger national movements, we can understand how the contemporary student worker unionization movement views (and does not view) itself as a historical actor. This history also provides a window into the continuingly complicated race relations within student movements as they negotiate integration, racist university structures and separatist ideologies. I draw significantly on Philip Altbach’s work chronicling personal and organizational histories of the mid-century student movements.

Throughout most of the 19th century and early 20th century, students were a largely politically inactive and reasonably conservative social force (although they often built a culture and identity around antagonism with their university and its administration). But during the 1930s, they began to play a larger national role. Communists and socialist headed newly formed national student organizations like the American Student Union, which, while not operating like a workplace union, did try to connect and mobilize students. Student’s participated in anti-war actions and tried to spread radical consciousness. Though thoroughly defeated by the growing war effort and post-War McCarthyism, the student activism in the 1930s set a new precedent for students – as – youth political participation.

After a relatively quiet period throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, student activism reemerged as a major political force in the late 1950s. The peace movement mobilized thousands of students on campuses across the country, both through official

---

63 Ibid, 231.
organizations and in independent action. The major national student peace organization, the Student Peace Union (SPU) organized actions with thousands of students, mobilizing students from 1959 to 1963. Students active in the peace movements went on to be key leaders in Civil Rights protests and the New Left as the decade progressed and student attention began to shift to anti-racist activism.

From its start, students were key actors in the Civil Right Movement. Students were crucial to the founding of the Congress of Racial Equality in 1943 and early actions by groups like the Southern Christian Leadership drew on the student peace movement’s implementation of nonviolent tactics. As the Civil Rights movement was growing on campuses throughout the late 1950s, fraternity power, a bastion of white supremacy, was declining because of the influx of veterans post war and liberal youth culture, that meant for the first time on many campuses, fraternities and sororities no longer housed a majority of students. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was organized in 1960 and despite being an organization mainly of organizers working primarily in the South was able to mobilize white and black students nationwide into doing affinity and solidarity work. Students joined in a nationwide boycott of Woolworth in support of the sit-ins and many students actively participated in them as well. Students from across the country went south in 1964 to participate in Freedom Summer, conducting voter registration drives. As the Civil Rights movement progressed, Black Power as an ideological current grew and eventually became a dominant force among student organizing. This shift both mobilized many black students and led many white students, now excluded from the SNCC to question and reexamine their own organizing.

---

65 Altbach, 185.
66 Ibid, 10.
67 Ibid, 196.
The Black Panther Party, led by students like Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, became an important locus of interaction between students, workers, and other youth.

Participating in the Freedom Summer and working on civil rights mobilized many of the students who would become involved in on-campus protests and the Free Speech Movement (both Mario Savio of the Berkley Free Speech Movement and Tom Hayden of SDS first organized in the South in the late 1950s). The emergent Free Speech Movement bridged some of the racial gaps that had emerged between white student organizing against war and black student organizing for civil rights but was largely led by white students. After being founded in 1959, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) became one of the preeminent student organizations of the 1960s and an icon of the New Left. Without an “adult” parent organization, SDS opened chapters slowly throughout the early 1960s before growing in reaction to the 1965 escalation of the Vietnam War. In its early years, the SDS was reasonably moderate and worked with the Peace Crops and the UAW on various projects (an interesting fore bringer of future UAW/student collaboration). As with the Civil Rights Movement, SDS grew increasingly militant throughout the later half of the 1960s and began occupying campus buildings while shifting towards more radical political ideology. Eventually in 1969, after reaching a peak of 100,000 members, the organization split into various factions, including the Weather Underground and the Worker Student Alliance. Though the Worker Student Alliance had a strong critique of American society and emphasized

---

68 Ibid, 201.
69 Ibid, 224.
working-class organizing, it failed to achieve much success and did not lead to significant worker-student cooperation or student worker mobilization.\textsuperscript{71}

These movements and the national perception of them were shaped by highly visible student protests throughout the 1960s. After the Berkeley Free Speech protests and the shootings at Kent State, American media began to reflect an image of a highly active left-wing hippie university student. This popular image was also informed by the events of May ’68 in France. Though globally there were many large-scale student protests in the late 1960s, from Quebec to the Mexico Olympics protest, none took hold in American cultural and political imagination quite the way May ’68 did. (This is both a product of American eurocentrism and the shift May ’68 marked in student/worker relations.) Following student protests at universities across France and clashes between students and police in cities, workers joined in bringing the country to a halt with a general strike. Throughout these actions, the French Communist Party (PCF) served as a moderating force, trying at first to limit the occupations and strikes and then pushing workers to accept the reforms offered by the government. May ‘68 is important for the role it plays in popular left imaginations symbolizing a powerful shift in both left-wing aspirations and tactics, and as both a student and worker movement, a new moment of collaboration between these classes. Many historians contest the amount of collaboration between students and workers that actually happened but regardless of the reality of student/worker unity, its image as a moment of such persists.\textsuperscript{72}

The failures of students and workers to actually collaborate in May ’68 points at a larger question of who the left considered to be the revolutionary actor. French workers were far from militant; complicating the students’ goals, which were based in a

\textsuperscript{71} Altbach, 212.
traditional Marxist understanding of the workers as the revolutionary class. They were counting on the workerism, *ouvriersisme*, of the French left, and wrote prolifically about the need for student-worker unity. Despite this, it was students acting, building barricades and throwing “society into question” as the workers movement, hampered by the PCF, moved cautiously. May ’68 thus became a touchstone to reimagine students not as a vanguard tasked with “the education of the masses… no longer accomplished in words, a function of the intellectual avant garde; it is accomplished with action and it is a function of a group which dare undertake counteractivity” a group constructed as young, unorganized and willing to expose violence at the heart of the corporate system.

May ’68 exists and is rebutted in contemporary student worker organizing. The main symbols of May ’68 are of an unorganized and radical youth taking on reformist organized labor. This proves a complicated legacy for student workers now trying to organize and become the unions, which in some ways they stood ahead of or against in 1968. At the same time, it provides a potential backdrop for student workers to position their militantism within as a new and more radical form of organized labor. May ’68 showed that student-worker collaboration had enormous potential to change all of society. Its popular image though does not reckon with students who are also workers—rather as collaboration between classes. Returning to the question of who the revolutionary class is, who can act and who should, students who work can be both of the things that move society.

Student activism surged in the 1960s and 1970s and created a new sense of students, representing youth, as important left-wing political actors. Of course, all the

---

73 Ibid.
movements detailed in this section also had strong backlash on and off campus, and there were many conservative white students that opposed and vigorously fought the Civil Rights Movement and integration, formed religious groups, or simply did not participate in the new radical/liberal campus movements. However, I focus here on growing progressive student movements, because these were the movements that brought students to the fore as national political actors, shifting domestic sentiments on civil rights and the Vietnam War. At the same time, they did little with organized labor both nationally and on campus. Though factions within SDS would talk about the need for worker organization and while the civil rights movement explicitly worked to change labor conditions, student activism was largely concentrated around more visible anti-war and free speech demonstrations and did not collaborate much with formal organized labor. Some exceptions to this will be covered later in the early graduate unionization fights.

This focus is not surprising. Students throughout the 20th century had had a history of focusing and organizing around foreign policy from the early anti-war movements of the 1920s and 30s to anti draft fights. (This focus will be echoed in the 1990s student movements’ attention to international trade and sweatshop labor largely overseas rather than domestic labor). It also could reflect a student movement bent on upending the status quo, that potentially viewed organized labor – then representing roughly a third of the American labor force and growing increasingly conservative in the wake of McCarthyism and the AFL-CIO communist purges– as parts of an old system. Student protests, though highly visible, had little power on campus compared to other global protests. Unlike in Mexico or France, where student demonstrations shut down

---

74 Alain Touraine, *The May Movement: Revolt and Reform: May 1968—the Student Rebellion and Workers’ Strikes—the*
the country, American students were unable to seize control of the university or exert direct policy changes (though of course their support in larger civil rights pushes and anti-war protests eventually manifested in change). I argue that one contributing reason for a lack of student power is not just the limits student organizers face, although there are many, but that during this peak, they rarely used their power as producers or workers. The failures and fizzling of the domestic student movement is part of why ‘May 68 in France came to have such power in American imaginations— it represents a time when students mobilized in new ways, finally working with workers, to show a striking amount of power.

**Early Graduate Student Unionization**

Students organizing in the anti-war movement translated their experience into a few scattered instances of unionization and labor organizing. In 1966, after attending an anti-draft sit in, graduate students at the University of Wisconsin Madison formed what is widely considered to be the first graduate student union in the country. The Teaching Assistants Association (TAA) was preceded and inspired by a previous Wisconsin Student Employees Association in 1962 and by efforts from the Berkeley Free Speech Movement to form a graduate employee union. The TAA organized in response to frustrations with the growing corporatization of the university, a trend that continues today, and anger at their exploitation by the university administration. Changes to tuition remission in 1969 brought most teaching assistants into the union and by the

---


76 These instances of student payment changes catalyzing unionization will be echoed in Chapter Three’s discussion of Reed College.
spring the union began bargaining. After a month-long strike in March 1970, the TAA won its first contract.

The union was able to bargain legally because of a Structure Agreement passed by the school administration shortly after they formed. However, in 1980 after failures to win a fifth contract and a five-week strike, the school pulled out of the agreement, which courts found legal because of Wisconsin’s lack of collective bargaining regulations. The union was eventually able to reestablish itself and by the mid-1990s was successfully negotiating strong contracts. This pattern was followed by the small initial wave of graduate unions. Graduate students at the Universities of Oregon and Michigan also succeeded in winning unions in the late 1960s but attempts at Harvard failed.\textsuperscript{77} The 1990s would see renewed interest and success in graduate organization as more public-school students unionized and private school students, led notably by efforts at NYU became increasingly common.

**Work Study**

Perhaps the biggest impact on student work came in 1964 with the creations of federal work study. The 1965 creation of the HEA shifted the nascent College Work-Study Program, created a year earlier in the Economic Opportunity Act from the Department of Labor to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (NASFAA). This policy can potentially be read as a reaction to the student movement, and an attempt to make students dependent, indebted or constantly employed instead of free moving radicals. As student movement was happening, more and more students were

\textsuperscript{77} Lindsey Dayton and Rudi Batzell, “Uniting Academic Workers: Graduate Workers Organize with the United Auto Workers,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 91 (ed 2017): 166, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547917000011.
working. Work study subsidized student labor on campuses and incentivized universities to employ students over non-student employees.

This beginning to what became a growing emphasis on students to work was part of a larger shift away from Schultzian ideas of human capital towards increasingly right-wing frameworks promoted by Milton Friedman and Gary Becker that emphasized students' own personal and familial investment in themselves as capital. This framing came as part of a right-wing backlash to the student movement that sought to deradicalize them by making students more financially dependent and pushed a return to some of the paternalist in loco parentis frameworks of university authority. Cooper usefully identifies this shift and some of the accompanying Reagan era rhetoric around personal responsibility and refusing to “overspoil” too pampered and entitled “children” (18-22 year old students) that became pervasive in the late 1970s and 1980s, but we can add to her analysis the growth of work-study programs as a means to enforce this new laboring youth who earns their education. In 1972, the reauthoriazation of the HEA created Sallie Mae and a began a shift from grants and federal subsidy to loan programs, but accompanying this form of the financialization of student life, and the beginnings of manufactured student debt on a mass scale, students also were encouraged to work through work-study.78

In 1979, the fair share adjustment was implemented to determine the amount of federal work study money an institution would receive, linking student income and cost of the university to federal funding, but institutions already using federal work study were grandfathered in. Contemporary federal work study recipience still reflects this,

78 Morgan Adamson, “The Financialization of Student Life: Five Propositions on Student Debt,” accessed April 16, 2019,
with older “prestige institutions receiving a disproportionate amount of federal work study money, even if they have an overall wealthier student body.

The 1980s also brought the Bennet hypothesis - a widespread, if probably false belief that high federal funding and subsidizing through loan programs and work study was to blame for rising costs of universities. In 1985 the work study program shifted from state to federal administration and in 1990 the program was restructured to have a new general purpose that focused significantly more on community service.

Community service jobs were first included in the work-study program after the 1972 reauthorization of the program but in 1992 they became a larger part of the program, with almost 5% of all federal work study funds going to community service jobs. This reframing both reflects and shapes how the government, institutions and student workers themselves think of their jobs, potentially framing them as not particularly necessary but as an act of volunteering. It emphasizes that these jobs are centered around building students as people with good character and getting them to “engage with the community” rather than compensating them for vital work - although of course community service is often extremely necessary, it is often thought of as charity not “real” labor (see Chapter Two on nonprofit work). The community service focus in federal work study and the ability to receive federal work study through off campus work in the “community” grew over the 1990s, expanding to 7% of all funding in 1998. The 2000s have seen cuts to the HEA and a refocusing of it around STEM programs. A key exception to the push to move costs of education from the federal government to students though came in the 2007 creation of the public loan forgiveness

https://www.academia.edu/7721249/The_Financialization_of_Student_Life_Five_Propositions_on_Student_Debt.
program. Though small and often impossible to fulfill, the program ties lower education cost to public labor.

**United Students Against Sweatshops**

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the US labor movement suffered major setbacks. President Ronald Reagan successfully defeated the air traffic controllers in 1981, setting a new precedent that strikes not only could be punished but would be and the decade that followed was rife with anti-labor legislation. The Clinton administration took largely the same tack, implementing neoliberal policies hurting labor protections at home and making it easier for jobs to be sent overseas. In 1994, the United States entered into the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Canada and Mexico, eliminating tariffs and trade protections between the countries. This, along with rising globalization and growing attention on organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Bank, led to protests like the 1999 Seattle WTO demonstrations and brought growing left-wing attention to international working conditions. Amidst this zeitgeist of concern about globalization and anti-corporate frustration, the organized labor movement began its first major formal collaboration with students on campus, working together to form the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS).^79_

I focus here on the growth and change of USAS both because it is one of the main actors in contemporary campus labor organizing and because its shifts over the last decade in policy attention and tactics serve as an important alternative to and potential

---

^79^ Shortly thereafter, the Student Labor Action Project formed. SLAP similarly organizes student labor solidarity on college campuses across the country but has some ideological and structural differences from
model to student worker unionization campaigns. The tension in USAS between attention to domestic and international work, between structural critiques of capitalism and frustration over corporatism, and between wealthy students’ apparent privilege and their labor organizing work all remain in unionization drives. USAS’s move from organizing around foreign sweatshops to local campus minimum wage laws both helps explain why student unionization campaigns are currently happening and offers a model of student worker organizing that exists outside of NLRB frameworks and state/juridical mechanisms.

USAS currently has roughly 150 chapters on campuses across the US, making it the largest national “student labor campaign organization.”\(^{80}\) It now has a national office and full-time staff, but when it officially formed in 1998, USAS was a much smaller collection of undergraduate students. The student group at Duke had grown out of the dozens of Student Labor Action Coalitions (SLACs) forming throughout the early and mid-1990s on mainly elite college campuses across the country that functioned as student clubs that did labor solidarity work.\(^{81}\) Unions were growing more interested in the excited student activists that powered these groups and in 1996, the AFL-CIO launched a summer internship program (that was inactive for the 2018 summer because of budget cuts) called Union Summer.\(^{82}\) Students, including several students from Duke University, who spent the 1997 summer working for UNITE (United Needle and Textile

---


\(^{81}\) Liza Featherstone, Students against Sweatshops (London: Verso, 2002). The history and analysis I provide of USAS relies heavily on Featherstone’s book, which was written in collaboration with several USAS members. The book provides a useful history of the organization and several insightful critiques of their organizing, but it is necessary to note that this 2002 publication does not have much distance from USAS’s early founders.

\(^{82}\) Featherstone, 11.
Workers Union) researched the connections between their own school’s branded apparel and sweatshops, and after returning to school in the fall began working on a campaign to pass a code of conduct for managers. After a successful code campaign against sweatshops at Duke, students in the spring of 1998 formed USAS as a network of campus anti-sweatshop groups.

The early years of USAS were spent predominantly fighting against foreign labor conditions and companies like Nike outsourcing labor to low-paid poorly treated foreign workers. This echoed a larger focus of mainstream left-wing opposition to corporations and sweatshops. Liza Featherstone, a journalist who wrote about USAS in collaboration with many current and former USAS activists, questions this anti-corporatism (also seen in the WTO protests, writing about McDonald’s and Ralph Nadar’s presidential campaign) asking whether it was “really about social justice or simply an aesthetic objection to bigness. It has, among middle class white people, become the dominant idiom of resistance in the US.... corporations provide a convenient euphemism for capitalism which few Americans want to talk about.” Indeed, USAS, coming out of mainly elite private schools, often focused on foreign sweatshops and directed its anger against corporate greed instead of “closer to home” issues of American poverty and class inequality in or around campuses. Unlike the SLACs, that preceded them, USAS chapters rarely worked with campus labor unions or dealt with on-campus labor issues.

Especially in its initial years, USAS activists tended to be much wealthier and whiter than the overall campus population. A 1999 survey found that “over a third of the USAS activists reported a family income of over a $100,000 more than twice the

---

83 Since its 2004 merger with the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union, UNITE HERE!
84 Featherstone, 13.
85 Ibid, 34.
proportion of all college students with that family income [while] only 8 percent of USAS activists reported a family income of less than 40,000, compared to 35% of first-year college students”\textsuperscript{86} though since then, as the organization has expanded to more public schools, this is likely to have changed. Featherstone also acknowledges importantly that this demographic makeup is part of a larger history of student activism coming from elite groups, often to protect their own interests. USAS has struggled to build coalitions between wealthy white students on campuses organizing in solidarity with foreign workers and students of color on campuses who were often engaged in campaigns against on campus racism, and describe that work as a response to feeling “constantly under siege”.\textsuperscript{87} The split between campus labor organizations (including student worker unions) and campus anti-racism campaigns has persisted since the early 2000s and will be a focus of some of the later case studies.

The focus of USAS on labor issues that at times felt largely disconnected from the student body (although early campaigns also came out of a sense of connection through university purchasing power and from a shared sense of youth and connection between high school and college student activists and young teenage and adolescent workers) presented a variety of challenges. The racial split in organizing on campus comes both from many campuses’ histories and cultures of segregation and from the fact that "while less affluent students are more likely to organize on their own behalf, against tuition hikes or campus racism, upper-middle-class white students have the luxury of organizing against their own privilege.”\textsuperscript{88} Featherstone goes on to point out that "ironically that sort of radicalism can be challenging for working class students, who may

\textsuperscript{86} Featherstone, 92.  
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid, 65.  
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid, 94.
feel they’re in college not to critique privilege but to court it,” a problem that has persisted into student unionization campaigns split views on multitenancy (see Chapter 3). \(^{89}\) However, USAS itself has been critiqued for a lack of militancy and structural critique in its organizing. By focusing on distant labor problems, many members were able to view sweatshops as aberrations in an otherwise functional system, limiting critiques of low wage legal labor (i.e. that students may themselves be doing).

