

One Step at a Time; Union Organizing in the Public Sector South

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ABSTRACT

In October of 2000, a coalition of students and workers started a public sector labor union for higher education employees known as United Campus Workers at the University of Tennessee - Knoxville. As a public sector union in Tennessee, United Campus Workers lacks the right to collectively bargain. By conducting interviews with union-related personnel and reflecting on my own time as a member, this paper explains the way the labor union has still won campaigns for higher pay and policy changes at UT-Knoxville within its legal context, and what union members and staff organizers make of their experiences. I conclude that by using social movement strategies of pressure escalation and worker identification, union members organize issue campaigns that culminate into interactions that partly mimic negotiations with management, sometimes resulting in campaign victories.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

People can spend a lot of their lives working. Work affects the body, whether it's the hunch in one's back, the callouses on someone's hands, the knees that don't work right, or the particles in a person's lungs. Emotionally, work can be a place where someone is treated well or treated poorly. A person's work can be something they take pride in and love doing, at the same time that they may be exploited or discriminated against by their supervisors. Workers must sit and face these impacts, because they need their paycheck to survive, to feed their kids, or to keep up with the costs of life.

Regardless of whatever the situation may be, people are paid the hourly wage or the salary for the work that they do, but that wage or monthly paycheck also reflects the price that people give their time and their bodies for. This exchange can compel people to want something different than what they're getting, meaning that they may quit and move onto something else, or they may start talking to others about how they feel. Some can be afraid of using their voice to talk about the change they want to see in their work, because of a fear of retaliation or dismissal. Others will want to have worked the job for more years before they start "rocking the boat". If someone has worked somewhere with harsh working conditions for a long time, it can be difficult for some people to believe that something so central to their work can change.

Workplaces can be understood as social ecosystems within structured environments. The dimensions of physical workplaces, the number of workers within them, and the hierarchy that facilitates them are all quantifiable. At the university,

academic buildings are made up of office staff, building custodians, university admins, faculty professors, and students. These people socially reproduce that academic building, with facilities workers running all the physical resources and supplies it takes to maintain the building (electricity, water, cleaning supplies, etc.). The roles and participation of all these workers is crucial to the function of the university. If the professors and graduate students don't teach, then there are no classes. Universities wouldn't be functional institutions without the custodians and janitorial staff that clean the floors of every academic building on their campuses. If the office staff and business managers in different departments didn't exist, it'd be very difficult for faculty to do the logistical and contractual processes that maintains an academic department, while also teaching thousands of students. It's easy to list these examples and make the point that there are a diverse set of roles that maintain an academic building or department, and while this is very true, these examples also illustrate the idea that the thoughts and physical efforts of these workers matter, because it's those thoughts and efforts that keep the university running. What these workers do with their time is important, and this project is focused on how the rearticulation of workers' thoughts and efforts can lead to social change.

The United Campus Workers is a public sector union that represents workers at the University of Tennessee – Knoxville. UTK is the largest chapter of the labor union in the state and in the country, with more than 1000 members. United Campus Workers (UCW) is a wall-to-wall union, meaning that university faculty, staff, student workers, graduate students, lecturers, custodians, and administration can all be a part of it. At other universities, it may be the case that there are different unions for graduate students,

faculty professors, or custodians on the same campus, but not here (although some professors are a part of the AAUP). This is for two reasons. The first is that it's because of the strategy of job class solidarity that the UCW has deployed since its early years, with union members and organizers understanding that to get the changes they want, workers of all kinds need to be on board. The second is the fact that the labor union has not negotiated a contract with the University of Tennessee - Knoxville, and thus, has no contractual definitions of which job categories can be a part of the labor union and which cannot. The lack of a contract comes from the fact that public sector unions are governed differently in Tennessee than private sector unions, with it being illegal in Tennessee for public sector employees to collectively bargain with local municipalities, except in cases of teachers, transit workers, and expressed statutory authority (Gibbons 2012). Expressed statutory authority only occurs when states have given consent for public employees to collectively bargain with their employers (Shuck 2011). It is legal for public sector workers to form labor unions and freely express themselves, but federal courts have consistently ruled against public sector unions, making it illegal for public workers to strike and collectively bargain with their employers (Shuck 2011).

An examination of 20th century labor history is useful in understanding the legal context of United Campus Workers. The New Deal period in the United States saw the implementation of policies that granted labor unions rights as organizations. Through the National Industry Recovery Act in 1933, unions were granted the right to bargain on behalf of workers free from employer interferences (Piven and Cloward 1979). This policy was largely ignored by employers, and since union grievances about employers

not abiding by this policy were regularly ignored by the Department of Justice (Piven and Cloward 1979), there was a serious lack of enforcement of this policy. The Wagner Act, passed in 1935, created the National Labor Relations Board. The NLRB served as an entity that was able to enforce bargaining contracts between employers and unions. These policies led unions to be able to negotiate contracts that designated their workplaces as “union shops” and “closed shops”, with union shops existing as workplaces where all employees had to be a part of the site’s labor union once they were hired, while closed shops were workplaces where employers could only hire union members. It also forced employers to maintain a “neutrality” in the workplace, where they could not openly expression their opposition to unions (Schneider and Stepan-Norris 2018). More than 8,000 strikes between 1935 and 1937 followed the passing of the Wagner Act (Piven and Cloward 1979).

The Roosevelt Administration’s implementation and support of these policies was met with uproar from sections of the business community in the US, but it wasn’t until 1947 when Republicans controlled both sections of Congress that amendments were made to the Wagner Act. These amendments, along with a series of policies known as the Taft-Hartley Act, were meant to greatly limit the efficacy of labor unions and their ability to organize (Piven and Cloward 1979). With Taft-Hartley, the Wagner Act provision on employer neutrality was reversed (Schneider and Stepan-Norris 2018:157), and labor unions were limited in their ability to strike, protest, and picket. Most notably, Taft-Hartley allowed for states to adopt right-to-work laws that banned both union and closed shops by making it illegal for unions to require all employees in a unionized workplace to

belong to and pay dues to the union that represents them (Lachmann 2018). Many southern states adopted these right-to-work laws, including Tennessee, limiting the efficacy of labor unions in that state during that time and to the present day. United Campus Workers doesn't directly face the impact of right-to-work because it can't negotiate a contract, but it still feels an indirect impact through its existence in the Southern United States, a region that has often been sought after by corporations for anti-union legislation (Lachmann 2018)

Although the legal dimensions that the UCW faces have certainly limited the formal capacity of the labor union, the lack of legal recognition has also made its labor organizing be open-ended and experimental. The lack of legal recognition hasn't stopped workers on campus from wanting their workplace to change. In the twenty years since its affiliation with the Communication Workers of America (CWA), campus workers at the University of Tennessee have won higher minimum wages for full-time staff employees, lecturer raises, the removal of mandatory fees for graduate students, and the fight against outsourcing thousands of facility workers all over the state.

These victories, along with the fact that the UCW has more than 2000 members across the state of Tennessee without having ever negotiated a contract, all made me want to learn more of the history of the UCW and what the people involved make of their experiences as union members and staff organizers. I joined the United Campus Workers in Fall 2021 and became one of the Graduate Workers Organizing Committee co-chairs soon after that. My relationship to the labor union forced me to think deeply about the purpose of the organization, and the processes that members and staff organizers

maintain so that the organization can continue to fight. I believe those were some of the more sociological underpinnings that drove me to want to focus on this organization for my thesis. The following research questions guided this project throughout the interviews I conducted and during my personal reflection as a union member and social scientist:

1. *How to do these members win changes in their workplace without the legal means that other unions have?*
2. *How does this labor organizing impact worker's lives, and what do they make of their experiences?*

To pursue the applied investigation of this phenomenon, I conducted a total of eleven interviews with people that are either presently involved with the labor union or had at one point been a part of it for an extended period. Of the group, nine of them had at one point been union members, with the remaining two being people that only spent time as staff organizers. Four of the eleven interview participants were at different points both union members and staff organizers. My own participation as a union member is another integral piece to the project, and I use my own experiences as a member to complement the opinions and experiences of the interview participants.

In the first chapter, I cover the origin of United Campus Workers and how the organization went from having only two dozen members on campus to becoming an organization with UCW chapters all over the state of Tennessee. Afterwards, I explain the differences in roles between union members and staff organizers within the organization, and how they relate to one another during periods of growth and campaigns. In the second chapter, I describe the different methods that members and

organizers employ to grow the organization, like the UCW model for recruitment and the campaign strategies that members take on to fight for changes. I conclude this chapter with the identification of different feelings that members share in committee spaces during campaigns, and how these feelings may be related to the unique legal context that these workers organize in.

Over the course of the paper, I cite and address the people that I interviewed for this project as Participant X, with x being a number that represents their place in the order that I conducted these interviews. I use participants' perspectives as fact in the writing of this project, and I hold their description of events at UT-Knoxville and the history of the labor union to be true, because I have every reason to believe them, and because, in some cases, my own experiences as a member matches up with what they say. Further, the analysis and interpretation of members' experiences is in line with the purpose of this project, so I have little reason to focus on the authenticity of what they say, because what they say is representative of how they understand their experiences.

CHAPTER TWO

Creating United Campus Workers

The history of United Campus Workers is a story about the development of this organization as a labor union, and how that development led to real material changes on campus without the normal means that other unions may have. During the 2023 Martin Luther King Jr. Event at the CWA Union Hall, a former UCW-CWA union president and current CWA organizing director spoke on the early days of United Campus Workers. In talking about the challenges and obstacles that the campus workers faced in growing their union in those first few years, he explained that organizing on campus was like alchemy, comparing winning changes and building an organization without a contract to turning tin into silver and iron into gold. In his speech, he emphasized the number of times that the organization almost died, and how a strong sense of hope, naivety, and luck were important to keeping it afloat. I think it's important to highlight this characterization, because it helps illustrate the seemingly unsurmountable barriers to creating this labor union.

At the end of the 1990s, Campus Dining employees at UT were outsourced and became Aramark workers. Half of the campus custodians were also outsourced and were replaced or rehired by a private company (Author Interview with Participant 10:2). Campus Workers for a Living Wage, the organization that would eventually become United Campus Workers, conducted a living wage study in 1999 to find out how much people working on campus were making. They found out that more than 68% of hourly employees were being paid less than the “living wage of \$9.50 with benefits” at the time

(UCWTN). At the time, some custodians were houseless. The issues that campus custodians were facing were at the heart of the first organizing efforts that the Campus Workers for a Living Wage took on, campaigning for and eventually winning university-paid Hepatitis B vaccinations, 4.75% raises for custodians, and 12% raises for the lowest paid custodians (UCWTN). These campaign victories lead Campus Workers for A Living Wage to become an independent labor union known as United Campus Workers in 2000, with Sandy Hicks, a dorm custodian, serving as the union's first president.

At this time, United Campus Workers was made up of interested faculty, undergraduate students largely from the Progressive Student Alliance, and any facilities or campus workers that had committed to join. It wasn't easy to grow this organization; at the time of its affiliation with the Communication Workers of America in 2003, it only had 26 members (Author Interview with Participant 1:4). The ongoing outsourcing of campus custodians created a fear of retaliation among custodial workers for joining the labor union, with the outsourcing also harming different people's relationship to custodial workers on campus. Speaking on that situation, a facilities worker and former union president I interviewed explained,

So, if we had complaints, we couldn't talk to this person's foreman or that person. We had to file a complaint with the company. And that had to go through the director of the department. They would in theory handle it internally. So, nothing ever got done. Nothing ever got fixed. Needless to say, our relationship as facility services with the academic side of campus and the administrative, the rest of campus was really poor, you know, because they would have complaints and nothing would happen. Maybe it was our folks and maybe it wasn't, but, you know, that was really difficult to determine (Author Interview with Participant 10:3).

The campus clearly needed to change, and there were certainly issues on campus that could motivate a lot of people, but the biggest obstacle to growing the labor union was that socially, people didn't really see joining the labor union on campus as an acceptable or capable way of changing circumstances on campus. When I interviewed a different former union president that was around in those early years, the same person who said that organizing at the University was like alchemy, he described the way different member's actions were received by the administration with,

Of just like nobody, like everybody's like, what the fuck are you doing? Like, we don't do that here. So, just like the psychic weight of that, the cognitive dissonance of like, this is not how you're supposed to behave. You're disrupting some kind of decorum or you're acting out of your role or like, who are you to do this (Author Interview with Participant 1:13).