Despite these challenges, USAS has been instrumental to transforming student involvement in the labor movement. Many students reported USAS involvement as a stepping stone to greater labor activism and an awareness of exploitation at home. \(^{90}\) Unions financially support USAS, and it regularly sends graduates to work for unions. Since the 2001 USAS national conference, the organization no longer focuses only on overseas labor and has increased its attention on domestic, local, and campus labor issues. Most importantly to student unionization efforts this has explicitly included a shift to including campus student workers in their organizing aims. Since the mid-2010s, USAS has organized for student worker $15-an-hour minimum wages and has won at several schools including Columbia and NYU in 2016. \(^{91}\) These campaigns mobilize workers across campus jobs and while focused on specific issues provide a foundation for future labor action and a growing sense of student worker identity. The language around them includes specific recognition of students as workers and has led to some of the largest gains in student work conditions on four-year campuses.

\(^{89}\) Ibid, 94.
\(^{90}\) Ibid, 96.
“Any employee”: the NLRB rules on student work

The NLRB, discussed earlier in its founding during the Great Depression, has long had a contentious and turbulent relationship with academia. It first ruled on the rights of academic labor in the still controversial Yeshiva University case, in which the Board recognized professors as employees, eligible to unionize but in a subsequent 1980 Supreme Court case (NLRB v. Yeshiva University), the Court ruled that professors had a managerial role and were excluded from collective bargaining rights. With that precedent, the NLRB's rulings on academic workers have had to negotiate the complicated power relationships on campus that do not always take the form of direct employer/employee relations the way they do in more explicitly corporate structures. Indeed, in ruling on student workers, NLRB decisions have oscillated on whether students working on campus can be considered employees, invoking larger questions raised by student movements and Featherstone on students’ multiple positions as employees, members, consumers and products of the university.

The NLRB first ruled on student labor in the 1972 Adelphi University Case when it made the limited finding that “graduate assistants should be excluded from a bargaining unit of university faculty members because they did not share a community of interest with the faculty.” This decision importantly did not address whether the graduate assistants were statutory employees but two years later the Board ruled that “certain university research assistants were ‘primarily students’ and thus not statutory employees.” The first major break with this ruling came in 1999 when the NLRB held

---

92 Adelphi University, 195 NLRB 639. (1972).
93 The Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York and Graduate Workers of Columbia GWC, UAW., 364 NLRB No. 90 (2016).
94 Ibid, 2.
that interns, residents and clinical fellows at Boston Medical Center were statutory employees that could collectively bargain.\textsuperscript{95} The Boston Medical Center case provided important precedent for the 2000 decision, in which the Board ruled for the first time that graduate assistants are statutory employees.

Because the NLRB does not cover public employees, graduate students had been legally unionizing at state schools since 1969 at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. But the 2000 NYU decision marked a landmark move that formally recognized graduate students at private colleges as employees and in the next couple of years, many graduate students unionized or launched unionization campaigns. However, only a few years later the NYU decision was overturned in the Board’s 2004 decision in Brown University.\textsuperscript{96} The Brown University decision, which came after George W. Bush appointed new NLRB members was able to rule against unionizing graduate student workers on the basis that the NLRA was “designed to cover economic relationships” and that the Board did not have jurisdiction in the case because it involved “relationships that are primarily educational.”\textsuperscript{97} For the next decade this precedent that graduate workers were students before workers and that their position as students prohibited their ability to receive collective bargaining protections limited unionization efforts on private campuses.

However, in 2016 after a Regional Board dismissed a petition by the Graduate Workers of Columbia -GWC, UAW, which represents both graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants and research assistants at Columbia University, the National Board heard the case and overturned the Brown University decision. The four members of the Board writing the decision (there was one dissent) based their decision largely off of the

\textsuperscript{95} Boston Medical Center, 330 NLRB 152 (1999).
\textsuperscript{96} New York University, 332 NLRB 1205 (2000)
\textsuperscript{97} Brown University, 342 NLRB 483 (2004).
NLRA’s Section 2(3)’s broad definition of employee. “Our starting point in determining whether student assistants are covered in the Act is the broad language of Section 2(3), which provides in relevant part that “[t]he term ‘employee’ shall include any employee,” subject to certain exceptions - note of which address student’s employed by their universities. The Brown University Board held that graduate assistants cannot be statutory employees because “they are primarily students and have a primarily educational, not economic, relationship with their university.” We disagree.”

The Columbia Board found that the assistants preformed work at the direction of the university, fulfilling common law interpretations of employee and emphasized the range of employees the Supreme Court has ruled that the Act covers.

They also emphasized that having a, even primary, relationship to the university as a student, did not negate the assistant’s role as employees and emphasized that the collective bargaining rights provided by the NLRA are not conditional on having an exclusively employee-employer, master-servant, or “economic” relationship; “a university may be both the student’s educator and employer.” The ruling draws explicitly on the purpose of the NLRA being to encourage collective bargaining unless there is sufficient reason otherwise, and they note that given the long history of graduate unionization and medical student unionization, there have yet to be any issues, to academic freedom or the university, that pose sufficient risk to disallow collective bargaining.

In considering the Columbia decision, the Board ruled not just that the petitioners could unionize but that they had formed an appropriate bargaining unit. The question of

---

98 Columbia, 1.
99 Ibid, 5.
100 Ibid, 7.
who can bargain together has long been a divisive point for labor etc. Though typically, unions will ask for a small bargaining unit and employers will push for a large unit that makes winning a vote more difficult, the decision in Columbia to allow the union’s request for a unit made up of PhD, masters and undergraduate assistants with a variety of job titles, marked a profound victory for labor. This part of the decision was covered significantly less by mainstream media, like NPR or the Washington Post and in trade media like Inside Higher Education, than overarching change the Board made to student employment status but is just as important a move especially given how this thesis will question not just whether students should organize but how.

It not only explicitly allowed undergraduate workers to organize and codified them in federal for the first time as workers, but it ruled that they could organize in a bargaining unit alongside graduate workers. The Columbia decision opened a possibility of organizing not along student identity and status, and program enrollment, but by job description. The reason they allowed this unit configuration is “as recognized by the Supreme Court Section 9(a) ‘suggests that employees may seek to organize ‘a unit’ that is ‘appropriate’ – not necessarily the single most appropriate unit.’” Though the Board acknowledges that there are differences in difficulty and independence as well as pay and benefits between graduate and undergraduate work, they found that the student workers share a sufficient community of interest to form an appropriate unit, with sufficient job overlap.

The 2016 Columbia decision was met with excitement from many graduate workers unions across the country that had been trying to gain formal recognition. At Yale University, where graduate students had been working toward a union for close to 25 years, the news was met with a jubilant vote officially forming Local 33. The
university however choose not to recognize the union and after a series of escalating actions culminating in an occupation of school grounds, march during commencement and hunger strike, the union eventually pulled its petition for legal recognition. The 2016 decision came just weeks before the election of Donald Trump, and Yale, like universities across the country, was able to wait out the union push until new Trump appointees took positions on the Board. Facing a conservative NLRB, unions across the country in a move coordinated by the UAW, which represents several graduate student unions including Columbia’s, pulled their petitions rather than risk cases getting to the national board and overturning the 2016 precedent. As students at schools like UChicago wait for a friendlier political environment to gain recognition, even after hard fought and successful vote drives, locals have begun to think of other tactics. They have to sustain interest and involvement in the union until cases can potentially be won again in the NLRB and at conferences like CGEU, the Coalition for Graduate Employee unions, alternative tactics in lieu of formal recognition are a frequent topic of conversation.

This has extended to undergraduate organizing as well. After Columbia (and the 2016 unionization of Grinnell dining workers) movements started on several campuses to unionize. Since the appointment of conservative members to the Board though, the undergraduate unionization attempt at Reed College similarly pulled its petition. This is discussed more in Chapter 3. But as student workers at private schools wait to gain formal recognition through legal processes, issue-based campaign have become an important part of organizing life. USAS campaigns for $15 campus minimum wage (see section above) are ways students can organize for better workplace conditions with limited power to form a union.
Conclusion

The history of student workers is complex, tying together the ebb and flow of labor histories, university establishment, privatization, and growing ubiquity, and student activism. Since the earliest schools were founded, both labor and the university have tried to negotiate their relationship to the state. This is deeply intertwined with the state’s role in supporting capital and private property developments and its varying involvement and inference with slavery. By the 1930s, labor was divided over questions of reformist tactics or complete opposition to state support, and fiercely debated the establishment of the NLRB. The Board still holds power, ruling on student labor in a series of reversals that have left private school students currently able to unionize but very tenuously. This juridical relationship evolved alongside a student movement that reached its peak in the 1960s. The student movements development of student identity without clearly attached worker identity was challenged by more recent USAS activity.

Throughout this history a tension emerges between different forms of worker organizing. Student workers must now negotiate the struggle between militant action and legal or reformist intervention especially after being alternately granted, and politically inhibited from using, legal avenues to gain union recognition. This next chapter will examine the conditions in which students organize to understand why they employ tactics they use by looking at the university as a company town.
Chapter 2: The University as Company Town

The prestigious, private Catholic University of Notre Dame du Lac occupies 1,263 acres of Notre Dame, Indiana.\textsuperscript{101} It houses roughly 2,000 first-year students in 30 residence halls and requires sophomores and juniors to live on-campus in real estate owned by the university.\textsuperscript{102} The campus includes a health center, fire department, police department, post office, public roads, restaurants, and stores.\textsuperscript{103} None of these qualities are particularly unique to the University of Notre Dame - many other similar-sized U.S. colleges and universities offer similarly amenities and services. But in 2017, these services took on a special significance when Judge James T. Moody used these factors to classify the university a “company town.”

Ruling in Moss v. University of Notre Dame du Lac, Judge Moody denied the University’s motion to dismiss Assistant Vice President David Moss’s claims that the school denied him a promotion in retaliation for speaking out against racist incidents on

\textsuperscript{101} University Communications | University of Notre Dame, “Campus Life,” University of Notre Dame, accessed April 1, 2019, https://www.nd.edu/.


campus. The university lawyers argued that, as a private entity, they could not be held liable for the kinds of free speech violations Moss was suing over.\textsuperscript{104} But Moody found that the school was subject to the state action doctrine,\textsuperscript{105} and thus responsible to Moss’s suit, because the university should be considered a company town. This ruling relied on an expansive definition of company town, in which the court recognized that the university did not completely provide the town’s infrastructure or municipalities. Instead, Judge Moody focused on the fact that Notre Dame “houses 6,000 resident students for most of the year, promulgates and enforces a code of governance for employees and students [and]… employs police with arrest powers on and off campus”\textsuperscript{106} (emphasis mine). The schools’ pervasive control through housing, moral codes, and policing reclassified the university not simply as a private actor but as a significant authority of a quasi-municipal entity.

In this chapter, I turn to Judge Moody’s argument that many universities function as modern company towns and how this has implications for student worker organizing. My analysis of the university as company town draws on Moody’s ruling and focuses on four key sites through which the university and the company town can be read in parallel: the company store and internal, idiosyncratic payment systems; the dormitory and residential structure of company towns; the police station and juridical systems; and the nonprofit office, “philanthropic” missions and familial cultures of the

\textsuperscript{104} “Constitutional Law - State Action Doctrine - District Court Preserves Claim That University Is a Company Town - Moss v. University of Notre Dame Du Lac, No. 3.”

\textsuperscript{105} The state action doctrine stipulates that only government actors can be held liable for violating a person’s constitutional rights. However, the Supreme Court has ruled in exceptional cases private actors may be held liable as well. In Marsh v Alabama, a 1945 case about a Jehovah Witness’s rights to proselytize, the Supreme Court established the precedent that company towns constitute one of these exceptional cases and can be held liable to respect individual’s constitutional rights because of the ambiguity in their roles as both private entities and municipalities.

\textsuperscript{106} “Constitutional Law - State Action Doctrine - District Court Preserves Claim That University Is a Company Town - Moss v. University of Notre Dame Du Lac, No. 3,” 1770.
many company towns. At each of these sites, the many roles the university takes on become apparent, as does its ability to infantilize or make dependent its student workers, and to promulgate and enforce its own moral codes. Tracing these codes, I ultimately argue that the university functions as an enclosure in the sense that it is a Foucauldian site in which the university disciplines students and student workers through the internalization and of dominant ethics and values.

***

This attempt to analyze the student worker in the context of the private university as company town is an effort to situate student worker strategies within larger historical frames, connect them to the broader workers’ movement, and discuss the constraints that exist on student worker organizing. I use company town in this thesis to refer to a place where a single company employs many, if not all, of the town’s workers, while providing much of the local infrastructure to its workers/residents. It is a reference to the historical phenomenon of the company town as it existed in American and parts of Europe in the late 1800s and early 1900s. I expand on this definition below, but here I aim to delineate the specific historical company town from another colloquial use of company town to refer to places often economically centered around or socially reliant on a company but less completely dependent on the company for services and daily welfare.

---

107 I do not explore in great depth the ways universities are literal enclosures, used by the American government and private interest to claim land, though this history is critical to understanding how universities, students and property relations within them develop. The use of the enclosure as a form of analysis can be expanded to use Sharon Stein’s work on the Morill Land Grant Act of 1863 to take land from indigenous peoples to contemporary struggles between “town and gown” and situational municipal claims on the university.

108 The university also has increasingly stopped directly employing workers and has turned to contracted workers to provide many of its services. This move defers liability and is a union-busting strategy. This chapter does not explore the privatization and contracting of university labor in depth but future research must be done on how these subcontracting structures interact with direct university control.
Currently no literature exists on undergraduate unionization, outside of journalistic pieces describing recent efforts at a few schools. To better understand and contribute to scholarship specifically focused on undergraduate unionization, I consider work on other labor organizing sectors, where analogous characteristics can explain the parameters of how student workers organize.

By viewing the private college/university as a “company town,” this chapter provides a framework against which current undergraduate organizing strategies can be read by workers and academics. The similarities between student workers and non-student workers’ employers, employment structures, treatment and demographics, reveal different organizing philosophies and tactics necessary for student workers aiming to unionize. Such comparisons remind us that undergraduate workers are not organizing in a vacuum. Despite their many idiosyncrasies, student workers can learn from, teach to, and act in solidarity with historical and larger movements.

It is not possible to describe all the shared issues of student workers and non-student workers. As such, I focus on framing small private American university and college campuses in rural, suburban or isolated locations as company towns, likening this model of worker/owner relationships within the historical precedent and presence in the United States. In doing so, I offer that enclosed geographies and economies provide an opportunity for organizing young and mission-driven workforces.

109 I encourage more research on (but not limited to): the gendered aspects of student work and organizing in mainly female workplaces; the racialized aspects of work and how black and brown workers in predominantly white spaces can organize; organizing in university workplaces that are less ethnically, socioeconomically, racially homogenous than other workplaces (and examining the ways university commodification of “diversity” impact the workplace); organizing in university workplaces with more international students/workers than other industries; organizing in diffuse workplaces; and comparing undergraduate organization to graduate student and adjunct faculty organizing.

110 I refer to “mission-driven work” to indicate primarily values oriented work that employees come to largely out of passion for the vision of what their work can accomplish. Mission-driven work includes nonprofit work, some public service, some press, and some corporate work that employees do both
The company towns offers a new lens into the difficulty and possibility of student worker organizing. Through this emphasis, I demonstrate the ways in which the university functions not just as a locus of the “academy” but how that role is intertwined with the university as a corporation. I identify how historical shifts in the national economy have impacted work on campuses and locate the university’s role as a private intellectual property producer in a neoliberal knowledge economy. This comparison contributes to a more robust organizing theory and better sense of how, if student workers are revolutionary agents, they fit into larger historical developments. Company towns were sites of worker militancy. By making the comparison with the university, I examine how when the company stands in as the municipality or works closely in cooperation with it, worker strategies often turn away from state or reform methods towards actions that target the company and state as aggressors.

Having established this comparative methodology, I will further outline hallmarks of the company town as it existed historically and in its most popularly recognizable incarnation in Pullman Illinois during the 1890s. I use this historical example to frame Matevz Straus and Razvan Zamfira’s theorizations of the contemporary company town. I then apply this contemporary model to the university, again noting, in alignment with Moody, that the company store, residence hall, police station and nonprofit office all as sites in which the university behaves as a company town. In each of these sections, I discuss possibilities for organizing student workers and the lessons they can learn from other workers and this labor history. I expand the section on the nonprofit office to explore related issues of family and youth. I then identify areas because of their paycheck and because they are passionate about the “good” their work can do. I like the term mission-driven because it carries the connotation of religious service and duty, a feeling many workers in such spaces express.
of difference between university work systems and company towns, by identifying the inherent transience of student work. Throughout these studies of specific areas and qualities, I show how universities exert their power and how this is internalized by student workers.

**The Company Town**

On May 10, 1894, 3,300 workers for the Pullman company walked off the job, setting off a violent and national strike. The workers were angry about deep pay cuts and sweeping layoffs instituted by the company following the 1893 economic downturn. The Pullman company, founded by George Pullman, controlled the market for sleeping cars. Just prior to 1880, Pullman purchased 12 miles of land south of central Chicago to build a new factory. 111

Based on utopian dreams for an alternative to the ‘impoverished slums of Chicago,’ George Pullman planned Pullman, Illinois as a model town. He forbid drinking and unionization from the town, even preventing the library from carrying information on the subject. At its height, 12,000 workers lived in Pullman, paying rent to George Pullman, following his rules and using utilities owned by the company. The Illinois Labor Historical Society cites one Pullman employee as saying, "We are born in a Pullman house, fed from the Pullman shops, taught in the Pullman school, catechized in the Pullman Church, and when we die we shall go to the Pullman Hell." 112

Charging steeper rents than those in surrounding areas, the Pullman company made money both its workers’ labor and their living situation. When the company cut wages in 1893, it did not cut rents. As tensions in the town escalated, workers explored the taboo option of unionizing and, after failing to get a response or reforms from company committees, went on strike. The American Railway Union (ARU) supported the strike, calling for a boycott on all Pullman cars. Workers across the country refused to load cargo on or off the trains. Rail barons hired thousands of strikebreakers, and fights broke out as workers attacked the trains. The federal government sent in 12,000 troops (roughly half of the American army!) to break the boycott, destroying the ARU and forcing Pullman workers to return to work.113

The Pullman strike had significant national consequence. It followed decades of labor tumult, including violent confrontations between labor and the government. The ARU President Eugene V. Debs rose prominence; after being sent to jail, Debs later ran for President on the Socialist Party ticket in 1912. While Pullman has one of the most famous American company town, but it was far from the only one.