It wasn't normal to be holding rallies, picketing along Cumberland, and organizing worker testimonials (Author Interview with Participant 1). It was legal for public sector employees to be a part of labor unions, but the University of Tennessee didn't have a history of union participation to make this feel more normal, and because of the right-to-work law's erosion of union power in the South, these union efforts were seen as unnatural. Returning to the idea of workplaces being made up of social ecosystems within structured environments made up of people's efforts, this prevailing attitude about what was normal on campus could be understood as a socially hegemonic tendency of the time at the University. It wasn't normal to publicly acknowledge the issues that people were facing on campus, or to get the press involved in talking about those issues, or for multiple people to demand for those issues to change as a labor union.

Different types of people weren't on board with UCW's early activity for different reasons. People in the University Administration tried to put an end to these organizing efforts by having private conversations with union members, because the worker agitation that members were doing was annoying and was an obstacle in university policy running smoothly. Some staff or faculty employees wanted to wait until official recognition before joining the labor union or didn't want to join in the first place because they didn't want to "rock the boat" at work with their supervisors (Author Interview with Participant 1). But for the union members, their biggest issue on campus, among all the different working conditions, was that they needed to build a labor union so that they could have an organization that was theirs and accountable to them (Author Interview with Participant 1:3).

Growing the labor union was a difficult task. There were thousands of employees at the University of Tennessee and there were workers actively being outsourced. Issues and reasons for joining were rampant, but that didn't necessary amount to a person's commitment to join. To join the labor union, people had to be willing to write their bank account info along with other personal information to pay membership dues. For some people, like those in the social sciences or those that already had a good relationship with labor unions in the past, this decision to join could have been very easy. These people may have been activists at the time or had been a part of labor unions in different parts of the US. Activists or people who had already been in a union, though, didn't make up the majority of workers on campus at the time, and they still don't. People giving out their bank account info to someone they just met and paying memberships dues to an

organization that seemed unnatural at the University made joining the labor union an incredible commitment with a lot of gravity.

Since the University of Tennessee is an environment filled with so many workers, it wasn't enough for just the activists and justice-minded folks to join, because winning campaigns without contracts needed people pressure, and people pressure meant many people being on board. This meant that the people on campus who union members hadn't met yet or had different political views were some of the most important workers to join, because the labor union would only be able to create people power by bringing all kinds of people on board, regardless of their political affiliation.

Knowing that there was no legal path to recognition (Author Interview with Participant 1:4), the labor union understood that it could still build an organization, and once it had affiliated with the Communication Workers of America in 2003, it had the support to do so. A few years before UCW's affiliation with CWA, members of the Progressive Student Alliance had attended an AFL-CIO organizing workshop over the summer and had gone on to distill the organizing methods that they learned into a script that union members could use to talk to their coworkers about joining the labor union (Author Interview with Participant 1). These methods, along with those from CWA's previous organizing efforts at Texas Tech decades before, were taken on by this organization to grow. Because of their affiliation with CWA, they were also able to hire a staff organizer on a funding line that was meant to be paid 75% by CWA and 25% by the UCW.

Some members of PSA would go on to have a closer relationship to UCW, and became staff organizers, while some UCW member leaders went on join the elected board of UCW, serving in positions like treasurers, job class representatives, or chapter presidents. Because of its affiliation with the Communication Workers of America and the staff organizer that CWA was now partly paying for, there was a timely pressure to grow the organization beyond just the 26 members that were already a part of it. It needed to become an organization of hundreds of members on campus, and the original members felt that growing the organization to that level would make winning campaigns for change on campus even more possible (Author Interview with Participant 1). Not long after affiliation with CWA and more campaign wins at the University of Tennessee - Knoxville, workers at different public universities in Tennessee decided to start their own UCW chapters to win changes on their campuses. Organizers started spending time at these different campuses, and this transition made UCW become a statewide organization. The University of Tennessee – Chattanooga, the University of Memphis, UT Martin, and the UT Health Science Center in Memphis are among the institutions that created their own UCW chapters before 2010 (UCWTN). The UCW website details the history of this transition, showing how the organization started to take on campaigns aimed at the state legislature, with members learning how to write bills and get them sponsored by different representatives in the legislature. This transition led to the creation of United Campus Workers' yearly Lobby Day at the state capitol during the legislative session, where union members across different campaigns organize their time in teams and speak with their state representatives about bills they support and oppose. United

Campus Workers consistently won raises at the state level until the financial crisis in 2008. By 2010, United Campus Workers numbered more than 1000 members statewide (UCWTN).

With the arrival of Vice Chancellor Dave Irvin to Facilities Services in 2011, former Chancellor Jimmy Cheek eventually brought campus custodians back in house, halting the outsourcing of those workers that had been going on since the 1990s (Author Interview with Participant 10:2). One interview participant, a worker in Facility Services for over 20 years, believed that this outcome was possibly partly because of the pressure that the labor union had been building on campus over issues of custodial pay for years (Author Interview with Participant 10:12). This pressure, along with the larger union density that had been built, led United Campus Workers to be notified early on about former Governor Haslam's plan to outsource thousands of facilities workers across the public colleges and universities in 2015. What followed was a 27-month statewide campaign that went on from early 2015 to late 2017 to stop the outsourcing of those workers. Since United Campus Workers had gone statewide in the dozen years before this and had already developed a relationship to the state legislature, the organization was in a unique position to fight this campaign. With the outsourcing outlined to occur at several public campuses, UCW chapters at the University of Tennessee - Knoxville, the University of Memphis, Middle Tennessee State University, and the University of Tennessee - Chattanooga, along with others, were all able to coordinate their efforts to oppose outsourcing on their campuses and at the state level.

After an interview with a former staff organizer that had worked for UCW during the fight against outsourcing, she showed me a video from Lobby Day in March 2016 where United Campus Workers had turned their 6,000-signature petition to stop outsourcing into a seemingly 30-foot-long scroll with the name of every person in opposition, all spread across the floor of the state capitol (Author Interview with Participant 5). Like the process by which the labor union had to grow by recruiting unlikely or politically ambiguous members, the United Campus Workers created resistance to outsourcing among members of the state legislature by moving local district representatives on the issue, many of whom were Republican. Although they didn't agree on a host of issues, union members communicated to their representatives that they and their coworkers would lose their jobs, and it would be those same people that would vote differently if their representatives accepted outsourcing. After more than two years of fighting outsourcing, campaign pressures and Bill Haslam's statement that campuses could opt-out of the outsourcing agreement led then-UTK Chancellor Beverly Davenport to do so, with other public universities deciding to do so the same. Among union members, it's believed that UT-Knoxville's opting out was especially important in the victory against outsourcing, because UTK was seen as the largest piece of the contract for the outsourcing corporations.