Like Pullman, Illinois, many of the other early company towns emerged as a rejection of increasingly crowded and destitute cities. Wealthy industrialists established new and large industrial factories in suburbs or rural areas and built the towns around these factories. The company provided (and emphasized its role as a provider of) housing, healthcare, education, leisure activities, and retail, where frequently only company tokens rather than legal money was accepted. They were insular and hegemonic, often founded using used philanthropic language with explicit paternalism, and advanced strict moral codes on the workers they housed and employed. After

---

113 “The Parable of Pullman,” Illinois Labor History Society, accessed February 27, 2019,
Pullman, rather than disappear, many company towns simply adapted. Instead of explicit paternalism, in the early 1900s they employed architectural design and new forms of industrial relations to provide sufficient social welfare to prevent uprisings like Pullman.¹⁴

In their master’s thesis on contemporary company towns, Matevz Straus and Razvan Zamfira argue that the company town must be understood through a historical materialist lens, in which “the emergence, decline and reemergence of company towns always comes as a negation of the previous models of socio-economic and spatial organization of society around the company. It is a reaction to the drawbacks and failures of previous models of organization.”¹⁵ Company towns in the mid-1800s developed as a reaction to industrialization and poor conditions in cities. Wealthy industrialists framed the projects as model communities on utopian, pastoral ideals, with work and housing for everyone. Such company philanthropy and welfare filled a void in a public sphere left by industrialization’s destruction of small-town accountability.

Ultimately, the decline of the company town in the 1920s and 1930s came in part from the rise of government provided social services. New Deal programs like Social Security (1935), the Public Works Administration (1933), and the Home Owners’ Loan Act (1933)¹⁶ meant that workers no longer relied on philanthropic companies.¹⁷ Many contemporary writers like Straus and Zamfira argue we are currently witnessing the rebirth of the company town. Following cuts to the welfare state starting in the 1970s,

corporate responsibility has taken on an increasingly important component of branding. Companies once again build infrastructure and provide services, although Strauss and Zamfira point to a few key differences between the historic company towns and the more contemporary versions, such as Beavertown, OR (Nike) or Bentonville, AKs (Walmart), or more expansively, like Google’s Mountainview California campus.\textsuperscript{118}

The new company towns also exist in reaction to and as part of their surrounding economy, meaning they are defined not by industrial relations but by post-industrial knowledge economies. Contemporary company towns share the expansionist ethos of company towns that grew during postbellum Manifest Destiny,\textsuperscript{119} but this "common characteristics stem from the purpose of the company town equaling being a 'method of opening up possible unexplored, usually unexploited, territory,' [now includes] unexplored and unexploited human potential."\textsuperscript{120} Contemporary company towns continue to grow in peripheral locations but rather than supplanting governments, they feature partnerships between local municipalities and the company. They are different in that company town populations are no longer homogenous but rather “the population is usually very diverse with percentage of foreign-born population being much higher than in neighboring often larger and economically more diverse cities.”\textsuperscript{121}

Straus and Zamfira are not alone in theorizing a new company town. A LexisNexis search results in thousands of articles written in the last year in English about company towns, with many referencing technology firms as establishing new company

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid, 198.
\textsuperscript{119} This historical framing necessitates greater discussion of the role the company town and the university in relation to settler colonialism and slavery than this thesis can accomplish. I recommend further research on the comparison on the roles of the company town and university as places of exclusion and land conquering.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid, 104.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid, 105.
towns. These articles, like the November 2018 *Quartz* article “WeWork and Google offices are a lot like the exploitative company towns of the past” or a March 2018 *Business Insider* article on Facebook and Amazon, describe the ways these companies towns resemble something similar to universities. They refer to the youthful, casual “campuses” that are enclosures of “privileged” workers.

Not just technological companies, but also many private universities fit into Straus and Zamfira’s model of the company town, reflecting the knowledge economy, partnerships with government, newly diverse populations, and peripheral locations. However, while Straus and Zamfira categorize the contemporary company town as one in which paternalism is no longer a defining characteristic, I argue that this is an area where universities continue to echo historical company towns, combining the new knowledge economy with old regimes of paternalistic control. With such blended structures, new tactics must arise from the old organizing struggles.

Many liberal arts schools, embodying elements of the company town, have over the last thirty years, become increasingly residential and profit-driven. Though with nonprofit status, the structure of profit sharing differs from that of the corporate world, institutions have, as described by Slaughter and Rhoades, after receiving less and less public funding, increasingly turned to new revenue sources, raising tuition and investing in corporate partnerships and patentable research. The private nonprofit, since its definition through *Dartmouth*, has worked closely with the state. John Whitehead argues that though the 1819 decision is a definitive point in creating the private university, public and private roles in higher education were not commonly recognized until after

---

122 Leanna Garfield, “Facebook and Amazon Are so Big They’re Creating Their Own Company Towns — Here’s the 200-Year Evolution,” Business Insider, accessed April 4, 2019.
the Civil War. Dartmouth was founded in 1769 as a quasi-public or provincial college. Even after the 1819 decision, Dartmouth continued to work closely with the state of New Hampshire. This close partnership continues until today, where state and private higher education institutions currently receive significant grant funding for research and federal subsidies, including to pay for student employees.

The Company Store

Universities both exist as a company store and contain their own internal company stores. Broadly, they are the company store, selling the product of education or at least class time or credits to the worker/residents who populate them. This sense of the university serving as a market and education as a product for purchase and consumption is important to recognize because it illustrates the university’s simultaneous and overlapping role of producer, employer, landlord, product, and consumer. Here, however, I focus on the second manner in which they often have company stores. The university is both store and industry. As industry, on many campuses, universities create (or, importantly contract) stores providing workers with more concrete commodities

---

125 Tellingly, many schools refer to the two week period in which students select their courses at the beginning of the semester “shopping period.”
126 According to Tara Mathewson, “nearly 40 percent of member institutions in the National Association of College and University Food Services, or NACUFS, now contract out all or part of their campus dining.” The privatization of campus services reveals an important shift in capitalism, as increasingly, corporations avoid liability and expense through contracts rather than vertical integration. It is also a key factor in student worker organizing, because it adds a complicating layer into how students organize when the university is not their direct employer but has contractor power over their employer. This aspect of contracting will be returned to in discussions of liability and the deferral of responsibility (mirrored in the university as an institution as it has been on a federal level to extend the analogy between municipalities and university company towns).
then “education” or “experience.” These include basic means like food, healthcare and housing.

On university campuses, perhaps the most necessary and ubiquitous “stores” are the cafeterias and grocery or general stores on campuses that accept student meal plans\(^\text{127}\) – company specific forms of money that enable student/worker/residents to buy food and occasionally dried goods and clothes. Investigative journalist Tara García Mathewson analyzed a national survey of campus dining contracts and using statistics from Peterson’s college guide and the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that colleges are charging students far more in their meal plans than average food costs.\(^\text{128}\) The top fifth most expensive college meal plans (meaning college meals plans at many expensive four year private liberal art schools), charge at least $9.00 a meal, twice what the average American spends on food. These costs have increased as a key part of rising tuition rates since the 1980s as meal plans become an important revenue source for universities. Over the past decade the price of room and board has increased 28% at public four-year colleges compared to a cumulative inflation rate of 20% and in 2013-2014 private, nonprofit colleges and universities made $400 million in profits in auxiliary services, like bookstores, parking and room and board.\(^\text{129}\)

At Brown University, first-year students are required to buy into a meal plan that costs $5,550 a year and provides them with 20 meals a week at the schools two dining

---

\(^\text{127}\) Student meal plans also function as an equalizing factor- a way of providing all students with food regardless of financial status by subsidizing student’s in needs. This characteristic is beyond the scope of this thesis but is critical to understanding different campus class relations and cultures. Campuses with meal plans often have more social cohesion than campuses without (these campuses are more often in large cities with many more accessible restaurants, corner stores and grocery stores).


\(^\text{129}\) “A Tough-to-Swallow Reason College Keeps Costing More.”
halls and 200 points, each with a $1.00 purchasing power at the campus’s mini market that sells snacks, dry goods and dorm materials. Both the dining halls and store are run by contractor Bon Appetit (a subsidiary of Compass Group).  

At Reed College, across the country, students living on campus must choose between purchasing three different plans, all administered by Bon Appetit (which employees both student and nonstudent labor), the most comprehensive of which costs $7,110 a year and provides a purchasing value of $3,730 a year, explicitly using the required meal plan as a profit-making tool. Student pay for food in “points” off their meal plan, which effectively pay twice the dollar price of any food they purchase.

Historically, company towns were less centered around dining services but similarly featured company stores that were managed by the company, and sold groceries, dry goods, and occasionally clothing – commodities central to worker’s lives. In some towns, the company would have multiple stores and would sell luxury goods, like cars, as a nod to the conception that these were small utopian places where workers could have whatever they needed. Underlying these utopian trappings however was the fact that many company towns, notoriously West Virginian mine towns and western lumber towns, would pay store pay, in which workers received their wages in the form of credit to the company store, or as scrip wages, as money redeemable by the company. Company stores existed as a secondary profit-making venture for the company outside of their main industrial output and increased the dependency of the worker/residents on the company. Store pay was a key piece of the cycle of debt entrapping many workers, keeping them from saving and setting prices exorbitantly high. At Pullman, for example,

---

the company stores prices remained the same in the years leading up to the strike, even as worker’s pay was cut.132

The hyper-costly dining operations and modern school stores make money for the university and frequently, particularly in more isolated or rural campuses, monopolize student food purchasing options. (Schools often manufacture this monopoly through required meal plan purchases). They sometimes echo the store pay model of mining towns because many student workers receive compensation in part through meal and board plans. I will deal more in depth with this phenomenon in the coming section on housing, but employees working in Residential Life often receive room and board packages rather than competitive real money wages.133 Like in old mining towns, the effect of this model is to keep student/residents and student workers alike indebted and dependent on the company/university. In his article “Higher Ed Becomes the New Company Town,” Erik Sherman makes the point that company towns kept poor people poor and drive the worker/residents in them into debt.134 The debt students experience from paying high tuition rates is compounded by their exorbitantly priced commodity purchases and, in the case of store pay student workers’ inability to save money while working or to develop alternative options.

The implications of moral ideologies of company towns will be examined shortly in this chapter, but historically, in addition to creating cycles of debt, company stores existed as key elements in enforcing the company philosophy and moral code. They built

---

132 “Pullman Strike/Lockout | Historical Encyclopedia of American Labor - Credo Reference.”
133 This payment system often inflates the value of what the university provides in aid to students and is treated as an equivalent to cash aid or grants.
behavior by limiting certain consumer choices (alcohol in Pullman for example) and by encouraging saving and restraint. Contemporary college meal plans carry much of the same paternalism, infantilizing students and encouraging what the college deems “healthy choices” (while also providing what universities assume young people want - pizza at every event). Like company towns of yore, colleges rarely sell alcohol in their dining venues, but this comes not just out of a moral panic over alcohol but from liability fears, a shift that mirrors the parental role Miranda Cooper describes in her chapter on “In Loco Parentis.” Like Brown, many private colleges require first year students at least purchase the meal plan, assuming that students will not be able to cook or feed themselves reliably and independently (this too limits liability and potentially creates greater social cohesion).135

The company store both limits and provides opportunities for organizing. The infantilization of students through forced dependency of the institution for even the most basic necessities can be pervasive and damaging to creating a consciousness of student workers as empowered actors. Student workers I talked to for this project expressed a fear to bite the hand that literally feeds them. Student workers that receive only or partially their compensation in room and board may also be less willing to organize because they may have trouble conceptualizing themselves as employees. Without receiving a paycheck and instead having fees waived, work can feel less like a clearly identifiable job and more like a club or activity. Feminist scholars and activists have pointed to the Wages for Housework movement and the ways work is recognized

through payment for it. Working from such theorizations, I worry that students without a wage, who instead receive a benefits package in the form of housing or food, can be both unable to recognize their own labor as work or receive outside recognition of their labor as work. Without fetishizing the paycheck or clearly commodified labor, expanding student compensation to receive not just benefits, class credit or accommodations, but money linked to hours of work is a potential strategic tactic for illustrating that student workers do work in a recognizable form. This store pay also has the potential to limit the kinds of actions student workers can take because the threat of losing a job when it is a literal source of food and shelter takes on higher stakes. Without being able to save cash money before an action or strike, student workers receiving store pay are endangering their food security.

But company stores can also be sites to organize around. Boycotts and solidarity actions targeting the store can be sources of student and student worker power. Student labor solidarity work has already targeted campus apparel stores and bookshops from a consumer angle (see the section on USAS in Chapter 1) and can potentially adapt to focus these tactics on student worker conditions. Company stores also make the company control of student/worker/resident life explicit and visible. The company store can be used creatively to reveal the systems of debt and financialization of student life and how it leads to university control.

The Residence Hall

As with the company store, university use control over residential spaces to make profits and enforce morality codes. Many universities, especially many elite private

---

136 Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*
schools, position themselves as either a primary or sole housing provider to their students and student-workers (and occasionally for other faculty and staff, but those contracts won’t be dealt with in this section). A Washington Post list of 87 postsecondary institutions that require first-year students to live in on-campus, university owned, housing in 2014-2015 included almost exclusively seminaries and religious institutions and elite private schools including four of the Ivy League schools, along with schools like Stanford University, Howard University, and more “alternative” elite liberal arts schools like Grinnell College. Over 100 colleges and universities, again mainly military academies, religious institutions, and elite private schools, had over 90% of their student population living in college-owned, operated or affiliated housing in 2017-2018. Living in college dorms or houses has been a key part of the popular narrative of higher education in American culture.

This housing does not come cheap. As the previous section showed, room and board are important sources of income for institutions. A National Multifamily Housing Council study found that students living on-campus pay an average of 9% more for similar use housing than off-campus peers (although this controls significantly for numbers of occupants and dorm vs apartment amenities). The Urban Institute found that since 1991, there has been an average increase in room and board costs that is about 2% above inflation and that in 2015-2016 the average room and board costs at a private non-profit university was $11,600.


138 Ibid.
Universities often justify mandated on-campus housing as an equalizing, community building and necessarily amenity that allows students (children) to grow instead of being cast into a “real world” of disparate rent and cruel landlords. For example, the Residential Life department at Grinnell College emphasizes university housing as a “foundation, which encourages an environment of safety, health, comfort, and inclusive residential living and learning… [that] promote successful transitions to the Grinnell College community.”

Housing is a way of integrating students to the school community and from one familial home into another. While there are many positive elements of university provided and occasionally subsidized housing for students, this thesis will focus on the ways that, in monopolizing housing, universities much like old company towns are able to exert power over their student workers.

When the university becomes landlord, it not only charges rent and provides maintenance and home care, it creates policies which students (and student workers) must abide by to not only retain their education but their housing. Housing often comes with a sweeping set of contracts that not only limit university liability (for things like lead paint or asbestos in older housing units) but bind students to certain morality codes. Reed College’s 2018 housing contract for instance stipulates that, after affirming their “commitment to responsible and honorable conduct in academic and community affairs,” (meaning “that members of the community should behave in a way that does not cause unnecessary embarrassment, discomfort or injury to other individuals or the

community as a whole”), students may not smoke tobacco or marijuana (legal in the state of Oregon) inside their rooms or outside on porches, balconies or near entranceways. Students are not allowed to own firearms, fireworks or large knives and they are expected to maintain low noise levels. Importantly, “the College reserves the right to enter all individual living spaces within Reed College housing at any time without prior notice.” This housing code and codes like it reflect a vision of what a moral and model student looks like. In doing so they create a severe infringement on student privacy that has to be considered when organizing and possibility for violence like racial profiling.

This draws on a long legacy of housing being both a symbol and scapegoat for upper class anxiety about the poor. Streams of American ideologies has long emphasized the ways that housing can shape a man’s character, from early tropes about the settler to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century urban reformers’ despair at industrial slums and tenement conditions that blended patronizing concern for the urban working poor with xenophobia and racism. The critiques of bad city conditions and overcrowded housing fed into idealists and capitalists like Pullman attempting to build new and better cities, and thus better people and workers, in their rural company towns (this also required a removal and exclusion of certain people along racial and ethnic lines to make these cities “better”). In Pullman, housing reflected workplace hierarchy with upper management living in freestanding homes, and less skilled workers living in row house or tenements, but each house was had brightly painted interiors and strong brick

143 Ibid, 19.
structures, an aesthetic meant to encourage moral unworthiness.\textsuperscript{145} Pullman’s control over the housing supply gave him power both by allowing him to hold his workers debt and by giving him control over the private sphere. After leaving the factory workers retired to spaces their bosses own and dictated, houses in which they leased on the condition that they could be evicted with only ten days notice and no cause.\textsuperscript{146}

Similarly, student workers today return to, and frequently work out of, living spaces their bosses own and regulate. The task of policing and enforcing these regulations often falls to fellow students, a move that reinforces a university shift to put liability onto separate or vulnerable workers in a way that echoes larger rollbacks of institutional provision on both a state and university level. Residential Advisors (different institutions employee a variety of titles for these positions but RA is the most common term) are usually second to fourth year students who live in dorms or houses and serve as mentors, community builders, first responders and police. Often (but not universally) RA compensation is provided through subsidized or free room and board. That their housing is conditional on policing their housemate’s behavior will be dealt with in greater depth in the section on Reed College in Chapter 3, but functions as a significant challenge to organizing workers. Out of the handful of undergraduate unions or organizing efforts in the United States, more than half of them have come out of RA organizing. One of the reasons for this is that not only is being an RA often the highest paid and most time-consuming job on campus, in which student workers have greater chances of identifying as full-time employees, RAs who have risked losing housing have quickly mobilized. University control over housing limits student and student worker


\textsuperscript{146} Papke, 13.
privacy, organizing power and infantilizes them, ceding control of life outside of work to the employer as well. But it presents opportunities for radicalization and for a worker’s movement that holistically addresses student worker need.

The Police Station

Moral codes are enforced not just through housing but often as a condition of enrollment. Many schools have codes of nonacademic conduct that include agreements to academic honesty, and similar drug and alcohol policies that limit student drinking and drug use. These agreements are part of a larger moral project in which the university positions itself as a moral guide and authority, shaping the ideal young man (and now woman). Lynn D. Gordon points to how as coeducation began, universities employed racialized standards of masculinity and femininity to create the “respectable” student.147 Universities crafted students explicitly through religion. The university has and continues to function as a locus through which students are classed, raced and gendered, made to fit into elite models.148

To enforce these moral codes, universities often employ their own judicial systems as well as cooperate with local and federal authorities. Many schools have their own honor boards, student judicial boards or committees, in which students charged with violations of written university regulation can be held liable. At Grinnell, cases of “alleged misconduct that occurs on- or off-campus, in College-owned residences (i.e. residence halls or language/ project houses) may be heard by the Administrative

Hearing, College Hearing Board (CHB) and the Judicial Council (JudCo).”\textsuperscript{149} Significantly, unlike many typical company town structures in which particular site-specific ethical, moral and legal codes were internally adjudicated, contemporary university judicial structures have frequently emerged from student protest and activism to have forms of self-governance. This is especially true for Grinnell, which has long prided itself on self-governance, but other private universities frequently adjudicate cases of plagiarism, noise complaints, or interpersonal disputes through structures in which students serve as part or all of the judicial body. Though this internal peer adjudication differs substantially from company towns’ hierarchical policing structures, peer judicial systems should be recognized as deeply intertwined with administrative structures and interests. Moreover, these kinds of peer bodies and internal regulatory structures are often accompanied by and supported/ run by internal police forces.

Internal policing was a key part of company towns.\textsuperscript{150} Using their own police forces, or working closely enough with municipal police forces to have them essentially enforcing company regulation and desires, company owner were able to enforce not just ethical codes, like prohibition, but crackdown strictly on labor organizing efforts. The Pullman strike was met with close collaboration between the company and state and federal troops (as the boycott became national) in which by early July 1893, the few thousand strikers faced more than 6,000 federal and state militia troops, over 5,000 marshals and 3,100 police officers who tried to force strikers back to work, protect scabs and break the boycott.\textsuperscript{151} The close collaboration between private interest and local, state and federal government limited labor power and, returning to the history of student

\textsuperscript{149} “Residence Life | Grinnell College.”

83
workers chronicled in Chapter One, is a difficult problem contemporary organizers face in determining strategy.

Though student workers obviously have not faced the kind of violence that was leveraged against Pullman strikers or in other nineteenth century labor disputes, the possibility for governmental collaboration with private institutions to limit labor organizing should not be discounted.\footnote{J. D. Porteous, “The Nature of the Company Town,” \textit{Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers}, no. 51 (November 1970): 132, https://doi.org/10.2307/621766.} Students, especially black and brown students, are already often violently policed - in the last two years alone, there have been several well publicized cases of student being violently hurt or killed by campus police and less public but constant ongoing police harassment of students.\footnote{“Pullman Strike/Lockout | Historical Encyclopedia of American Labor - Credo Reference.”} Because schools have their own ethics codes students must agree to enroll, it is not difficult for them to limit activist activities. Coupled with the lack of privacy discussed earlier in the section on housing, internal police potentially enable universities to charge students known or suspected to be organizing with violations of non-academic codes of conduct, either directly for their...
activism or more likely for unrelated charges (targeting students with drug or alcohol charges for instance).  

Student on private campuses are often publicly imagined as privileged, white, and wealthy. Student workers are however frequently low-income and/or students of color. In the wake on police shootings and a history of police racism, the relationships of police towards black student workers in particular must be considered in union organizing, and realistically collective action must be planned in ways that preserve student worker safety. Private universities are in a unique position, because many student workers commit frequent nonviolent violations of codes of conduct like underage drinking or attending parties with underage drinking (a 2014 national survey found that 60% of underage college students reported drinking in the previous month), to prosecute union activists with internal policing systems, without being making this retaliation explicit.

The Non-Profit Office: Philanthropy, Mission Driven Work and Family

The moral codes universities promote are not just regulatory tools, but function as part of larger philanthropic missions. Establishing a certain ethic of student behavior is an internal means of stressing the role private universities play as non-profit institutions serving the public good. Straus and Zamfira discuss how in the capitalist’s mind, the traditional company town was a utopian enclosed vision, a way of aiding the

---

154 This policing happens disproportionately depending on how much students and their families may be paying in tuition. Universities may stand to lose a full paying student’s tuition but have less to lose by charging, suspending or angering students on financial aid, without wealthy parents.


156 “Results from the 2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed Tables, SAMHSA, CBHSQ,” accessed April 5, 2019.
poor working class by ‘lifting the poor working class out of urban slums’ into rural productively designed towns. They argue that in the contemporary company town this has translated into corporate social responsibility (CSR), which after an initial phase in the 1950s as an altruistic corporate philanthropy became, in the 1980s a key part of branding, an “economic tool to gain competitive advantage and social capital.”

Private non-profit institutions certainly trade on their philanthropic missions. Despite revenues of millions of dollars every year, institutions are able to solicit donations and maintain nonprofit status because of their educational mission. Private nonprofit universities maintain their 501(c)3 status through their educational role and the value the government has found in universities improving the “productive and civic capacities of citizens.” Similarly, Pullman hoped that his town would have an “ennobling and refining” effect, that it would build model workers and citizens.

This kind of philanthropic framing is difficult for workers to organize within and against. By positioning universities as benevolent, charity institutions, administrators make it difficult for workers within them to fight for wage increases or better work conditions because workers who have internalized company rhetoric view doing so as taking from a charity or being selfish against an institution designed to do good. At universities, this challenge emerges both on an institutional level in which the whole university promotes its educational and philanthropic mission leading to a challenge for all student workers and is particularly exacerbated in particular workplaces, in which students are employed doing mission driven work.

157 Straus and Zamfira, 43.
159 Papke, 12.
Students who work with other students or at-need community members as educators or mentors, in environmental offices, in diversity initiatives (like multicultural centers or peer mentoring programs), or in on-campus health initiatives, to name a few examples of small, mission-driven workplaces on campus, often face the same challenges that workers in social-service nonprofits or other mission-driven work encounter in their organizing. In the course of my research and own organizing efforts, many students at both public and private schools have spoken about the challenges of not wanting to detract from the larger mission that they believe in with their own self-advocacy. Surveys of the nonprofit industry have found that nonprofit workers tend to be more motivated by “the chance to help the public, to make a difference,” then they are by “job security, the salary benefits or the paycheck.” They feel ideologically committed to their work and their commitment to clients sometimes discourages nonprofit workers from leaving their jobs. The limited budgets of nonprofits, mean that often workers minimize their own grievances at work, not wanting to take from what they perceive to be a small pool.

Private nonprofit universities benefit from similar perceptions within their workers. Student workers in ideologically motivated, mission-driven work often perceive funding to be limited because regardless of larger university wealth or endowment, departments will often be given limited budgets. Not wanting to take from the people they serve or from the work they are dedicated to, these workers can be reluctant to organize. But two points of reference emerge in formulating strategies to organize workers in austerity-shaped mission driven work. Francis Fox Pivens and Richard

---

161 Capulong, 389.
Cloward famously outline a strategy for fighting scarcity in public funding by simply demanding more, enrolling more people in public programs and forcing promised but underfunded services to have more resources dedicated to them by demonstrating greater need. I believe that this theory can not only be applied to mass use of programs but to demands of the workers facilitating them. Student workers can similarly combat the scarcity narratives driven by universities and the limited funding partitioned out to divide different departments or initiatives with demand that they receive more in the hope that greater demand and use will force greater allocations.\textsuperscript{162}

Moreover, nonprofit unionization campaigns provide a potentially useful model for student organizers. Since the 1990s, unions like SEIU and AFSCME have turned to organizing nonprofit and mission driven workers.\textsuperscript{163} Facing a workforce that is worried about “selfishness” and mission oriented, these unionization campaigns have emphasized client interests, arguing that better treated workers, with more stability, resources, time, or higher morale, can provide better client services or succeed in their mission.\textsuperscript{164} The Nonprofit Professional Employees Union (NPEU), for example, emphasizes on its website that “all nonprofit professionals want their organization to thrive. By joining together in union with NPEU we have created better, more effective

---

\textsuperscript{162} The wave of teachers strikes, that has its roots in the 2012 Chicago Teacher strike and in 2018 spread from West Virginia to Oklahoma, Arizona and now is reaching teachers in democratic states is a powerful illustration of this. The 2012 CTU strike effectively combatted the narrative teachers were selfish of harming students (Jane McAlevey, 2017) setting the stage for the recent fights by teachers in places like West Virginia for higher wages and increased educational budgets.

\textsuperscript{163} This drive to organize nonprofit workers came after social services previously provided by the government were privatized and either contracted to or abandoned and taken up by nonprofits. This had the effect of essentially taking high paying stable government jobs and leaving them to private low paid temporary workers. Both for the benefit of these workers and to protect their own workers from unit erosion and the threat of competing low wage nonprofit worker, public sector unions committed to organizing nonprofit workers. This provides a useful analogy for why outside unions might want to organize low wage, idealistic student workers. (Capulong 381).

\textsuperscript{164} Capulong, 396.
This rhetoric that the union is good for the work people are doing has the power to motivate workers who might be hesitant to advocate on their own behalf and feel more comfortable and motivated organizing around a larger cause or others. SEIU 500 takes this language of the union as a selfless and altruistic tool even further, writing in a 2013 article on their website titled “Why Would Progressive Nonprofit Organizations Need a Union?,”:

When we hear about union organizing, we often think that unions come in to fight exploitive and unethical bosses and corporations to give workers in factories or fields a bit more of a humane existence. Philosophically and politically, many of us support labor unions but don’t think of labor unions as something that could exist in our offices or ever consider collective bargaining for ourselves … You can like your boss and still have a union. You can believe in your organization and still have a union… Join us as a way to strengthen the social justice movement in the United States.

Highlighting that unions are not necessarily combative is not unique to the nonprofit industry. But it is prevalent in an industry full of small, close-knit workplaces in which workers expect long hours, low pay and exploitation in the name of a larger mission. In the third chapter I will return to this argument, but while I think this kind of language can be strategically useful, it also has significant drawbacks. Union organizing that emphasizes the selflessness through focus on the larger mission risks reemphasizing a false narrative that self-advocacy is “selfish” or bad when not accompanied with external goals of fulfilling the work assigned. Workers organized in unions that focus on this kind of rhetoric for example might go along with an initial drive but struggle to fight against their own exploitation when they don’t think it will improve their work. It reinforces that work and self-exploitation can be good. While I agree that it is important to connect people’s success in their work to the conditions they work under, I worry that

---

focusing on this precludes a more radical organizing against work or the basic conditions of worker subjugations. It is critical to connect union organizing to larger social justice aims and to recognize that unions have huge power to win not just raises or benefits but to be advocates in creating a more socially just system with greater equity within and outside of the workplace for women, racial minorities, people and workers with disabilities and queer people and worker. But the framing that this focus is necessary and otherwise the labor movements demands are selfish (when of course raises and benefits do improve conditions for marginalized people) simply internalizes company logic. Student workers organizing small mission-driven workplaces on campus and who organize within the nonprofit university must be careful of adopting company logic that unless their demands benefit their clients, they are selfish and thus bad.

Related to the challenge of organizing in workplaces that emphasize their philanthropic work or altruistic mission, is the challenge of organizing in places that frame themselves as families and communities. This happens frequently in the small offices of the nonprofit industry and was a common characteristic of company town, which isolated in rural areas or as self-contained municipalities and deeply paternalistic, frequently positioned themselves as a family which their workers must be loyal too.

Alexandra Rick’s 2016 thesis about worker organizing at Wesleyan University explains how the language and sense of family was critical to labor relations at the school. She details how there was relatively little labor organizing at the school during the early half of the twentieth century, during the “golden age” of Wesleyan University, when it both promoted a language of family and delivered on it, offering relatively high salaries, and easily accessible managers and administrators. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, as the school expanded under the “little university” plan and took on debt “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.”

In the context of the Civil Rights Movement, a growing women’s movement, and frustration from female clerical workers with the sexism they faced from male supervisors, workers beginning with clerical staff began to organize. Student workers can learn from this history and other instances of workers organizing against familial workplaces to seize on the disparity between expectations of what actual “familial support” and care would look like to reveal that the company is in fact not a family member but an employer.

Companies’ use of family rhetoric positions themselves as parental figures who deserve loyalty and respect and who in turn support their infantilized workers. In private university settings where the majority of students and student workers are between 18 and 22 this infantilization is a particularly significant factor. Unionization rate for youths (ages 15-24) are about a third of unionization rates for adult workers. Studies have found that this is not a result of a difference in attitudes between youth and adults—

---

166 Alexandra Nicole Ricks, “When Workers Organized at Wesleyan University,” n.d., 35.

167 The comments Ricks records of women talking about the “male chauvinism” they were frustrated with reflect an important part of how “family” and gendered roles interact in the workplace. Companies that position themselves as families and employ paternalistic attitudes towards their workers not only represent symbolic expressions of traditional gender roles in which the company is a male head of house to its infantilized workers, but often reflects literal paternalism of male bosses acting as controlling father figures to female workers. This is critical to understanding how the often feminized and women-dominated labor student workers are treated.

168 The rhetoric of family and worker infantilization through paternalism traces back in American history to the plantation. The plantation romance as an expression of familial care and employment of familial tropes was an important tool to maintain slavery and build white supremacy. The use of paternalism in universities especially in relation to black and brown student workers must be further examined in this context.

fact young workers may be more favorably disposed towards unions and joining them then older workers.\footnote{170}

Young workers do tend to have unformed union preferences and minimal knowledge about unions, though,\footnote{171} and work in sectors with low union density which likely contribute to their low rates of unionization.\footnote{172} However, even within unionized workplaces, young workers still tend to be less likely to be members than their older colleagues, a factor largely explained by inefficiency in unions’ approaches to recruiting and organizing young workers.\footnote{173} Young workers are likely to view collective action favorably, with 67% of workers under 22 and 87% of workers 22-29 thinking of collective action as a “solution”\footnote{174} so unions can and should look to young workers as important and organizable new members.

Research has shown that the main reason non-members in unionized workplaces give for not having joined is that they were never asked to, leaving an opportunity for unions to win young workers by robust rank and file engagement strategies. Rather than trying to specially cater their pitch to young workers as youth centered or hip, “research indicates that the most successful strategies are those simply appealing to the young as workers.”\footnote{175}

On campuses, worker’s youth poses the specific problem that they are often reliant on their employers for help as they begin “careers.” This dependent relationship

\footnote{170} Stephanie Tailby and Anna Pollert, “Non-Unionized Young Workers and Organizing the Unorganized,” \textit{Economic and Industrial Democracy} 32, no. 3 (August 2011): 501.
\footnote{171} Ibid, 502.
\footnote{172} Young workers tend to work in private industry and in jobs with higher turnover than older workplaces, making them more likely to look to exiting the job as a strategy for addressing grievances more than collective action (see the coming section on transience).
\footnote{173} Tailby and Pollert, 504.
\footnote{174} Ibid, 514.
\footnote{175} Tailby and Pollert, 504.
is most obvious in academic work, where students working for professors (as teaching assistants, researchers etc) rely on their employer both for their current paycheck and for letters of recommendation for employment, further education, mentorship and connections. However student work in service and blue collar sections of campus contains elements of this dependency on maintaining a good relationship because workers looking to start a career will rely on similar relational support (i.e. students working for ResLife might need their boss to help them find their first job off-campus and students in admissions might look to their bosses for connections in their desired field). This kind of dependency is a key barrier to organizing. Students not wanting to anger or frustrate employers they have worked to develop relationships with, build trust and gain respect from may see the value of these relationships as greater than potential gains in earnings or workplace safety for example. Whereas in other industries, worker’s youth is sometimes lauded for creating boldness and a willingness to act, student workers caught between the transactional relationships of academia and unionization may act more timidly. (Extensive research on this constraint has been done for the field of graduate student organizing – while not perfectly analogous, this research is useful to understanding undergraduate academic relationships and organizing. Cain (2017) provides a good review of the relevant research on graduate union advisor/employer dynamic.)

However, despite these limits, recent numbers show promise for organizing young workers both in high and low density union industries. In 2017, 76% of union growth came from workers under 35.176 The disposition of young workers to collective

action, especially after having workplace experience shows the opportunities unions have for organizing young workers on campus. Early positive engagement with unions makes workers more likely to remain union members, making student-worker organizing integral to the future of the labor movement. But young workers are not just the future of unions – they can be its present.

**Transience**

Though private nonprofit universities act as modern company towns in several significant ways, their role in a growing knowledge economy creates consequential differences from the old industrial town. In the university, students are viewed through the lens of human capital and are made into not just the worker but the product of higher education. As such, they are expected to leave. Student workers consume their education/admission into the university and are developed to an educated end product, two roles that have finite time periods associated with them. This creates tension with their roles as producer and worker which are not traditionally limited to a four-year window. However, unlike industrial rail workers or coal miners, student workers are inherently temporary.

This transience poses several organizing challenges industrial company town workers did not have to contend with. This temporality of undergraduates at elite nonprofit institutions, 88% of whom graduate within six years, has the potential to lessen investment in a job. Even if student workers work in their job for four years, close

---

to the average 4.2 years an average American worker spends at a job,\textsuperscript{178} they know when they start it that the job will end at the latest with their expected graduation date. Having an end date may make them less inclined to put the time union organizing entails into something they know will pass.

The quick turnover between student workers also makes passing along lessons, organizing advice, experience or institutional memory difficult. As noted previously, student workers at private nonprofit universities (and this is different than in the broader environment of all higher educational institutions where many older students are enrolled both at 4 year and 2 year institutions and off campus), are generally young, generally between the ages of 17-23. They are often in one of their first jobs and by the time they have experience with the job and with labor organizing, they may not have more time at the school. Learning how to organize and maintaining a strong rank-and-file in a job with constant turnover and clear hierarchy (first year students may have a hard time taking up leadership positions in workplaces with seniors for example) challenges the strength of any contracts a potential union wins.