United Campus Workers' victory against outsourcing in 2017 changed the level of influence of the organization (Author Interview with Participant 5:4) and it showed members that they could wield a great deal of power even without the right to collectively bargain. The depth and specificity of this two-year campaign also meant that

some job class issues surrounding pay or contracts weren't taken on as campaigns in this time (Author Interview with Participant 7:5). A former staff organizer who started working full-time for UCW after outsourcing but participated on that campaign as a student explains,

And initially it was kind of like, because we had been in this outsourcing campaign with facilities workers for so long, there wasn't an active campaign around faculty issues either tenure track and there was nothing super active at UT around non-tenure track issues. We had done an adjunct united campaign statewide, but UT doesn't have any adjuncts - like that specific title. So, that didn't quite take off at UT and it wasn't quite suited to the things that people were facing at UT (Author Interview with Participant 7:5).

In 2018, United Campus Workers at UT - Knoxville started organizing job class committees to fight job specific campaigns, with lecturers and graduate students seeing victories within those campaigns over the past few years. Since lecturers and graduate students are the bulk of the member participants I interviewed for this project, I will be covering what they make of their experiences in a different chapter later in this work. What follows is an explanation of the organization as it currently exists, and how people in different roles work together to develop the organization on campus.

Membership and Staffing of the Organization

As United Campus Workers developed as an organization, so too did the roles of people within the labor union. Between 2000 and 2003, members of UCW grew the organization enough for it become affiliated with CWA, and after affiliation, they were able to hire a paid staff organizer whose job it was to help facilitate the growth of the organization. Members' dues contributions created a pool of money that could pay for

campaign materials and supplies, event speakers, food expenses, shuttles to the state capitol, and a portion of the staff organizer's salary. Because CWA paid for the other 75% of the organizer's salary, there was a large incentive for the labor union to grow, and it could reflect poorly on both the paid organizer and the labor union if the person being paid to sign up people wasn't doing so. CWA receives a small portion of a UCW member's dues, meaning that CWA had a vested interest in the growth of the organization, while United Campus Workers had that same interest, because that growth could also mean more people being on board for campaigns, creating a larger distribution of effort and greater union density at the University.

As it stands, the labor union is made of workers who have committed their time and their money to the organization as members. Presently, there are over 1,000 union members at UT- Knoxville, and over 2,000 members across the state of Tennessee. There are only a handful of paid full-time and part-time staff organizers in Tennessee, so the ratio from members to staff organizer is fairly large. Since two of the union's central purposes are to win changes on campus and grow the organization at the university, members and organizers support those purposes together, but in different ways. What follows is an examination of the differences of those roles, how they connect with one another, and how they're formed.

Members

Because of the laws limiting unions in the public sector, workers are only able to join the union if they've heard about it or have been asked to; because of the lack of a

negotiated contract with the University, the labor union isn't able to be a formal piece of a new employee's onboarding at the University. A union form or dues-check off text box aren't a part of a new employee's introductory materials distributed by the University, although they are at other workplaces with labor unions in the United States. Among the union members that I interviewed for this project, some of them joined because a union member or staff organizer mentioned the labor union at a department event or organizational meeting; only a few members learned about it through their own investigation of whether there was a labor union on campus. Interestingly, many of them explain that they joined when they first got to UT or within their first week of work, instead of joining after a period where the issues they eventually encountered motivated them to join. One union member, a lecturer who joined during outsourcing, recounts what motivated them to join the labor union here:

I finished my dissertation and I was gonna get hired on full-time cause I'd been part-time. And yeah, I got hired and I saw how much they were gonna pay me for a degree that they said was so important and that they would hold up as so important that they would, and other universities around the world would, profess me in front of thousands of undergraduates and their families and they would put the ceremonial hood on me and make me wear a fancy little hat. And everyone would take pictures and people would travel for long distances and your name would be in a program in front of thousands of people and then they would reward that with a job that said that wasn't worth anything (Author Interview with Participant 4:5).

When I asked a different union member what it was about the first interaction with union members in meetings or interactions with a staff organizer that motivated him to participate in the labor union, he explained,

Well, honestly, it wasn't really about the meetings. I was ready to go. The meeting was just a place for me to go. Like right where like I was kinda like a missile. I'm like, just fucking aim. Just aim me. Like I'll go. And so, for me it was already, it was inherent. So, the meeting was just sort of strategy. Like, where are you gonna send me? That's it (Author Interview with Participant 8:9).

People may join the labor union because they know that the work they're doing is worth more than the pay they're getting, or because they see their coworkers putting so much effort into a campaign for their job class that they become moved to participate. One member explained, "I'm just like, my brothers and sisters, if they're working like that, I gotta be at least matching it. Right?" (Author Interview with Participant 8:5). Throughout my years in the labor union, I frequently heard a similar refrain to this one, especially among non-tenure track members involved in the faculty senate.

Leadership identification is a strategy where organizers or workers attempt to identify the workers who lead their departments outside of management, in the sense that they're the person who other people look to for advice or help, or the person who successfully turns out their coworkers to events outside of work like happy hours or community events (McAlevey 2016:13). Sometimes workplace leaders can just be employees that really care about their work and are able to influence others to care the same way. In a union election setting, where a majority or supermajority (over 60% of workers) of workers is needed to win the election of whether that workplace will form a union, organizers and hopeful employees must identify these leaders, because their opinions on the election may hold a lot of sway over their coworkers. Some workplace leaders may side with the bosses and tell their coworkers to vote against the election,

while other leaders may give their approval and move those that follow them to vote for the union.

Although there are no union elections in the context of United Campus Workers, organizers and union members still deploy this strategy to think about who they want to join the labor union over the course of a campaign, so that their influence as members in their workplace and in the union can result in a stronger committee and campaign.

Recruiting just about anybody is important to growing the labor union. But it can be really significant to recruit leaders identified in this way, because the activist oriented and justice-minded folks that are more likely to join may also alienate their coworkers in how they talk about issues on campus, so it's good to also recruit members that are already good at communicating with others in their department. Along with leadership identification, there is also leadership development, and in United Campus Workers, this looks like organizers and members attempting to develop their coworkers into members able to support campaigns in their specific departments or in their job class. Staff organizers hold monthly trainings for members to learn how to facilitate meetings, how to have structured organizing conversations with their coworkers, and how to send mass communications to members of the labor union.