To solve the kinds of problems transience brings, student workers can turn to other student organizations and the literature around student activism. Clubs and groups on campus have always had to contend with creating investment in a project for a place student know they will move out of and have had to learn techniques for passing along institutional memory. Student workers can also turn to more recent labor organizing literature on sectors with young, highly transient workers like fast food workers, who spend a median of 1.9 years at a job.\textsuperscript{179}

\textsuperscript{179} Ibid.
The transience of student workers has a potential benefit. In the article ‘The Problem of Reformism,’ Robert Brenner asks “why reformism doesn’t reform” and provides an incredibly clear and succinct explanation of how key reformist actors’ material interests change as they begin to work within institutions, like the party or the union. For the union staff or paid elected position, “their material and social position is their place within the trade union itself… the economic position – wages, benefits, working conditions – of ordinary workers depends directly on the course of the class struggle at the workplace and within the industry.”\(^{180}\) But for the trade union official, “in the short run, especially in period of profitability crisis, class struggle is probably the main threat to the viability of the organization”\(^{181}\) as the union only exists so long as it does not overthrow capital but compromises with it. The union becomes a force for tepid reforms because of the misalignment between the interests of the union official and true class struggle. However, given that student workers are inherently temporary workers, they potentially have a chance to escape this. The union officials in a student worker union would know their position is fleeting – and while the ephemerality of their work may create disinvestment it may also mean that they are more willing to take bold risks, challenge power structure’s and create change because they will not have to reckon with the consequences of losing their new identity and interest. The temporality of student work is an obstacle, but it is also a path to more militant and radical change.

**Organizing the Company Town**

As universities increasingly tend towards operating in the model of company towns, contemporary organizers will want to understand what historically effective

organizing strategies at these sites have entailed. The historical company town was both a locus of company control and worker pushback and, despite the diverse geography, industry, and formulations of different company towns over the 50-year period in which they were most common, they have become an icon in labor history for bloody conflict and worker organizing. Pullman has taken on both a historic and cultural martyr-like role as a turning point in American labor history when workers organized both powerfully locally and nationally and faced violent pushback from federal troops. Both the worker deaths and jailings took on a cultural significance and became icons of one of the strongest waves of American socialism.

This history is relevant in part because it ushered in the new era of labor relations that we are currently living in the aftermath of. It led to a rise of militancy and both company towns and worker reaction to them, were part of a discourse that introduced the ideas of the safety net, later taken up by Populists, Progressives, and ultimately the Roosevelt administration. To avoid the kinds of conflict between labor and capital historic company towns produced, government eventually developed labor regulation. This only came after alignment with capital though and, as this thesis critically examines undergraduate organizing within the new company town, this history of state action and violence remains crucial. In looking at the tension between militant and legal strategies, fundamentally, I am asking what the role of the state and of the university is and if it always exists to protect capital. The way the state worked with and was supplanted by historical company towns provide at least from 1890-1920 and now in specific contexts a partial answer to this question.

181 Ibid, 44.
Without equating the struggles and situations of early 20th century coal miners and rail workers in company towns with contemporary undergraduate workers’, I’ve hoped to establish some points of comparison between the historical company town and 21st century private nonprofit university to identify important constraints and opportunities for worker organizing. The university as a contemporary company town owns the food and shelter workers need, is able to dictate its own moral codes and police itself, and infantilizes and creates a sense of dependency between its workers and itself. It has remained paternalistic and disciplinary. Like the company town, the university also uses its philanthropic mission to promote a certain brand image and curry public favor, while fostering guilt and shame within the workplace for organizing against the charitable mission of the school. These employment conditions create certain constraints and opportunities in organizing, namely making unionization difficult because of both external and internalized surveillance and dependency that the enclosed university fosters.

However, while understanding some of the specific employment conditions and workplace structures is critical to developing strategies for unionization on campus, the AFL-CIO has found that more than employer opposition, workplace structure, workplace demographics, or company and industry characteristics, the best predictor of a union campaigns success is the intensity and quality of the campaign itself.\textsuperscript{182} The comparison of company towns is useful in providing a set of constraints and models of other actions that have happened within those constraints but the internal AFL-CIO recommendation that regardless of industry having rank-and-file focused, high-contact intense campaigns with sufficient and appropriate staff to work on them is compelling.
This raises another set of concerns though, of the ways in which the university as company town both limits and enables possibilities for running the kinds of campaigns the AFL-CIO describes. Student workers will require outside investment from the larger labor movement to have organizers with the time and experience to help run strong campaigns. Their unique blending of living and working conditions both potentially enables high contact and engagement strategies because of the frequency with which workers can potentially see each other due to isolated living conditions. It also potentially limits their effectiveness because of the heightened social tension that can come from living in small communities. The focus on worker action however remains important and in framing work conditions I have aimed to highlight how they promote and discourage certain kinds of worker activity and have historically inspired certain kinds of tactics.

The model of the company town points to potential strategies student worker organizers might employ and opportunities they can seize on. Company towns were sites of radicalization and bold new formations of labor organizing. In company towns, from mining towns in West Virginia to Pullman to logging companies in the pacific southwest, workers not only organized but unionized with an eye towards larger revolutionary aims. The Pullman Strike launched Labor Day, a national movement, and made Debs, and others, a socialist. In a compelling blog post, James Robb argues that this kind of action and revolutionary spirit was possible in the company town because workers could see not just the profound inequity and deplorable conditions of their work but that they

---

were places in which social relations were clearly polarized. While most formations of capitalism do not simply contain the proletariat and bourgeoisie but a number of other, potentially older classes that perform a mediating role, the company town is more clearly divided. Because everyone workers for the company, there is no class of shopkeepers, tradesmen, or petty bourgeoisie to perform a mediating role. Instead the divisions between workers and owners becomes much more stark and a more pure enactment of capitalism becomes visible. The explicit ownership was coupled with a remoteness of the company town that both empowered bosses but separated them from larger hubs of capital. This was used as a source of power by workers who in isolation could both clearly see their exploitation and felt removed enough from the larger societal structures to continue utopian dreaming. Universities can be similar sites of radicalization. The total control that private universities are able to enact over their worker/client/products makes them vulnerable to the same kind of visible polarizations.

Finally, throughout this analysis of the university as a company town, the thread of moral codes has emerged as a defining factor. At each site, from the company store to the residence hall, police station and the family/nonprofit office, the university has employed its specific geographies to isolate, control and discipline. Universities are places with clear moral codes. They remove almost all student privacy and deploy their own police to enforce these codes (and even employ students to do some of this policing). In this space, the student (and student worker) is made to feel “alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible.” This is both a limit to organizing in a clear way

---


184 Robb.

– student workers are precariously positioned and face significant risk organizing - and more insidiously.

Michel Foucault famously asks, “Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?”¹⁸⁶ In identifying and comparing the elite, private, secluded university to the company town, I have highlighted how the university operates as an enclosed institution which using panopticism, a discipline-mechanism to “improve the exercise of power.”¹⁸⁷ ¹⁸⁸ The universities control of space, thought within the classroom, policing and student time push its resident/student/worker to “become the principle of his own subjection.”¹⁸⁹ Students internalize the universities moral codes and modes of operating. Forced into dependent relationships with their employer, educator, and guardian student workers can internalize and replicate university logics, becoming a self-disciplining subject. As student workers shift towards increasingly neoliberal modalities, it is through this self-disciplining that students come to echo neoliberal attitudes, even in their activism. This next chapter will explore these attitudes and apply the model of company town used here to understand the failures of student worker unionization efforts at Reed College.

¹⁸⁶ Foucault, 228.
¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 209.
¹⁸⁸ Foucault emphasizes that this shift, to accumulate men, is tied inherently to the accumulation of capital (221). Returning to the figure of the student worker as a frontier of capitalism, a new material through which value can be extracted, the employment of these disciplinary mechanisms are a means through which to incorporate this new figure into capitalist order.
¹⁸⁹ Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 203.
Chapter 3: Reed Student Workers Coalition Local 1

In March 2018, students at Reed College in Portland Oregon made headlines after the regional office of the National Labor Relations Board ruled that undergraduate housing advisors (HAs) must be allowed to vote on their union and that the college must recognize the vote.\(^{190}\) Reed HAs had been organizing since mid-2016 and shortly after the court decision, they voted for the union 34-14 (71% of students voted yes) and a 92% participation rate.\(^{191}\) The school challenged the vote and, because their appeal to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) threatened to overturn the critical Columbia decision for private school students nationwide, in the summer of 2018, Reed students pulled their petition.

Most of the organizers behind the Reed unionization campaign point to its origins in Reed’s 2016 decision to change how HAs were classified. Housing advisors, who plan programs and serve as mentors and resources for student’s living in Reed’s residential housing, had been receiving free room and board. However, after already

---


\(^{191}\) “At Reed College, Students Are Unionizing,” NWLaborPress (blog), March 23, 2018, https://nwlaborpress.org/2018/03/at-reed-college-students-are-unionizing/.
going through several rounds of interviews with applicants and after some of the HAs had signed their contracts to work during the upcoming 2016-2017 school year, the administration announced that it would be switching their payments system to treat HA salaries as taxed income. Student workers alleged that this effectively cut their pay by $1600 and threatened their ability to receive federal student aid; it would also potentially limit social services they could receive in the future, for instance limiting eligibility for food stamps.

The announcement of the change led to an outcry among HAs. Following the protestations against the new payment system, the university set up working groups that met throughout Fall 2016 to offer solutions. The working group, staffed by non-student ResLife managers and HA volunteers, recommended several solutions, including that the school raise returning HA pay by $400 and requiring new job responsibilities. These recommendations were rejected by the administration.

At the same time that the HAs were growing increasingly frustrated with their job and disillusioned with the working group process, a senior in the mailroom was working to organize a schoolwide undergraduate workers union. Jack192 was 28 years old, having returned to school after seven years away. Jack had worked in the mailroom part-time when he was first enrolled at Reed, and in 2017, he worked there 20 hours a week. Like the HAs, his specific interest in organizing on-campus was sparked by a sudden change in payment structures. In July 2017 Oregon’s minimum wage rose from

192 All student and student worker names in this chapter have been changed. Though all interviewees gave permission to be recorded and quoted and several students are listed in judicial records, their relative youth and power status as well as the potential repercussions this narrative could have on their organizing and welfare has prompted me to anonymize everyone.
$9.75 to $11.25 in the Portland metro area. In response, the mailroom cut staff hours and limited gradual pay raises workers gained with seniority. Jack saw an opportunity: “It was a time where a number of people seemed like they might be able to see that they were being exploited, that they didn’t have any direct say in how their work functioned and if they got together, they might be able to do something about that,” he told me.

Since 2011 Jack has been a dues-paying member of the International Workers of the World (IWW). His interest in organizing fellow Reed student workers came both from frustration with his work as well as from larger structural concerns. Describing himself as “a communist, anarchist, economically left leaning” and academically as a labor historian, Jack approached unionization as both a movement for material gain as well as part of a larger project to fight for the working class. As a Wobbly, he initially dreamed of creating “one big union” on Reed’s campus that would unite all of the student workers. A few weeks after beginning to share the idea, most of the mailroom was on board. But Jack wanted to expand out of the small mailroom of about 25 people to Reed’s roughly 600 student workers, an attempt to build what he termed “mass support.” Jack and others in the mailroom began talking to other students and by orientation week in the summer of 2017, he had found allies in ResLife.

---

194 The IWW is a century old radical labor union. It is famous for being an industrial union that aims to unite all workers in “One Big Union” rather than by trade. It is member-led and known for strong anarchist and socialist streams within it and for opposing “business unionism.” Instead members, often colloquially referred to as Wobblies, embrace a more militant strategy that “eschews traditional contracts” and bargaining as an end goal and builds power through direct action.
195 As with many other private nonprofit campuses that employ larger amounts of student labor, it is hard at Reed to know exactly how many student workers there are. The number fluctuates week to week as students pick up jobs and shifts and the number of hours students work varies vastly between jobs with some students working a consistent eight hours at a single job per week and some students working sporadically only one hour a week. How exactly to count how many student workers there are is both an issue for organizers and became a fight during the unionization process as the school and union debated who could be included in the bargaining unit. Further complicating this is question is that fact that many students work multiple and variable numbers of jobs on campus.
Madeline, then a junior HA of Farm House, had been thinking about unionization after seeing some articles about graduate and undergraduate unionization at Columbia and Grinnell. When Jack talked to her as they both worked in Reed’s small community garden, she was eager to help. Madeline remembers sitting in the quad waiting to make her pitch about the union to passersby, and then, as she realized how hard it would be to get people to engage, chasing them down to have the conversation. In September Jack, Madeline and others in the mailroom and ResLife built a small organizing committee.\textsuperscript{196} A few weeks later, Madeline sent out an email to other HAs and convinced more people to come to the initial meetings, where the group began to quietly shape their demands.

By early October, it was becoming clear that the majority of organizing would focus specifically around the HAs rather than a schoolwide union. Though their job had many specific constraints to organizing, HAs were good candidates because many were eager to get involved, frustrated about the pay structure changes and were used to working closely together. The HAs had a separate workplace culture from most other student workers on campus and worked for a salary rather than hourly pay. They had distinct grievances and a unique cohesion. The organizers quickly realized it would be easier to run a campaign with the 52 HAs, than with the hundreds of student workers on campus.

\textsuperscript{196} Core members were divided on whether they called it that in their interviews with me. Only a few of the student workers I spoke with used union jargon like organizing committee or business unionism because very few of them had experience with organized labor or applied structures they learned or read about to their own work. I use these terms to translate actions Reed student workers were doing into language familiar to labor studies.
The HA organizers along with Jack and a few mailroom employees collected authorization cards\textsuperscript{197} in September and early October and got two thirds of the HAs to sign onto a union. At the same time, they worked on developing a list of demands based on input from the meetings, open to all HAs, that they had held. These meetings had varying attendance and the core group of seven to nine organizers ended up winnowing down all the grievances into a list of nine demands, including: pay raises, extending the school’ medical amnesty policy to HAs,\textsuperscript{198} increasing counseling services for HAs and changing discipline structures. They went public with the campaign in mid-October, a choice organizing committee members told me was in part a move to get the school to negotiate and potentially head off the legal challenge unionization the school would make. They filed for the union but the school refused to negotiate, prompting the organizing committee to go to court. After a brief government shutdown from January 20-22, 2018 delayed their case, the HA union presented their case to the Northwest offices of the NLRB on February 5, 2018. The students were self-represented with Jack serving as their counsel based on his legal research on the internet. The school hired the firm Barran Liebman, which “exclusively represents management in employment, labor, benefits, and higher education law.”\textsuperscript{199} The university’s testimony lasted close to six hours, leaving the Reed student workers only two hours to testify, calling HA juniors Noah and Xavier to the stand. In their testimony, the student workers presented documents in which the college itself used the language “employees” to refer to HAs in

\textsuperscript{197} If a union is able to get a majority of workers in the bargaining unit to sign cards, they can declare a union. Card checks can be contested, hence the Reed HAs’ NLRB fight.

\textsuperscript{198} Student’s at Reed are able to call for medical help in situations of illegal drug or alcohol use without being disciplined by the school. However, if an HA were to call for emergency medical assistance in the case of underage drinking or illegal drug use, the situation, like all other cases, would be reported to the head of ResLife. This reporting effectively eliminates medical amnesty for HAs because using medical assistance can effect their employment.
contracts and argued that their job description was considerably different enough from the other peer support positions to be a distinct bargaining unit with its own common interest.

The student workers waited about a month for the decision and on March 2nd, the Board announced that students working as housing advisors would be allowed to unionize, finding that “that the HAs are employees within the meaning of Section 2(3) of the Act and that the unit sought by Petitioner [Student Workers Coalition-Local 1 Housing Advisors] is appropriate”200. The decision draws on the Columbia precedent, noting that the students’ dual educational and economic roles do not negate each other, and that “if the evidence demonstrates that each element of the three-part common law test is present, an employer-employee relationship is demonstrated instead of comparing the relative size of the parties’ economic, education or some other non-economic relationships.”201 Indeed the Board found that, though the HA is a core part of many students’ college experience and the job is fundamentally relational, it is a compensated position that students do neither voluntarily nor for academic credit. The students are thus in an “economic relationship with the Employer” and given the control the college exercises over HAs, “that the Employer’s Housing Advisors are “employees” within the meaning of the Act.”202 Pursuant to these findings, the board ruled that an election in which HAs could vote on if they wanted to be represented by the Student Workers

---

200 Reed College and Student Workers Coalition Local 1 Housing Advisors Decision and Direction of Election, No. 19- RC-213177 (National Labor Relations Board Region 19 March 2, 2018).
201 Ibid, 10.
202 Ibid, 11.
Coalition would be held on Thursday, March 22, 2018 from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. and 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at an appropriate location in the Reed College Student Union.\footnote{Ibid, 22.}

Perhaps anticipating this decision, over the course of the previous month, the school had held “info sessions” for the current and incoming class of housing advisors. These info sessions were largely union busting measures, held with HR that were designed to scare student workers away from the union. Union organizers attended these info sessions, pushing back on the college’s narrative that the union would lead to pay cuts. Throughout this time, union activists were organizing for the vote. They talked to different HAs but did not have a clear map of their workplace and didn’t know before the vote exactly how everyone would be voting. Somewhat surprisingly, they thought of the closed ballot as something to their advantage.

After winning the election, the union started to form a bargaining committee and ratified a constitution for itself. However, the school still refused to negotiate with the HAs. Reed appealed to the National Labor Relations Board, which in 2018 was comprised of members appointed by Donald Trump. Throughout the previous year, several graduate student unions that had won their own votes but had failed to force their school administrations to recognize them had pulled their petitions out of concern that going to the national board would overturn the Columbia decision (high profile cases include the student workers at the University of Chicago and Yale University). This coordinated action has been framed by labor unions as a form of showing solidarity with each union acceding not to risk the overturn. Over the summer, as the NLRB hearing got closer, staff from the UAW, which represents many academic student workers unions, including undergraduates in the UC system (UAW 2865) and at UMass Amherst
(UAW 2322) as well as many only-graduate unions, contacted Jack asking him to pull the petition. On June 6th, the HA union did just that.

***

There are two ways of understanding the organizing that happened at Reed. It can be viewed largely as a tale of success - a small group of college students were able to create a union, winning a hearing with the Northwest regional office of the NLRB and an election, by a substantial majority and with extremely high participation rates - all in under a year. But, importantly, Reed’s union can also be viewed as a failure and examined for why, a year after the successful legal effort and quick organizing, there currently is no student workers union at Reed. I am interested in exploring this second question, not to discount the impressive work of Reed’s student workers but to learn from their attempt at unionization, recognizing their successes while also analyzing their failures.