All of these subjects are skills that the organizer knows and uses very regularly, but members taking on those skills as their own and using them accordingly also develops the organization. Training and leadership development can also look like staff organizers accompanying members through their department, talking together with the

member's coworkers about the issues they're facing on campus and what it would look like for those things to change. Reflecting on her experience developing other members, one current staff organizer who was once a member herself explained,

I try to still teach people all the skills that I learned that changed my life. So, like all the ones that I already mentioned that are like organizing conversations, charting campaign training, etc. But I think that some of it is just tied up in the relationships you have with people and there's no, oh, I'm gonna sit down and train you on this thing. It's like you train people through working together over time, or you teach people through working together over time (Author Interview with Participant 3:3).

This leadership development is what may lead some members to take on positions of leadership within the organization, with some members feeling more comfortable to step up and lead as committee co-chairs, chapter vice presidents, or representatives on the elected board of the statewide labor union after they've spent time participating in the labor union and taking personal ownership over the organization.

The Progressive Student Alliance and United Campus Workers

When I became a member of United Campus Workers, I was still a member of the Progressive Student Alliance and in the leadership of that organization. Although I had already been a part of PSA for two years, I knew very little about its history or relationship to United Campus Workers. One day, I met with someone who had been in PSA for around seven years, and he gave me a lot of older documents from the organization's early days. It was through this interaction and a few others that I began to understand that more than a handful of people had started out in the Progressive Student Alliance as undergraduates, had gotten caught up in the local labor movement through

United Campus Workers or Jobs with Justice, and then had found a job in that labor movement, either moving on to work for United Campus Workers or for the Central Labor Council. Some people, though, just went on to be union members.

I noticed that my story was beginning to be quite similar to that of other people who had been a part of these same circles, and since I was also beginning to think about the social reproduction of organizations (which was the original idea for this thesis), I started to characterize the relationship between the two organizations as a type of social pipeline, where people could be facilitated through PSA as undergraduates to eventually become rank and file members or organizers within United Campus Workers or the labor movement in Tennessee. Five of my interview participants had experienced this transition between the two organizations, to varying degrees, and I can think of at least four other people that I didn't interview for which this is the case. In my view, I believed this to be a purposeful transition, as a way for these labor organizations to develop their membership base and leadership. I felt that United Campus Workers had become so capable in its twenty-year life that this type of pipeline had become some type of recurring social process now integral to the organization.

Once I started this project and got more involved in trying to organize on campus, I learned that although this transitional relationship between the two organizations was very real, there wasn't necessarily any automated social processes that purposefully developed members between the two. This union isn't developed enough bureaucratically to take on a life of its own in that way. Still, the number of people that experienced that

transition is worth noting, and I feel that it is more so representative of students in PSA having a relationship to UCW as campaigns are happening, and that type of social diffusion causing some students to become enchanted with the labor movement. For two interview participants that had been a part of PSA as undergraduate students, they name the fight against outsourcing and the work that the two organizations were doing together on campus as what led them to want to join the labor union (Author Interview with Participant 7; Author Interview with Participant 9). I'm sure that the undergraduate students in PSA in the early years of UCW joined the labor union for similar reasons.

Although many people transitioned between the two organizations, it was still very useful for PSA to represent the role of students in the campus labor movement, because students were able to reserve rooms for UCW meetings on campus, whereas the labor union could not (Author Interview with Participant 10:13). Since students were paying to be at the UT-Knoxville, they were stakeholders at UT in ways that campus workers were not, which as a dynamic was useful in UCW's early years throughout campaigns because of the appeals students could make for funding higher education through raises and better working conditions for campus workers.

Staff Organizers

The performance and function of the staff organizer role in the labor union can be complicated. The nature of their job as an organizer out on campus talking to people means that they may be one of the most notable union-related personnel on campus, possibly shifting the perspective on the union held by workers towards the organizer

instead of the members, and since it's the organizer's job to support the labor union by have an active presence on campus, it's easy for the idea that the staff organizer exists as the labor union in a total sense to be disseminated on campus. This can reflect the larger idea present in the United States that unions are a service that members pay for when they need something or when they're in trouble; here at UT, that type of characterization isn't helpful because it's union members' participation that create the people pressure to win campaigns, and United Campus Workers as a labor union lacks the negotiated contract with the University to be able to address grievances in the "service" way described. Staff organizers are not meant to be the voices talking to management in member meetings about working conditions, because doing so propels the idea that the labor union is a third party beyond the workers on campus, where members' interests are represented by a person being paid by the labor union, instead of members representing their interests themselves.

The spectrum for what staff organizers should and shouldn't be doing in regards to more public participation is something that was figured out over time. One staff organizer remarked that they participated in certain events in ways that they wouldn't do so now, like giving speeches at rallies and testifying in front of the state legislature as a staff organizer (Author Interview with Participant 6). With a large number of staff organizers being former union members that decided to take on the role as staff, including the person mentioned above, it makes sense for these gray areas between role participation to be a work in progress.

Reflecting on her time as a member and staff organizer, the same interview participant as the one mentioned in the previous paragraph explained that she didn't expect how much of her role as staff would be focused on facilitating and teaching others, and that she didn't start teaching others soon enough (Author Interview with Participant 6:5). On a certain level, it's good for staff organizers to make themselves replaceable in their role by developing other members to have their skillset, because doing so will also develop the capacity that the labor union has to fight campaigns. Further, if union members take on some of the skills that the organizer uses to grow the organization on campus, then members can work at systematically growing the organization on their own, allowing the staff organizer to focus on specific things like individual worker grievances in their departments or work on other campuses.

At the beginning of my second year as a union member, the staff organizer at UT and I were helping members in discriminatory work environments file complaints with UT Human Resources and the Office of Equity and Diversity at UT. I don't believe we would have been able to spend so much time doing that if the UTK chapter wasn't as developed as it was at the time, with the expression and participation of United Campus Workers as an organization being so beyond just the staff organizer. The work that we did early that semester led to a meeting between campus custodians and the chancellor about discriminatory practices, resulting in some changes in that department. This meant that the organizing that members and staff were able to do around a specific issue led to changes that reverberated back into the organization and the workplace.

I raise this case as an important example in this relationship because the UCW growth project that CWA has taken on since 2018 in southern states has looked like a few interested workers and a staff organizer in the southern region trying to begin chapters at universities with no union members. This means that in this situation, staff organizers are trying to get members on board to the idea of the union and what UCW members in other states have done to grow their organization, so that this new chapter can also begin to grow. At this stage, the labor union is not a normal part of campus and members may not be equipped in the skills it takes to build and maintain the organization, so the staff organizer may be teaching members skills while also attempting to recruit workers on campus. This proportion, though, is meant to shift so that members take on their role in the organization, making the organizer more able to shift on to other campuses or follow leads among different workers, once members have started talking to people in their departments about a campaign or the new labor union that they've started. The reproduction of the organization between staff organizers and union members is always in flux because members' time is always limited, and staff organizers are paid to organize. As the organization develops, so too does the ability of the labor union to take on campaigns around larger issues on campus. When more people talk to their coworkers about joining the labor union and the changes that they want to see on campus, the more possible it is that campaigns can take hold.

The UCW Model of Recruitment

There may be an issue on campus that a lot of people can get behind, but those people don't just appear out of nowhere, either because they may not even know about

the issue, or they don't feel confident enough to go out and talk about it in public.

Whatever the case may be, those people still work at the university, so organizers and members can go find them and talk to them.

The time of both organizers and union members is very precious. With organizers being paid to support the financial sustainability of the organization by facilitating its growth among members (Author Interview with Participant 6:6), unsuccessful days or weeks on the field can be a heavy weight. Members, on the other hand, are often directly affected by the issues that started the campaign they're talking to their coworkers about and face these issues while they organize on campus. One interview participant that was present in the early years of United Campus Workers went into more detail on this with,

[Facing rejection] took a toll on people, people whose lives were already like mired in crisis, right? Because of the way class and race works, right? Like they were like facing housing insecurity and like dysfunctional home relationships and like sometimes people were just fucking hungry, right? Like working full-time for the state and qualifying for food stamps and, it's just the end of the month and in between pay days and they're gonna eat that one meal a day. That was the case for a lot of people in - at least in the dorms (Author Interview with Participant 1:13).

These two currents led United Campus Workers to develop a systematic and structured organizing script for talking to workers on campus, because conversations being structured meant that they were teachable, and members could get better at them through practice (Author Interview with Participant 1). Over the course of the conversation, the structured steps build up one another, attempting to agitate workers around the issues they and others are facing enough for them to be motivated to join the union and support campaigns. Using the structured organizing conversation strategy

wasn't a perfect way to get others join; most conversations still ended in rejection, because the union was seen as unnatural at the university, and it was difficult for people to be trusting of others they had only just met. Still, the organizing steps were important to follow, because they were the tested distillation of decades of CWA's organizing efforts in a similar setting in Texas, and they could still motivate people to join (Author Interview with Participant 1:8).

What follows is a description of the structured organizing conversation as it takes place. The first organizing step is focused on introductions and getting to know the worker. Kindly, the person starting the conversation introduces themselves and the labor union on campus, and then asks the person if they have a minute to talk. A lot of conversations finish here, depending on the work that the person is doing on campus. If they do have time to talk, the organizer or union member then asks what work they do at UT and how long they've been working at the university. This information serves to better understand the worker's experiences, and for the union-related person to better locate the person within broader campaigns or department struggles happening at the University based on their responses.

Once the union-related person knows more about them, they move into talking about workplace issues and what it's like to do their job on campus, or what made them want to start working at UT-Knoxville. People can be really hesitant to talk about issues that they're facing at their job, so it helps to ask them questions that are partly hypothetical, like "if you were president, if you had the power to change something, what

would it be?” (Author Interview with Participant 1:6). This is another point where the conversation may come to an end, because people may not feel comfortable to talk about what their work is like *while they’re working*. Some of the workers I’ve spoken to have answered questions about workplace issues with a whisper or glanced at other parts of the room before giving a reply. Others don’t really go into details and instead say that there’s nothing about their workplace that they would want to change. The purpose of this step in the conversation is for the worker to register their issues, and how what they may be facing at work contradicts what made them want to work here in the first place, so the conversation might not be going anywhere if they aren’t really willing to talk.

If the worker does start talking about the issues that they’re facing in their workplace, then it’s the organizer or union member’s role to listen and ask questions about what they’re going through, rather than speak so much that the worker’s responses get drowned out. Depending on the issues that they mention, the instigator can ask if they’ve talked to their coworkers about it, or if they’ve brought it up to their department head or head supervisor. People may respond by saying that they have, but nothing’s changed, or that the issue is just a part of the job. This organizing step is focused on connecting people with a vision for change. If the issues that they mention are something that members of the labor union are taking on as a part of a campaign, then here is where the organizer or union member communicates that what this person is facing is something that other people on campus are going through and trying to change. It can also be good to share stories of other campaign victories at the university, like the recent victories for

lecturers and graduate students, or the raising of the minimum wage at the university, so that it becomes clearer that issues on campus *can* really change.

Throughout the whole conversation up to this point, the union-related person speaking with the worker is thinking whether this person will join. The conversation may have become long, with the worker being willing to talk to about the changes that they'd like to see on campus or what they're going through in their department; it could be short, because the worker may not seem interested in talking. In the case of the latter, the union-related person may feel that it may be better to not ask the person to join and instead move on to another office or building. At some points it may make sense to move on, especially if the person is saying offensive things or clearly being anti-union, but when people only seem ambiguous or reserved in their demeanor, it's still good to ask. People can be very surprising (Author Interview with Participant 3), and from an organizational perspective, union-related personnel can't really know how people feel about the labor union until they have been asked (Author Interview with Participant 1). This information is important to feed back into campaigns because some people that are not willing to join may still be interested in signing and sharing a petition to raise pay and could be invited to the next campaign meeting. If this person has a friend or coworker in the labor union, it could be better for that person to make the ask again later in time, maybe once the petition has gotten more signatures or after union members have spoken with the administration about the campaign.

Asking a person to join the labor union is the largest step in the organizing conversation. With all the other structured steps building upon one another so that this ask will lead to a commitment to join, the significance of the asking step cannot be overstated. It's good to be forward and direct in posing this question, so that the person being asked really has to consider it. During my time in the labor union, I've noticed myself and others attempt to dull the way that this question is asked, so that the worker can feel more comfortable shirking the commitment to join. This could look like a union-related person handing the worker a flyer and saying that if they're interested in joining the labor union, they could just scan the QR code on the flyer to join online, without making the ask to join at all. People may dull the way that they make the ask because they want to avoid some of the uncomfortable tension that comes with asking someone to make a commitment, or because they don't necessarily want to deal with rejection. Given that these organizing conversations have around 1/10th of a chance of being successful in the best circumstances (Author Interview with Participant 1:7), it's still more worthwhile to ask than to foreclose the possibility of a person joining, since people in the UCW context really only join if they've been asked to.