The Reed Student Worker Coalition failed in the sense that it did not win recognition from the university and is not acting as a bargaining partner with Reed College. This happened most directly because of unfortunate timing. Reed student workers happened to try organizing just a bit too late in the narrow window between the Columbia decision and Trump appointing a conservative NLRB. In a sense the Reed student workers were just unlucky. Had they not dropped their petition because of the risk that it would overturn a nationally important precedent, they may well have had a functioning and vibrant union today.

However, I want to consider how the Reed union came to depend on legal structures. The very fact that its existence was contingent on a politically favorable moment is a sign of its weaknesses. That it does not exist today is an entry point
improvement of the organizing strategies employed. In this chapter, I will argue that a number of interrelated factors made organizing difficult and ultimately unsuccessful. These largely centered around tensions about how the union was defined and viewed and around how different students felt about militancy and anger. There was a divide in the organizing committee and general student body between students who primarily viewed the union as a legal mechanism and students who looked to it as means of collective action or expression of student power. Ultimately, the unionization campaign focused on the legal aspects of the union to the detriment of more militant organizing and as a result, when legal routes to unionization became unavailable, the students were left with little recourse. This section explores how this attitude developed, tracing how university structures produced certain constraints on organizing; how campus environments fostered certain attitudes; how organizing decisions, made in these contexts, produced their own challenges; how anger and fear were (or were not) leveraged.

**Methodology**

My analysis of the Reed unionization attempt comes from spending ten days at Reed this summer, meeting many of the HAs, students and organizers of the campaign. I talked to many people casually and conducted in-depth interviews with nine people I identified as key players or necessary or representative voices. These interviews included lead organizers, union dissenters, and peripherally involved members. My research is not comprehensive, and I did not speak to all of the members of the central organizing
committee (many of whom have graduated) nor did I speak to administrators, and did not speak in depth with many incoming students, or more casual members. More work remains to be done on the Reed effort, especially since the 2017-18 drive, students have continued to think about organizing and have taken new kinds of actions.

One of the challenges in drawing lessons from the Reed organizing attempt, or at least identify trends or patterns within it, is that the Reed community and specifically the Reed student unionizing community is quite small. In my research, while much of what I uncovered may point to large theoretical conclusions, much of it may be simply the result of a single person’s personality or a relationship between a pair of people. The overlapping interpersonal issues of a community centered around a dozen young people complicate this ethnography and my analysis.

Similarly, the themes that emerged from the interviews were often hard to isolate. Within a single conversation, an interview subject would take many disparate and occasionally contradictory ideological positions. For clarity of argument, in describing the particular situation at Reed, I have attempted to disambiguate the different themes that emerged from my research as distinct threads. However, these themes could be grouped in many different ways. For example, the unionizing students’ lack of experience and organizing skill is an issue of them not having greater support from a national union; a product of their transience; and, a result of a specific campus culture. Each of those three causes was deeply interrelated. Student workers themselves would, within a single conversation, alternate between taking a legalistic view of the union and a more militant attitude showing that the dichotomy between the two stances is not clearly

---

204 The administrators I reached out to at Reed, including the school President, Vice President and head of ResLife all refused to speak with me. I believe more work should be done understanding their response to unionization efforts but I focus here on student workers actions and internal debate.
defined. Nevertheless, I move through different these different points to outline some of the challenges student worker organizers encountered.

**Not Angry, Just Disappointed**

Throughout my time doing research at Reed I was struck by how differently members of the Reed student union spoke about their union and the fight for it relative to what I have heard when others in the labor movement discuss unionization. The Reed student workers primarily viewed their union as a legal mechanism and saw the struggle to win a union as a legal battle primarily conducted through the NLRB. Unlike more militant sections of the labor movement, which discuss collective action and unions as an expression of worker power, Reed student workers were more likely to frame the union as a legal entity to present student workers’ opinions to their boss.

A lead organizer (Noah) spent the first 45 minutes of an interview only telling me about the regional labor relations board hearing and legal process they had taken to get there. After I asked why organizing the union in this primarily legalistic manner was so important to him, he told me:

> It’s the only way to organize a union, you know. Ever since ’37 when the National Labor Relations Act was passed, a union is a legally defined thing, right? And there are reasons why that’s good. It means that employers, with the recognized union, the employer has to sit down and bargain, right? They don’t have an option to do otherwise. That’s a benefit. But it also means you have to go through this legal process to form a union and its complicated.

This explicit reference to American history redefining unions not as a broad expression of worker solidarity and power but as a legal unit explains some of why Reed workers organized the way they did. Their understanding of the union as a primarily legal identity is of course not wrong. They are informed by the last eight decades in which
unions have been legally defined and labor organizing has had federal legal mechanisms mediating it. But at the same time, unions also have a larger history and broader connotation indicating a form of worker organization in which workers act in solidarity to collectively bargain. This view of a union as not strictly a its legal category but rather as an active force and tool to gain worker power was missing in the ways the majority of my interviewees expressed their involvement with, or conception of, the union.

One of the lead organizers I spoke with told me she defined the union as “a group of workers who are given legal bargaining rights in order to negotiate their contracts with their employers. The employer has a legal obligation to negotiate fairly with workers who are unionized.”206 Workers in this view of unions do not win their contract gains, or even earn the right to them, but “are given” bargaining rights, placing them as passive recipients. After having legal recognition, this view and Noah’s emphasized that employers have an obligation to negotiate fairly, belying the fact that without worker power to force concessions from employers, “bargaining in good faith”207 still allows locking out your employees (for economic purposes), withdrawing from a union after a contract expires, and “refusing to discuss or agree to any modification of the terms of an existing contract.”208 It belies the fact that contract negotiations, like all forms of bargaining, in and out of the workplace, produce results depending on how much power the parties have relative to one another. A union derives its power not from its legal recognition (a mechanism used to reduce labor violence) but from its members ability to act in solidarity and withhold their labor. Workers have

205 Interview with author, Portland, OR, August 23, 2018.
206 Interview with author, Portland OR, August 21, 2018.
power because they offer something the employer needs—labor. Workers have less money, time, resources and often less visibility than management, but because of their position as suppliers of labor who can in turn withhold that supply, they have some inherent power at the bargaining table.

The organizers’ more legalistic view was both informed by and in turn informed their organizing tactics. The organizers I spoke with had not thought much about organizing actions to pressure the university into bargaining. Instead, they concentrated on the legal work of appealing to the NLRB. In trying to win the union, there were a few times in which they tried to generate support for their collective efforts. They unsuccessfully reached out to faculty asking professors to sign onto a letter of support. They posted flyers and had a petition drive during admission week targeting new incoming students and families. They hung a few banners. But these tactics were sporadic efforts and never took on a central focus. Crucially, the actions and ideas interviewees shared with me about continuing the campaign through media and alumni donation boycotts all centered the leverage and power student workers had against Reed as coming from their role as students—consumers and tuition payers. Students mobilizing newly admitted students, media or alumni are all tuition-centered approaches. The Reed student workers did not emphasize their role as workers and the power that withholding their work would give them.

After noticing this trend in my first few interviews, I began asking interview subjects if they felt they had power. Most of the people I talked to replied that they either did not or felt that they had very little. A few students pointed to their job as a

---

208 “Bargaining in Good Faith with Employees’ Union Representative (Section 8(d) & 8(a)(5)) | NLRB | Public Website,” accessed April 15, 2019, /rights-we-protect/whats-law/employers/bargaining-good-faith-employees-union-representative-section.
source of power; but even then they expressed that though they were important and did important and necessary work, they felt weak compared to the school. This rhetoric was markedly in contrast to many of the successful grad student slogans in historic campaigns that have emphasized that the “[school] only works because we do.”

Related to these issues of union definition and power, is how the student workers felt about the school and themselves. Classic organizing models taught by UNITE HERE or the SEIU emphasize the role of anger in organizing. Unions often argue that anger, using incites passion and energy, helping mobilize workers against conditions that, without anger, they accept. LaborNotes, an organization that pushes for more radical, rank-and-file led, democratic unionism stresses using a model for organizing conversations based on “AHUY” or Agitate Hope Urgency You. Organizers and stewards walk their coworkers through feeling angry, then hopeful, and then understanding the immediacy of their work. After this, they ultimately ask the worker to focus on their specific role. This model of bringing people to action and to take risk starts with agitating and anger because the goal is to connect with the worker on something they want to change.

While overreliance on anger can be limiting to building long-lasting or productive movements, anger has the potential to fuel bold action and to unite large swaths of the working class. Anger correctly directed is a reasonable response to exploitation. Just as I was struck by how little my interview subjects talked about power relations on campus or in the workplace, and the lack of power analysis that took place in their organizing, I was surprised to find how little anger most of the organizers seemed to have. They were rarely visibly emotional about their year-long unionization campaign and very few of them expressed a willingness to be very angry at Reed or their
direct bosses for either the changes in pay structure that had initially prompted the union or about their unwillingness to recognize the union.

Instead of anger, the predominant emotion student workers I spoke with expressed was disillusionment. Most of the students spoke with me about the experience giving them a “peek behind the veil”209 (Xavier) or revealing where university priorities lay. Many of the students I spoke with talked about the early organizing effort as very hopeful and in ways they themselves came to categorize as naïve. In going public early on, an organizer told me “I optimistically thought that Reed might feel some pressure to not do the classic union busting thing.”210 (Jack) They described key transitional moments when they went from expecting unionization to be a relatively easy process to understanding it as a longer campaign and, occasionally, as a fight (again though for most students the violent and angry connotations of a fight did not resonate). Madeline told me that the regional board hearing, six months into the campaign was “really like a come to Jesus moment for us a little bit because we were like, fuck the school is really not fucking around here….That was a little disillusioning.”211 Another lead organizer, Noah, told me that “by the end of the fall semester, I think we were pretty much aware that the college wasn’t going to recognize the union,” emphasizing that for the majority of the first semester of organizing student workers had hoped that the school would voluntarily recognize the union.

The early expectations of student workers seem primarily predicated on the role the university had in taking care of them, feeding and housing them, and in the public

209 Interview with author, Portland OR, August 21, 2018.
210 Interview with author, Portland OR, August 23, 2018.
211 Interview with author, Portland OR, August 21, 2018.
image it promoted as a liberal campus. Noah, who testified at the regional hearing, told me that after seeing the university testify, he

lost a lot of trust in various people in the administration. I felt particularly that Brody, the Vice President of Student Services, and a few other folks were really dishonest on the stand and spoke in a way that was really different from the way they speak to actual student workers when they are on campus.212

Several student workers told me that they had chosen to come to Reed in part because of its reputation as a progressive campus that would be accepting of their queer identities, act in line with their own progressive politics, or be more inclusive then the communities they grew up in. Instead they found that the school was more conservative than they had hoped and that its public image and actions and fiscal conservatism belied this branding. They discussed disappointment that the university took the actions it did, especially in bringing the case to the National Labor Relations Board, where it would have overturned the *Columbia* precedent.

One of the surprising consistencies among everyone I talked to at Reed was that they referred to this appeal as Reed siding with the Trump administration. They stressed that the university fighting the union and was a choice to “legitimize the Trump administration’s attack on labor rights” (Xavier)213. This framing connects an entity, the university, that was trusted and respected, or that student workers expected to act with their interests at heart, with an already recognized conservative and oppositional figure, Donald Trump.

Rather than feel enraged by the pushback they faced, or workplace challenges they experienced, students felt shocked and betrayed that an institution they trusted

---

212 Interview with author, Portland OR, August 23, 2018.
213 Interview with author, Portland ORD, August 21, 2018.
would act like this. Their sadness rather than anger was continuously present in my conversations about work in ResLife and in the organizing effort.

It is important to note, however, that, occasionally, as students grew more disillusioned, their feelings shifted to outrage. Madeline told me that using disruptive tactics, which she associated with a kind of anger was something more people were willing to do as the campaign progressed.

I think we got progressively more willing to be disruptive. At first, I don't think we thought it was super necessary. We're just like we'll just follow this legal path and then we'll have a union and then we're done. Which is pretty naive in retrospect. And I think as we realized that the school was being, it was the only to be more and more backhanded. We felt more and more justified and targeting alum and targeting incoming students and telling people what they were doing and how fucked up it was.\(^{214}\)

This shift reveals the importance of understanding how anger and disillusionment related to each other, to the tactical approaches taken by the union, and to how union organizers conceptualized the union.

Perhaps, the most surprising aspect of the student workers’ legalistic approach to the union, lack of a power analysis, and lack of anger was the dissonance between this approach and the politics of the lead organizers. All of the student workers I spoke with pointed to Jack as being a key figure leading the union effort, either prompting them to get involved or as being the person they could identify as leading the union. Yet Jack identifies as a Wobbly and approached the unions as a means of building working-class power and a part of a larger movement. He spoke with a lot of anger and identified larger structural issues that none of the other students I spoke with mentioned, using language like “exploitation” and mobilization.\(^{215}\) He explicitly told me about the power

\(^{214}\) Interview with author, Portland OR, August, 21, 2018.

\(^{215}\) Interview with author, Portland OR, August 23, 2018.
anger had in prompting him to organize and that from that he took away a lesson to “never underestimate the organizing power of anger.”

In the rest of this chapter I will explore how the union, especially given Jack’s perspective, took on the legalistic approach and rejected anger by identifying interrelated causal factor in how the university is structured, in the campus culture and organizing environment and in the union’s own decision-making process.

**University Structures Produce Constraints on Organizing**

While I believe that the students had a great deal of agency in planning their campaign, they also were operating within a set of constraints unique to their university. Reed is now a 70% residential campus, secluded from the surrounding Portland area. The 116-acre Reed College fits roughly into the model of the university as company town described in Chapter Two. While many of the challenges this poses have already been discussed, including the dependency and lack of privacy. However, Reed students are supposed to leave at the end of every year. This key departure from the traditional company town was repeatedly identified as a particular challenge. While I have already discussed the challenges of transience abstractly in Chapter Two, the high turnover and specific academic schedule at Reed limited the kinds of organizing student workers could do. The disillusionment that students displayed came in part from the high rates of turnover. Recently hired workers have not yet had time to develop the experience or cynicism needed for confronting workplace issues robustly or directly. Without time to identify the specific ills of a job, it was hard for organizers to marshal anger. Students I spoke to pointed to the fact that it took them time to realize their frustration with their

---

216 Ibid.
work. Having both time on the job and time in the school seems to have produced student workers who addressed the school more cynically and critically.

A clear example of this came from student reactions to the working groups ResLife made. After students voiced initial complaints about the pay structure in 2017, ResLife created a working group tasked with addressing the issue. In almost all my interviews, student organizers mentioned that after the union failed to gain recognition, ResLife created new working groups. Simon explained that they did not want to join this second set, because “every year we have some sort of working group, which is like a group of has some people from ResLife and some higher up administrators. Last year, God, I can't even remember what they are working on but they always have like some goal and then nothing changes.”217 The ability to identify these reformist tokens as measures designed not so much to produce change but redirect student energy is clearly one that students have gained from experience. They each had to learn this and were unprepared for a ResLife uninterested in working in their favor.

The turnover also limited how much knowledge could be passed down between students. The students I talked to who were still attending Reed were all interested in preserving institutional memory but were struggling to make sure they were able to take the lessons they had learned and pass them along. This lack of institutional memory manifested during the campaign in a lack of knowledge around unionizing strategies. The student workers I talked to were all aware of general histories of Reed activism and, as I will discuss shortly, were deeply enmeshed in ongoing Reed activism. But they expressed much less confidence discussing specific organizing tactics. Many of them

---

217 Interview with author, Portland OR, August 22, 2018.
expressed that there was a big learning curve to organizing, which in part seems to come from not having older mentors teaching them when they were underclassmen.

Both this issue of disillusionment and of not knowing concrete skills also derive in part from the university’s employment of young students in HA positions. Except for Jack, all of the students I talked to were between the ages of 19 and 22. For many of them, this was their first job. Their youth and inexperience meant that they had not had time to gain the kind of critical attitude towards their workplace that older workers might have, nor did they have anything to compare it too and they had not had the time or experience to gain union organizing skills.218

With limited outside experience, the student workers were primarily informed by their college experiences and their families. Several of the student workers I talked to reference their families and specifically parental employment to explain their approaches to unionization. One of the lead organizer’s parents both work in senior policy positions within the AFL-CIO after years of working as organizers in the rural south. Their experience and perspective currently running the largest institution of organized labor informed their son’s approach to the union as a legal entity and led him to be less confrontational in his approach to unionizing (see Chapter Two’s comments on Brenner).

A student worker who opposed the union frequently cited informed by her mother’s involvement in teachers unions and corrections officers unions in her critiques.

218 Jack also pointed to a difference between his cynical attitude towards the university, characterized by a frustration with its operation and an awareness that it did not have his interests at heart with his fellow organizers often hopeful trust in Reed to be a responsible or caring actor towards them that I believe is worth mentioning. He identified a small generational divide between himself, coming of age during the Bush era, protests against the Iraq war and a frustration with authority figures in government and the other Reed student workers who had come of age during the Obama years and a hopeful liberal resurgence.
Even more importantly, she drew on a close family friend’s position as a Human Resources officer at a university. This union dissenter had learned from this family friend that the university might want to audit the HA position and spread a fear in the bargaining unit that the hypothetical audit would result in pay cuts.\footnote{Interview with author, Portland OR, August 22, 2018.}

Though the worker’s youth meant that they were more influenced by family attitudes than older workers with more experience, this influence should not be overstated. There also were many student workers I spoke with who in joining the union were acting against family beliefs and creating self-identity. One such worker, Simon, had a parent who had immigrated from Venezuela, hated socialism as a result of his experience with the Venezuelan government and was a manager of a steel company. His son choose to embrace a left-wing politics and when he told his management family that he was unionizing, they were not pleased. This tension wasn’t too large a sticking point though and, while recognizing the influence of family, I want to be careful not to infantilize or essentialize young workers.

The transience of the university as distinct from the historical company town also has another layer - the academic schedule. Organizers at Reed had to mobilize quickly and had to have a plan to win in less than nine months. Jack expressed both a frustration and resignation that “reality is you’ve got maybe six to eight weeks at the start of each semester and then people at least at school like Reed, are so locked in to, you know, their academic schedule and what they’re doing. It's impossible for them to dedicate time.”\footnote{Interview with author, Portland OR, August 22, 2018.} Universities don’t just have lots of turnover between years but most of the student population regularly leaves the campus en masse every few weeks for breaks. The union went public in mid-October very conscious of the timing of fall break and the
need to mobilize quickly once everyone was back on campus. The university is similarly conscious of this timeline. They brought the case to the NLRB in the last few weeks on November, right before final exams and Winter Break.