Once the ask to join has been made, the union member or organizer must pause and allow the person being asked to consider it, for as much time as it takes for them to give a response. Many of the staff organizers that I've worked with and interviewed emphasize the importance of this question to people, because it may be the first time that someone has ever made a personal and political decision like this. One former staff organizer I interviewed, a student who started out in PSA and went on to work full-time

for UCW after they graduated, explained the importance of this moment with this comment:

I'd say like, approach it with the gravity it deserves because you might be talking to someone who's been working, they might be 50 years old, they've been working since they were 18, they've been working for 30, 40, 50 years and they have never in their entire working life been given an opportunity to participate in like shaping the structures of their workplace (Author Interview with Participant 7:13).

It's important to notice one's own composure and demeanor over the course of the conversation, but especially at this point specifically, because so much of a person's commitment to join rests on whether all the different aspects of the interaction moved someone to want to join. To illustrate a union-related person's acknowledgement of their demeanor, I include this comment from a former member and organizer:

It's useful to have a clipboard, it's useful to hand them the clipboard and then like my hands are like maybe behind my back, I'm standing like this, or I'm not trying to take that clipboard back from them, right? They're gonna hold onto that clipboard. Um, until they filled it out. And I'm cool. My hands could be partially in my pockets. I'm still friendly, right? I'm ready to engage in any like questions they may have, I'm gonna watch them fill it [the membership signup form] out (Author Interview with Participant 1:7).

Often, potential members who have committed to join will get to the section of the sign-up forms that asks them to include their bank account information and then walk back their commitment to join or say that they want to fill it out at home and return it later. In cases like these, it's unlikely for the person to follow through with their commitment to join, because the conversational window that may motivate people to join has now closed. If a person doesn't end up joining on their own time like they said they would, they may be flagged for a follow up so they can be asked again later. These

follow ups may make sense to be done by union members that the person works with in case that person was hesitant to join because they didn't feel comfortable giving their personal information to a stranger.

Having illustrated how difficult it can be to get workers to join the labor union, it can seem unusual or incredible for the labor union on campus and across the state to be as large as it is. Growing the labor union in those early years was understood to be a numbers game, with there only being hundreds of people joining if hundreds of people were asking (Author Interview with Participant 1:8), and people only really joining if there was a campaign that could motivate them to (Author Interview with Participant 6:6).

My development as a union member and staff organizer was filled with dozens of conversations where I struggled with being confident and also following the organizing steps. Often, I would introduce myself and my relationship to the labor union, rush through identifying the other person's relationship to UT, and then ask them to join. For this reason, it was helpful for me to spend a lot of time accompanying other members and staff organizers on campus where we would talk to people in pairs. Throughout this period, I noticed that the setting and social dynamics where the conversation took place were as important as the conversation itself. On one occasion, a staff organizer and I were speaking to a group of three custodians in the Student Union, and one of them, a woman who had been working at UT for a long time, was really willing to share the issues she was facing at work. The conversation had lasted about ten minutes, and once we felt that

enough ground had been covered to make the ask to them about joining the union and participating in a campaign for better pay, one of them replied that they wouldn't join but they'd be willing to come to campaign rallies. This comment had a palpable impact on the conversation, because the other two custodians didn't want to join either after that, even though one of them had really acknowledged how badly they wanted to their work situation to change over the course of the interaction.

During a three-day organizing effort with other UCW organizers at the University of Georgia, an organizer and I approached a group of three Classics graduate students and asked them if they knew about the labor union on campus. One of them spoke up and said they hadn't but he was interested in joining; all three graduate students ended up joining that day and didn't have any issues filling out the form and write down their bank account information. These two examples in themselves may be representative of what I mentioned earlier in the paper about leadership identification, with people in both examples following what one of their coworkers decided to do.

The depth of the organizing conversation plainly lays out the effort that people need to make to get someone to join United Campus Workers, and I believe it illustrates the impact that the laws governing public sector unions in Tennessee have made. Because of a lack of bargaining power and right-to-work, there can be a labor struggle taking place at UT surrounding pay or working conditions that affects many people, but because of the legal context, UT employees have a choice in whether they want to support their coworkers. Detailing this dynamic, a former staff organizer explains,

It's not something that you just opt in or opt out. Like you can't be neutral in this situation. There is a struggle going on in your workplace, your work, your coworkers are fighting for your rights and to try to make it better and to have a voice, and either you're with them or you're not with them. Like either you're part of that struggle or you're opposing it. Um, it's not like, oh, it's not your cup of tea to get involved. It's like, it's actually is a binary choice. You're a part of the struggle or you're opposing the struggle (Author Interview with Participant 7:8).

I don't explain things in this way to cast blame on anybody at the University who hasn't yet joined the labor union; there can be a multitude of reasons for why someone hasn't joined, many of which have to do with money and time. Instead, I include this description to show the difference that these laws have made in increasing the obstacles that union members face while organizing, and how central union struggles once were to work in America, versus how separate they now seem. In the following chapter, I illustrate how union members relate to their coworkers at the University of Tennessee throughout campaigns and the lengths that they go to change people's feelings about the work that they do at the University.

CHAPTER THREE

Preface

This section details the strategies that members employ within committees that are trying to win campaigns on campus. This section isn't meant to communicate that what's described here is all that members do. There's a lot of work that union members do outside of committees and even campaigns, like drafting bills for the state legislature, planning yearly events, or moving the labor union as an organization through the elected board. Although that work is very important to the life of the labor union, it's not included here or in the paper itself, because my interview process didn't include questions that addressed these topics, and instead focused on people within campaigns and the labor union.

Committees in Campaigns

As has been outlined over the course of the paper, union members win changes by the way that they move employees to support and participate in campaigns around issues or conditions that people are facing. In a different context where these workers could collectively bargain, there would first be an election where workers vote on whether they want their workplace to have a union. During this period, depending on how quickly the movement for unionization becomes public, management may try to hire consultants or legal firms that specialize in union busting so that the union won't be able to win their election. If the workers win their election, then they enter a period where they can start negotiating a contract and eventually take the company to the bargaining table; companies may continue to union-bust during this period in an attempt to shift the

outcomes of these negotiations (Lawlor and McAlevey 2023), or simply refuse to go to the bargaining table at all by disputing the results of the election. At the end of this period, negotiations can result in a legally binding contract that forces companies to operate in a particular way regarding the interests of the workers and the new union. Within the context of United Campus Workers, this institutional process doesn't exist; nevertheless, union members attempt to mimic and improvise this process by the way that they rearticulate employees in the workplace structure they are a part of. The following sections outline the different ways that members have done this to win campaigns, and what these members make of their experiences during this time.