This timeline is significant and pushes on-campus campaigns to choose tactics that can work quickly. Given the limited timeframe, a campaign may be less inclined to do the work of deep base-building needed to take dangerous, extreme, or widespread action. Rather than aggressive and longer-term rank-and-file engagement, the short timeline might necessitate a small cadre of dedicated organizers or running a simple card check without plans for escalation. Building and keeping a large core of invested members is difficult if everyone is constantly leaving to return to faraway cities and is not residing in the environment that they are hoping to change. More than either anger, fear, or disappointment, the break schedule enables a certain malaise to overtake a campaign if plans aren’t made to constantly be bringing people together. The short time frame gives people less time to try things that might not work or take risks. It forces a more stringent prioritization of actions and doesn’t allow the kinds of experimentation or learning a longer, less interrupted campaign might enjoy.

The university structure also limits organizing through the way schoolwork and wage-labor are balanced. The HAs were all working part-time. Organizing their part time job took a lot of time. A small committee with limited time to spend unionizing activities that were already supposed to come second to their full-time job (education) necessarily had to choose how to distribute its resources. Already the limited organizing union leaders were doing took up significant time. Noah missed school to go to the labor relations board hearing. Jack and Madeline both talked about how ideally, they would

---

220 Interview with author, Portland OR, August 23, 2018.
have both committed to organizing actions and pursuing a legal route but, faced with limited time to do both, they ended up letting a lot of the interpersonal organizing necessary for disruptive action fall by the wayside.

HAs had a 40 hour a week commitment academically leaving student workers little time to try to build power. Given a limited amount of time, all student must decide how to best spend it and it is an open question as to how much time students on college have. At Reed there is a culture of talking about how busy you are without being very busy. Certainly, different students, both with different commitment levels to different projects and with different financial need have different amounts of spare time. But it remains true that for the HAs, any organizing they were doing was aimed at improving what had been billed to them as a part time job.

The school also derived power from its own labor structure. HAs answered to resident directors, who report to the Assistant Dean for Residential Life. The layers of bureaucracy within the university are not unique and like other industries they serve an important function of insulating the decision makers from attacks and dividing the workers organizing. Many of the student workers I spoke with expressed a lot of affection for their bosses. Simon told me “I really like ResLife, I love our staff and my bosses have been really, really amazing. Who I have issues with are the people in the administration.” Madeline told me “I do think ResLife is willing to work on things. I don’t have a lot of beef with ResLife” but that they were overly bureaucratic.

These kinds of attitudes in which students saw the abstract school, rather than their direct bosses, with whom they had close and frequently important relationships, as

---

221 Reed College and Student Workers Coalition Local 1 Housing Advisors Decision and Direction of Election at 2.
222 Interview with author, Portland OR, August 21.
their enemy affected the kinds of organizing they did. Instead of disrupting or confronting their direct workplace, they spoke more abstractly about Reed as an institution. This had both the effect of bringing some larger structural analysis into the union fight and of diffusing its target. Recognizing how their fight was part of a university wide practice that underwrote the supposed progressivism of the school was an important turning point that led many students to their disillusionment. But it seems that the love of their direct bosses, at the same time that it prompted larger systematic outrage about the university, prevented direct anger from building in the workplace. It also confused who the target should be - rather than taking on one or a few direct decision makers, who they could appeal to or organize around, students were left with a school bureaucracy that left them with Reed or the “administration” as the entity they needed to win against. This defusal of power among many stakeholders is a classic union busting move.

Perhaps most importantly, union action was limited on campus because students felt they couldn’t strike. Much of their focus on the legal process arose because they felt they couldn’t take collective action to withhold their labor. Their reluctance to strike came from a sense of responsibility to their residents. As discussed in the section of chapter two on nonprofit organizing, HAs expressed a fear that stopping doing their work would be abandoning students they lived with and were responsible to. Simon worried that “we don’t want to detrimentally hurt the communities we work for or that we are there for.” HAs felt unable to stop doing many aspects of their work including mentoring and supporting their residents. A few student workers told me that in discussions of what a strike might look like, they had thought about ways they could leave their place of work, their own rooms and effectively strike only by relocating. They
were worried that they would not be able to get enough students to commit to a strike. But rather than take smaller direct actions to slowly build student worker comfort with the kinds of risks that a strike would entail, the fear of not having widespread support seemed to have discouraged organizers from trying to take any action.

The risks they worried about weren’t insignificant. Being an HA is the highest paid position on campus and the jobs are competitive. Student workers aren’t usually dismissed during the school year, but the semester structure and yearly turnover offered lots of opportunities for students to either lose their jobs or not be rehired. One HA reported that usually there is a 40% return rate to the job – interestingly during the 2018-2019 school year after a year of union organizing, there was a 50% return rate. Student workers who were worried about losing their job mentioned that the HA position was how they were able to afford Reed and that losing the job would mean losing their home and education.

Finally, another key school-imposed influence on the union organizing was Reed’s history as a predominantly white institution. Reed was founded in 1908 in Oregon, which officially excluded black residents as part of its state constitution until 1926. The school emphasized a liberal arts education grounded in the first-year seminar based on a European humanities cannon. In the last two years, this has produced vehement protests to expand and diversify the syllabus. In 2004, less than one percent of the nearly 1400 students at Reed were black, a lower percentage that the population of the state of Oregon which currently stands at 1.6 percent.223 This history as a definitively white institution defined the terms students organized under and, as will be explored shortly, impacted the segregated activism on campus. The school is currently 57% white,
5% black, 6% Hispanic, 20% Asian and 8% international.\textsuperscript{224} Social racial integration continues to be difficult among the student body though and plays a key role in how organizing effort have happened. Students often “self-segregate” to find places of refuge amidst a predominantly white institution.\textsuperscript{225} As I will discuss shortly, fights against racism had taken up large parts of the student body activism over the year before union organizing started and the acrimonious nature of those fights as students struggled to negotiate race and racism both between themselves and between the student body and administration would color how the union effort happened. The racial structure of the school also shaped power dynamics in the union and affected how students understood issues of oppression like appropriation as I will discuss.

**Campus Environment and Campus Culture**

The center of the front page of the October 6\textsuperscript{th} edition of the Reed College Quest, the school’s primary newspaper, included, in surprising small font, the headline: “Student Protesters Hit With Sanctions.” It described a recent case in which students involved in Reedies Against Racism (RAR) had disrupted a lecture to protest racism both on and off the syllabus. Members of the on-campus anti-racism activist group were called to attend an honor-board hearing. Next to the center story, on the left was the headline “RAR Wells Fargo Divestment” above a story about the RAR’s ongoing campaign to boycott the bank. Below the fold was the story “Establishment of CREA Accelerated by Student Voices” about the creation of the Comparative Race & Ethnic


\textsuperscript{224} “Reed College | Institutional Research | First-Year Students Ethnicity 2017,” accessed April 12, 2019, https://www.reed.edu/ir/firstyearstuethnic.html.
Studies major for the following school year, after recent student protests and a six-year long campaign. Amongst these news items on the far-right column appeared the headline “Student Workers Unionize.” This story announcing the second-ever independent undergraduate unionization campaign in the country was perhaps the least prioritized or shocking news on the cover. The front page reports a strong divestment campaign, students being penalized for the third interruption of an intro-level lecture class that semester alone, and the creation of an entirely new major after student pressure, as well as the beginning of the unionization campaign. And it is only from the sixth week of school.

Fall semester, 2017 had a lot going on at Reed. Since Fall 2016, RAR had been protesting racism and eurocentrism in class and within the curriculum.226 This activism preceding the unionization campaign inspired students. But it also effected the kinds of organizing students wanted to do. During the Reedies Against Racism protests, things on campus became quite acrimonious. Students were called “race traitors” and got into verbal fights in online forums and on campus.227 Many of the students I spoke with, both in and out of the union, talked about how fraught and exhausting the 2017-2018 academic year had been. Part of union activists’ reluctance to be angry or to use anger as an organizing tactic may be a reaction to seeing the anger of anti-racist activism become divisive and counterproductive.228

227 Bodenner. Also from student sources.
228 A piece of why the acrimony around the RAR protests was felt so viscerally by everyone I talked to on campus was likely rooted in anti-black stereotypes that assumed and demonized the anger of black students. At the same time, the specificity and individualization of the verbal attacks against white students
Students talked to me about the importance that they placed on being friendly and welcoming. Madeline told me she felt there was a steep learning curve to these conversations, and that she learned to moderate her tone to seem less angry. “Sometimes I get like really angry at the administration and still am but that would come out and I think turn people off. They’d be like ‘she’s crazy. She doesn’t like Mike Brody [the Vice President of Student Affairs].’ And, yeah, I fucking hate Mike Brody, but I need to tone it down a little bit.”

Madeline attributed people’s reactions and distaste for her anger to the socioeconomic conditions of Reed. She noted that the college bills itself as being progressive and thus attracts many liberal students. However, these students, though “socially liberal” were wealthy; thus, when she showed anger about the conditions of the working class at Reed, “it was really hard for people to relate.” She ended up learning to talk to people in ways that stressed “empathy.” Shortly after telling me about the critical necessity of empathetic and less abrasive communication, she stressed the union as a legal object, connecting this approach with nonconfrontational tactics.

Madeline also pointed to differences in the organizing committee on the issue of communication, which she felt was gendered. Many of the women would have to learn how to speak “with empathy but also get [their] point across.” She seemed to use “empathy,” as coded language that showed less anger, to distinguish between aggressive and controversial conversations and more understanding.

Other student workers in the organizing committee also told me that there were disagreements regarding how disruptive to be in their tactics and how much anger to use

---

and non-black students of color by white and black organizers seems to have a long reach, informing the unionization campaign.

229 Interview with author, Portland OR, August 22, 2018.
or express in conversations. Some of them attributed this to “people having different tolerances for confrontation” while others, like Madeline, noted the gendered aspects of the difference. Gender and women’s socialization to be appeasing certainly played a role in the union’s aversion to using anger and to engaging in conflict. However, there were also other forces that played a significant role in creating this attitude.

Many student workers acted out of their own internalization of the neoliberal ethics of individualism and civility. And the organizers who disagreed with this logic still often cooperated with the other student who more fully adopted the narratives of civility and misapplications of identity politics. Melinda Cooper in the conclusion of her chapter on *in loco parentis* and the conception of the university as a parental, authority figure argues that there is a stream of the left wing that has assimilated the language of personal injury law.231 Left without any of the protections of the state or collective organization following the 1980s cuts to welfare and attacks on unions, left-wing students on campus have found “the harms once attributed to the phenomena of ‘social discrimination’ or ‘structural violence’[are now] more readily perceived as private wrongs embedded in offensive words or images.”232 Notably Cooper is not critiquing contemporary student movements with the language of the right, as “snowflakes” or “social justice warriors,” but rather argues that that the ethos of personal litigation and tort law have been adopted by students and applied in ways that replicate tort law’s privatizing and essentializing effects. Cooper describes this imaginary of tort litigation as becoming pervasive and indeed, as the university has become increasingly neoliberal, student workers even thought about union organizing through this lens.

230 Ibid.
Students have learned the language of liberal identity politics and reframed their unionization in those terms. Rather than organize around concepts like solidarity and an understanding of themselves as workers, they resisted seeing their work at Reed as being part of a universalized worker’s movement. Madeline told me about an email sent to all the HAs that ended: “if this school truly wants to help low SES [socio-economic status] students, paying us a decent wage, would be a good place to start.” Veronica, a union dissenter, replied arguing that this was inappropriate to say, writing “I am incredibly uncomfortable with [that sentence]. It’s okay not to be pro-union. Not wanting to support the union does not pit you against low SES students” This email was followed by another student worker replying to the listserv agreeing with Veronica’s argument against the union and highlighting that HA’s at Reed are paid relatively well compared to ResLife workers at other universities. They wrote “unionizing hasn’t in any form helped me personally… Low-SES HAs unionizing is a high risk, low to no return and potentially a big loss that has major effects on low-SES HAs.”

The anti-union replies all share a few commonalities. They emphasize the union’s responsibility to low-SES students positioning “low-SES” as a fixed identity marker. They separate unionizing as distinct from workers organizing to presumably negotiate higher pay and changing their economic situation (however slightly). The argument that it is “ok to not be pro-union” and still support low-income students is confounding, given that the students were unionizing in order to win higher incomes. Madeline’s initial email noted that the university says it supports low-SES students, and she argued that

---

232 Cooper, 255.
233 Reed students primarily use the language of “low-SES” over other terms like low income or poor. The term low SES came from a push to highlight the socio-cultural aspects of income and class difference. I find its use indicative of the larger attempts at Reed to be inclusive by addressing identity, in this case through making an economic situation— receiving low income— into a characteristic one can have – having a class or socio-economic position.
instead of waiting for cultural changes to make the school more “welcoming” or “inclusive” to low-SES students, student workers should demand higher pay, thereby directly lessening class difference. The replies emphasize identity politics and individualism. They looked at class as fixed rather than created and mutable, as cultural and not economic.

The complaint that “the union has not helped me personally” is not only ridiculous because at that point the union was not recognized and had not won anything yet, but displays a liberal perspective of looking at the union for what it could do for the individual rather than for collective. Tying this complaint to the preface that the author of the email was a low-SES student shows the link identity politics can have with liberal individualism. Identity politics is highly individualizing and highlights the specific person. It centers their essentialized being and focuses on who they are not what they are doing (potentially collectively). The worker becomes a sole individual actor, a solitary and unique if homogenized self, categorized through different identity markers rather than needs that can be addressed through action. The email replies stress the special risk that low-SES students face, not to suggest collective action that can mitigate danger, but solely to imply that individual identity markers must be looked after.

The interjection that other schools pay their workers less emphasizes a privilege politics and repeats a classic union busting technique that unions are good for workers who are really exploited, taken advantage of, and poorly treated. It does not recognize that exploitation, in the Marxist sense, is endemic to every workplace and job and the condition on which wage labor is built. Instead by emphasizing the relative quality of their work, the student was proposing that the HAs at Reed are “privileged” and should act on behalf of people less privileged. Set in the context of the acrimonious Reedies
Against Racism protests, this position is a reasonable one for the student worker to take. But it stresses the centrality of individual identity and ignores the role that solidarity and collective action, taken on behalf of ‘equals,’ working together in the same fight can play. Instead, in this framing, students are meant to be helping others “more in need.” But if workplace standards are only judged by the most abusive conditions, all workers are hurt. Raising industry standards can be an important and movement building action.

Privilege politics and a desire to not seem selfish fed into how the union organized. Though the initial interest in the union seems to have come out of the pay restructuring, as the campaign progressed, the organizers faced more pushback from student workers working within these neoliberal paradigms. As a result, the organizers stressed pay less and less and instead, placed more emphasis on issues like medical amnesty and disciplinary procedures.

The culture of reflective neoliberalism, emphasizing neoliberal discourse, among student workers, particularly in the fraught environment described above, also led to the less combative unionization campaign. After the email thread, many of the organizers were upset. The nature of being in ResLife meant that workers live alongside the people they are working with and given Reed’s tight knit community and small size, many of the people involved were friends. I talked to both the person who sent the initial email and the first replier, and both described the other as close friends and discussed how hard it was for them to talk about the incident. There were resounding personal consequences for both these internal conversations and many students indicated that they worried about the effects of taking militant action. These relationships limited organizers’ willingness to push for change or press opponents on their views.
Jack, who was somewhat insulated from some of these social pressures by his age and time off, still felt exhausted by the misapplication of identity politics to the union. At an open meeting, Jack remembers being approach and told that someone had heard he was ‘appropriating the worker’s movement.’ “I don’t know what to say to that,” he told me. “I was like, these are all workers. And they are just organizing.”234 Like the language in the emails and in student discussions, this comment was reminiscent of Cooper’s well-articulated rejoinder that civil litigation can’t address poverty, “thus class inequality can be registered, if at all, as “classism,” as a threat to essentialized working-class culture.”235

In the student’s critique, classism, not class struggle, takes the fore as the primary concern. Classism is about discrimination based on class status, noticed through class markers. But unionization efforts, at their most powerful, are not primarily about combating this discrimination. Instead they are invested in combatting the oppression that creates class and the work conditions that make workers subservient, selling their labor and taking directives from those the economic system has made bosses. The absorption of the university’s neoliberal focus on singularized identity markers rather than structures led students to similarly be concerned not with verbs, and actions, but with adjectives and fixed descriptors.

These politics limited what students felt was possible. Concerned about appropriating the working class, many at least somewhat believed the university line that they were too privileged to unionize. In the context of identity politics, student workers at a fancy school couldn’t be viewed through their actions as workers and did not have a claim to anger.

234 Interview with author, Portland OR, August 23, 2018.
Consequences of Organizing Decisions

Throughout the unionization campaign, one of the effects of viewing the union as a purely legal entity (and not pursuing direct action or power-building) was that many members and organizers adopted the view that pushing too hard for the union would be bad. Closely tied to their aversion to anger was a desire not to “manipulate.” Student workers frequently stressed an unwillingness to make a strong ask at the end of a conversation or to urge people to take action for the union.

One of the eventual members of the short-lived departmental committee and a long-time union supporter (Simon) told me “really, our goal was just to have conversations with people and inform them and let them come to their own decision. I don’t think we were like ‘we have to change everyone’s mind.’”236 Madeline explained that she was hesitant to repute anti-union rhetoric she heard from other HAs because “I don’t want to feel like I’m tricking people into supporting the union or manipulating people into supporting the union.”237 Having conversations that were not open ended but instead had a concrete goal of getting people to support the union, or act in support of it, were counter to the liberal mindset and popular narrative that stressed respect for all ideas. Organizing within the liberal/neoliberal university, student workers had internalized these beliefs.

Classic union organizing models emphasize the importance of conversations that show people how the union matters by connecting it to issues that matter to the individual. Union organizers traditionally approach organizing with the view that the union is a good and necessary thing and convincing people that they can and should

235 Cooper, *Family Values*, 256.
236 Interview with author, Portland OR, August 22, 2018.
237 Interview with author, Portland OR, August 21, 2018.
support it. This is not viewed as manipulative but rather as an opportunity to engage previously disengaged workers and bring them into something that has value. As Israel Rings articulates in the essay “Who Saw Who Heard the Ten Dibrot [commandments],” under capitalism, people are constantly surrounded by and influenced by messaging that supports capitalism and its mechanisms. In this climate, arguing for the union and against worker subjugation is not “brain washing” or manipulative but a necessary counternarrative.

The student worker organizers themselves adopted the liberal view of respect for ideas and therefore framed these counternarratives as manipulative. This is understandable given that the ideas of the ruling class, a liberal elite that benefits from the capitalist order, become the dominant ideas. Without established union organizers to help them feel comfortable offering a counter to dominant narratives, the student workers were limited in their ability to fight this paradigm/push back on this rhetoric.

Very early in the campaign, the student workers choose not to affiliate the budding union effort with a larger national union. Early organizers made this choice because they valued the Reed union being independent and locally specific. They viewed Reed as a bit of a bubble, and did not want the complications that would come with affiliating, including having to pay dues to a national union. They also expressed

---


240 I do not dwell on the decision not to collect dues, but it was also influential to how the union formed. Organizers were reluctant to collect dues because the worried it would make it more difficult to recruit people to the union and were worried about any possibility of allegations about misconduct involving money. Ironically, the most ardent union opposing HA I spoke with cited the union not collecting dues as one of the things that made her hesitant about it because she was worried about how it would operate. She viewed the union through the lens of business unions which relied on heavy amounts of paid staff to be
concern about business unionism and the issues they have seen in other unions acting conservatively and non-democratically. The Reed HA unionization push also came after SEIU dropped the George Washington University Residential Life workers (Residential Advisors) unionization attempts after the Trump election and the few Reed unionizers who followed national labor movement news were thus cautious about involving an outside organization.

The decision not to affiliate though had the consequence of separating Reed from potential support from a national union that might have helped them learn how to organize or emphasized the reasons why they might want to convince other workers to support the union. It could have brought them in touch with experienced organizers who could have talked to them about the role of direct action or anger or shown them the ways that they could have combatted union opposition within the HAs by assuaging fears or planning escalating actions. I am not arguing that student workers needed affiliation to do any of these things or that without affiliating student workers are invariably ignorant and need traditional labor institutions to come and teach them. Rather I argue that one potential way some of the ideological turns the union movement at Reed could have been addressed is potentially through contact with others in the labor movement.

Beyond not affiliating, Reed workers also had very little other contact with other organizers or people with labor experience. They received an email from the President of the Grinnell Student Dining Workers Union but did not reply. They were supported slightly on campus by the Reed custodial workers union, but this support did not translate into any trainings or joint demonstrations. Different organizers mentioned effective. At Reed, not having dues can also be seen as a causal factor that limited the student worker’s
potential trainings in Portland or connections they might have had with other unionized workers but none of these ever materialized and students didn’t focus on them, in part because they were caught up in all the time their schoolwork and existent organizing practice took.

Time is the final, critical part of why student workers pursued the largely legal path for unionization. Because they choose not to affiliate with a national labor union, student workers did not have the support of a larger union or legal staff to represent them in court or even to help with smaller processes like filing their petition. Instead they did all the legal work themselves, researching on the internet and reaching out to knowledgeable family and friends for advice. This, it should be noted, is impressive. With no prior legal experience two juniors and a 28-year-old senior won a legal case against Reed university. But it also left the core members of the organizing committee who did all this legal work very little time to engage in other forms of organizing. Choosing not to affiliate left organizers in a bind where even if they had planned on focusing maintaining on collective action doing the minimum legal work of collecting and filing cards ended up turning into a large legal process.

This narrative of time and a gradual encroachment of legal work is the main one Jack uses to explain the direction the organizing push took.

I think the real failure of last year, pretty much my failure, was to build the fact of mass action around this within Reed. I mean I got so tied up doing legal work with the case stuff, I stopped doing any other organizing and work really. And I think we sort of fell apart on reaching out to other people and actively getting people who aren’t as involved in this.\footnote{Interview with author, Portland OR, August 23, 2018.}

\footnote{ability to go on strike or more efficiently get legal help.}
Dedicating time to doing legal work and limiting rank-and-file organizing was a self-reinforcing problem. Without time to more directly engage and mobilize fellow workers, organizers had fewer people to help them and in turn organize other workers.

Similarly, Madeline viewed the entanglement into the legal aspects of unionization as the thing that distracted organizers from being able to adopt a dual-pronged legal and direct action-based strategy.

We got into this legal rat’s nest and I think we all thought that if we just got through that we could have a union. Really what I think we needed to be doing was creating a huge ordeal of it on campus and then making it something the administration wanted to not have to deal with.\(^{242}\)

This sort of reflection was not unique among the HAs. Many had learned from their year of organizing with the union that the only way they could gain power would be through more agitation and action. They referenced new efforts beginning in the 2018-2019 school year to act like a union without formally having one and rooted that behavior in collective actions. This kind of shift, returning to the earlier analysis of youth and experience and the pervasiveness of liberal ideas, indicates that through unionizing (or trying to), student workers could learn how to organize and develop a more revolutionary politics. Through struggle students could gain the experience and perspective that allows them to be angry, more willing to challenge the schools position, and more willing to defend their beliefs.

\(^{242}\) Interview with author, Portland OR, August 21, 2018.
Conclusion: Lessons and Homework

I started this project because I fundamentally believe in the labor movement as a place for change. Student workers have power in the work that they do, and I am excited to contribute to a movement which recognizes and mobilizes this power. In two months, I will graduate from Wesleyan University but in my four years here I have held a number of jobs on campus: I have planned programing and end of year move out days for the Sustainability Office, created community and mentoring as a House Manager (similar to Residential Advisor) for Residential Life, coordinated Shabbat cooking for the Wesleyan Jewish Community, and helped teach a class as Preceptor for my department, the College of Social Studies. I’ve also held a handful of odd jobs, staffing Reunion and Commencement and Homecoming. Through these diverse experiences of student work on campus, some things stayed consistent. Student workers were almost universally unrecognized -by the university, administration, employers and students themselves- in the work they (we) did to make the university operate. Sometimes, in conversation with co-workers, we would reflect on our own importance, the critical necessity of our labor, but these conversations never led to greater action.

I want to suggest that action is possible. The project has always been personal and expressly political. Thus, to conclude, I chronicle some of my own experiences to
offer a guide of what I have learned as an organizer through this project. While writing this thesis, I have been trying to apply what I have learned in my research on the figure of the student worker. Here, I reflect on the ways my experience echoed themes that emerged in my historical, theoretical and ethnographic research and the ways this experience can be applied.

I began being interested in the possibility of student worker organization in the fall of 2016. As the country was reckoning with Donald Trump’s election, on-campus, the school was struggling to respond to revelations that a university dean who had been responsible for adjudicating sexual assault claims was discovered to be a pedophile (who has since been convicted). As students reacted to the scandal, ResLife student workers were also trying to figure out how to respond to a student manager who allegedly had sexually assaulted and physically abused female students. A month earlier, during summer training, we had had partial success pushing back on a new ResLife policy that would have jeopardized student health and increased RA and HM workloads. People were angry and hurt and wanted to make change. It became apparent as we talked about all the ongoing work issues that trying to fix issues one by one in a piecemeal network of working groups and “discussions” was not going to solve our problems. By organizing as workers, we could use our labor power to gain leverage in the workplace and make our voices heard and respected.

However, in the fall of 2016, I realized that organizing ResLife would be a difficult task. We were all already overworked, felt “too busy,” and there was a current of anti-establishment anger that rejected the idea of working together as workers to take action strategically. In a meeting with the whole ResLife student staff, a student worker proposed making a list of demands we could all vote on and then voting on the kinds of
tactics we would all use to win those demands. They were quickly shot down by another student worker who argued that if we all did the same actions (hanging up signs, refusing to do paperwork, picketing meetings), low-income students would be disproportionately at risk. Thus, we should all just take whatever protest actions we each felt comfortable with, without even unifying guidelines. Disparate risk and different positionality in approaching the job and action prompted people to want to act individually not collectively -- a reflection of some of the ways, Wesleyan students, like Reed students, echo their university’s message and models of neoliberal control.

At the same time that I was grappling with how to organize my workplace, the fallout of the August 2016 Columbia decision began to be apparent. Undergraduates at Columbia and Grinnell won union recognition and fights across the country started popping up as people started paying renewed attention student workers on college campuses. Learning from these campaigns, and in the face of the 2016 election and a labor-hostile NLRB, I turned my attention to organizing a worker’s action center on campus, Peer Advocates for Working Students (PAWS).

From its inception, PAWS has been informed by my academic research. It served as a lens to identify sources of employer/university power and a testing ground to try different strategies to build student worker power. Given the turbulence of the NLRB, PAWS is structured to train student worker organizers, assist and organize issue-based workplace campaigns and push good labor policy within the university before building to a more aggressive unionization push. It exists to radicalize both the “Peer Advocates” (organizers within it) as well as the larger student worker body. Learning from interactions on campus and from research done for this project at schools like Reed and Grinnell, we pushed student workers to identify as workers with the hope that feeling
ownership over this identity would empower them to fight for better labor conditions. Student workers who do not see themselves as workers cannot act as workers. By internalizing the university-propagated myth that their education supplants their role as a worker or that because they are young, part-time, students at a privileged and elite campus they do not have a claim to being “workers,” student workers are estranged from the power their labor gives them. Believing these myths, they cannot participate in the workers’ movement and they are alienated from righteous and motivating anger.

Campus labor organizing has not been an easy task. Many of the institutional controls, strategies, and rhetoric that bosses employ in the university company town (modalities that were explored in the theorization of the town that took place in Chapter Two and illustrated at Reed) were used by administrators, professors and employers at Wesleyan to fight student worker organization. University administration and employers have used scarcity narratives that emphasize austerity, lack of funding and workplace mission importance to demonize student workers asking for a raise. (This often comes from bosses saying that raising wages will cut into the financial aid fund, an illogic made all the more ridiculous because most Wesleyan student workers are on financial aid.) Bosses have used delaying tactics, knowing of students have limited time frames. They have delayed responding to demands from November to mid-April using countless “meetings” and “discussions” as excuses. They have scheduled big, potentially incendiary announcements, like pay changes and cuts, with periods of heavy academic workloads, like exams and paper deadlines, to take advantage of student stress, business, and inability to prioritize workplace organizing.

Through PAWS, I have also seen how pervasive the infantilization and leveraging of student workers’ youth has been. Bosses have used this power dynamic to
stifle student worker protests through a politics of civility, telling students explicitly in some workplaces that even asking for minimum wage was disrespectful. This admonition was influenced by the student/professor relation and conditions of academia in which students are limited in the organizing by their need for professor/employer support after graduation through networks and recommendations. Perhaps most importantly, through PAWS, I have worked with many student workers who were told bluntly that they were not workers. Boss and administrative arguments usually relied on the student workers positions as students to negate the qualification that the labor the person was doing was in fact work. These arguments also sometimes employed rhetoric around the prestige and honor some campus jobs had.243

Facing this organizing environment and learning from student unionization campaigns across the country, PAWS focused on building student worker consciousness in the hopes that this would prompt swifter, stronger action. We ran know-your-rights trainings, worked with specific workplaces to organize around issues like cut hours and higher wages, and petitioned for school-wide policy changes. However, we struggled to overcome certain organizing challenges.

Most students we organized with worked under 20 hours a week and did not feel as invested in the job they only did a few hours a week as they did their school work. The costs of investing more time to organize it sometimes outweighed what student workers perceived the benefit of higher wages or fewer hours would be. We had a difficult time engaging people when they had imminent academic deadlines coming up. The consistent breaks make building momentum hard. Within PAWS, we struggled with

243 This kind of currency in academia has been refuted through graduate student, adjunct and white-collar campus work organizing campaigns, most memorably with the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical
time, trying to organize in addition to our own school work and paid labor. Organizing takes focus and persistence, which were both difficult to give.

We had to navigate the tight knit social circles that come from working, living and studying all in one small space. It was difficult to organize alongside student workers, who coming from an education in the neoliberal university, feel inclined to distrust worker action and instead place faith in the market fairness of professor's/bosses’ exploitation. Students relationships with privilege though variously vulnerable positions of being first-generation, low-income noncitizen, racialized and gendered have led fear. Because of the dominance of individualizing ideologies, these different positions of precarity also promoted shifts from acting collectively in solidarity to personalized risk and despair.

Some of the students we worked with rarely interacted with other student workers who do similar work – they do not share offices, workspace, know each other or even have contact lists of the other academic workers cross departments on campus. This diffusion of academic work keeps us separated and our workplaces small, limiting our power. The relational currency of academia as well as the precarity of students who rely on their employers to recommend them for any educational or economic prospect after school limits the amount of conflict academic student workers are willing to engage in. The other students I worked with through PAWS got increasingly angry (and in some cases ultimately afraid of that anger) as we waited and were rejected by our bosses but were consistently wary of angering them.

This fear of anger was even present among PAWS organizers, some of whom were reluctant to “agitate.” We had hearty debates of the productive versus destructive

Workers (HUCTW) 1970s and 1980s 14-year long unionization campaign that popularized the slogan “we
powers of anger because some of the organizers felt that using anger or agitating would be counterproductive, hurting our relationships and power within the administration. They approached workplace issues as places to try having reasoned debate with bosses and finding comprising bipartisan solutions. They had trouble forcing issues, using aggressive tactics, employing language like “demands” or, critically, making people commit to action because of their wariness around interpersonal conflict, a reasonable fear at a school that has only 3,000 people.

Many student workers we spoke with were righteously enraged and wanted to mobilize their workplaces. But others did not feel they had a claim to being called workers, because of the privilege of working on an elite campus, the fact that their work was part time or because they liked their boss, though this was mediated by class and racial identities that helped connect people to what they imagined as the figure of the worker. Offering a structural analysis that allowed student worker to feel they had “good working conditions” but still have reason to mobilize was important to PAWS’s work.244

The lack of precedent for undergraduate unionization made it difficult to organize because we did not have a clear guide on how to act and because student workers had not seen or considered the possibility that people in their position could organize. Despite these difficulties, we have had success. We succeeded when we built collective action across difference. We succeeded when we did this quickly and worked persistently, by have narrow but high intensity focuses. We succeeded when we used anger to build this quick collective movement, finding power in agitation.

***

can’t eat prestige.”
I began this thesis hoping to discover a special condition of the student worker. I wanted to identify specific practices and actions student workers took to figure them as unique actors. Instead I have found that student workers organize like all other workers in reaction to and as products of their environments. The environmental conditions they are shaped by in the private university have historical analogies in the company, as well as key differences, and are part of a broader economic shift towards neoliberal policy. This perspective produced a much broader set of questions for this thesis to examine about the nature of student worker identity development in and against the university and through government, student and worker action.

First, I chronicled the creation of a mass student workforce as both a genealogy of student workers and a reflection the formal subsumption of the student as worker into the university. This history looked expansively at American universities from the colonial era to 1990s, but was centered around pivotal moments like the creation of federal work study, the GI Bill, human capital theory and the 1960s student movement that all happened post-WWII. In Chapter 2 I followed this history with an argument that the contemporary private elite isolated college or university operates both as and similar to a company town. A product of the history detailed in Chapter 1, this university company town requires certain strategies to organize against and within. Finally, I conclude by looking at the realization of student worker identity in attempts to organize. Though I detail the Reed College organizing attempt specifically looking to its failure, I am interested in it because of the success of other undergraduate unions and the growth of other successful labor organizing across the country.

244 Though student workers invoked privilege politics and fear often, I have noticed a significant shift in how student workers talked about collective action between 2016 and now. This I believe is in part because of the visibility of worker organizing on and off campus that explains why solidarity is protective.
Ultimately, this research reveals how important student worker organizing is. It matters to the labor movement which will be strengthened by new members. Studies reviewed in Chapter 2 demonstrated the link between union experience and future union membership. A resurgent labor movement will be dependent on student workers organizing in their current position and because, as more and more people attend institutions of higher education, student worker unions will be their entry point into the labor movement. More directly, organizing can change student workers live dramatically. Student workers operate in highly exploitative spaces, that are able to take advantage of students’ youth, their confinement in the company town, and their debt to create harsh and paternalistic workplaces. Student workers can change this through organizing, and in turn the organizing changes them. “It changes how you see yourself in the community,” Xavier told me. “What you are doing, it’s a battle and you are a warrior in this fight.” Standing up against the university as an employer with money and power on its side was empowering.

I also have been struck by the role and power of anger in organizing. Leaning into anger and agitating along classically militant models can give student workers power in a world that teaches them constant labor submission. Anger is potent. Within a population of workers, produced by the university as the exploited and subservient subjects, anger challenges the power hierarchy. It allows workers to access a full toolkit of tactics and offers them a capacity to make change. After revealing the violence of the world, what response can there be but anger?

Finally, throughout the process of researching and organizing this past year, I have realized the importance of connecting and learning from others doing the work. Finding mentorship and solidarity within the labor movement, student worker
movement and inside the campus is critical. Militant strategy is unfamiliar and hard to execute. Experienced people with the labor movement can teach and share these skills. The undergraduate workers I spoke with during my research had very little contact with each other as well. I am interested in how student workers can learn from each other and from experienced organizers in and out of academic circles, while also retaining the qualities that make them unique and give them power.

Like the undergraduate unionization movement, this research is only just beginning. New work must be done on who undergraduates organize with, how they define their bargaining unit and what those formations mean. Different unit types can have profound impacts on both undergraduates and the workers they may organize with, prevent unit erosion on-campus and contributing to a stronger labor movement. I am hopeful that more ethnographies of student workers will help explain their evolving identities, tactics and ideologies as the movement progresses. Finally, I am interested in what student worker unionization does to the fundamental economic forms and workings of the university. Once student workers organize, how will their mobilization alter the economic formations of their work? How will their movement for the university to adapt to find new methods of exploitation and extraction of value? How will student workers wield their power and what new worlds will they enact?
Bibliography

NLRB Cases
Adelphi University, 195 NLRB 639. (1972).
Boston Medical Center, 330 NLRB 152 (1999).
Brown University, 342 NLRB 483 (2004).
Columbia University in the City of New York and Graduate Workers of Columbia GWC, UAW., 364 NLRB No. 90 (2016).
New York University, 332 NLRB 1205 (2000).
NLRB v Yeshiva University 444 U.S. 672 (1880).


“Bargaining in Good Faith with Employees’ Union Representative (Section 8(d) & 8(a)(5)) | NLRB | Public Website.” Accessed April 15, 2019. /rights-we-protect/whats-law/employers/bargaining-good-faith-employees-union-representative-section.


Clark, Julie D. “COMPANY TOWNS IN AMERICA,” 1880, 73.


Reed College and Student Workers Coalition Local 1 Housing Advisors Decision and Direction of Election, No. 19- RC-213177 (National Labor Relations Board Region 19 March 2, 2018).