Of the union members that I interviewed for this project, the majority of them are or were at one point graduate students or lecturers. In the years after the outsourcing victory in 2017, the labor union developed committees around job classes so that they could fight for job specific changes on campus. The Graduate Workers Organizing Committee (GWOC) and the Non-Tenure Track (NTT) Committee of the labor union belong to graduate students and lecturers, respectively. Graduate workers within UCW across the state started a campaign for higher pay before the fight for outsourcing in 2015, but their shared campaigns efforts around their job class dissipated at the beginning of the outsourcing campaign (Author Interview with Participant 6:2). Fall 2018 stands out among participants' responses as the period where lecturers started organizing for changes in pay and contracts within the NTT committee. Since then and to this day, the provost would hold Coffee and Conversation events where UT employees could come speak with the provost about anything; lecturer members started going to these meetings

to talk to the provost about raising pay (Author Interview with Participant 8). Although these interactions between union members and the administration at UT were clearly not negotiations, they were still moments where organized workers were able to speak with the people who had the power to make important decisions on campus.

In that same period between Fall 2018 and Spring 2019, a member of the graduate committee attended a training held by the UCW to learn how to file a FOIA request about UT, eventually filing one to learn what graduate assistants and associates were being paid at the University (Author Interview with Participant 9:2). Most of the information on the salaries of staff, faculty, and administrators is accessible to the public, but the pay of graduate assistants and associates at the University of Tennessee is not. The information that this request provided outlined the reasons for graduate workers to take on a campaign in 2019 for the removal of mandatory fees for graduate assistants and associates at the University of Tennessee – Knoxville; with many graduate workers at the university being paid between \$12,000 and \$18,000 on their contracts, and international students being legally barred from working at other places because of the nature of their work visas, the nearly \$2,000 that graduate workers had to pay back to the university was a tough load to bare.

Throughout this period, union members in both the NTT Committee and GWOC started *charting* out their departments. Charting is a campaign tactic where union members or pre-union workers (in the cases of union elections) write the names of every job class employee in their department that their committee's campaign corresponds to, so that they can keep track of how their coworkers react to the campaign as it develops

(McAlevey 2016). Over the course of the campaign, as workers in charted departments signed campaign petitions, joined the labor union, and attended campaign rallies, their names would become highlighted and stickered to show each action the person had taken in the campaign. This information was crucial because it illustrated the extent of union density and department support for campaigns, showing how close or how far the campaign was from winning a majority of workers over on the issue.

While answering a question I asked about how UCW's legal context impacted campaigns, one union member I interviewed, a lecturer and member of the NTT committee said,

That's why we do these petitions to show like a majority of this group is upset about X and now it's time to talk about X rather than, like, me personally, I'm upset and you have to address my issue. Right? Like obviously they wanna dismiss that as fast as humanly possible, but when we say like, oh, a majority of lecturers are asking for this, that's where we know it's a weighty thing (Author Interview with Participant 2:5).

Although petitions were the right tool to show support of campaigns on campus, they could also fall under heavy scrutiny by the administration if people beyond lecturers had signed a petition. Detailing this dynamic, the same member emphasized,

And that is something we learned in that first campaign in 2019 because we did a petition, but we let everyone and their literal mother sign it. So, we had thousands of signatures. But then when we went to the table they asked like, well, how many are lecturers? And we didn't have that data, right? We were so proud of this big number we had, but we hadn't broken it down to like, okay, who's an actual lecturer making this ask? And that's where we learned, oh, we need a majority petition where we're tracking who has signed, making sure we get to 50%. You know, because like I said, if it's just a small group or just one department, right,

then they're gonna treat it differently rather than yeah, we're all asking for this (Author Interview with Participant 2:5)

Some campaigns, like those to raise the living wage on campus, make sense to be signed by all UT employees and community members in Knoxville, but some committees may want to clearly limit their petition around job classes, like it's mentioned above. The results of a descriptive workplace chart could also show which department employees seem interested in participating more in the labor union; those that were showing deep support for campaigns could be asked to attend committee meetings and UCW skill trainings so that they could become strong union members in their departments.

Usually, campaigns led by UCW members follow a strategy of pressure escalation, where the efforts made by members throughout a campaign change and become more ambitious the more that people are won over to the issue, rather than starting with the most ambitious action first. This strategy is used frequently by unions because it's good to build the public and workplace social buy-in of people slowly over time than to potentially risk splitting members on workplace issues by doing an action in the workplace that a majority weren't prepared for (Bradbury, Brenner, and Slaughter 2016), like starting a campaign with an effort to strike. Further, if a union jumps the proverbial shark too early, it may be easier for management to dismiss union efforts as being against the interests of company employees. This strategy of pressure escalation is very important to United Campus Workers because it is only when union members have created an effective organizing apparatus of them and their coworkers that they are able

to win changes; if only a handful of people support pay raises, it isn't likely that anything will change.

Similar to how campaigns can communicate the coalesced voice of many workers around an issue when a majority of people in a workplace support it, the faculty and graduate senates exist as spaces where department representatives can come to a conclusion about a certain issue that people are facing on campus. Although the university administration must still act for those senates' passed resolutions to become a reality, these spaces can be very useful for campaign efforts, because the administration designates them as the correct spaces for policy discussion and employment decision-making to take place. The passing of senate resolutions can also hold a significant symbolic weight, because passed resolutions may be focused on policy changes for job classes that are neither faculty nor graduate students, signaling the senate's interest in material change for people on campus they don't represent. Over the past few years, some of the loudest voices in the faculty and graduate senates spaces have been those of department representatives that are also union members, and union members have drafted resolutions that demand the same policy changes that campaigns have at the time. The passing of senate resolutions were integral steps to several campaigns that lecturers have started to get higher raises; graduate workers passed a resolution in both the graduate and faculty senate for the removal of mandatory fees.

Campaigns usually begin as meetings where workers and union members discuss the issues that they've been hearing about on campus or the ones that they're facing. The identification of these issues can happen across different spaces on campus; one may

learn through several organizing conversations in a department that a big issue graduate students are facing is their monthly stipend. During faculty senate, someone may bring up the wage compression that have accompanied floor raises for lecturers. Union members then meet as committee to draft a petition that demands changes to the specific issue that their coworkers and other employees in their job class have raised, and once all the language looks good, they release it to other union members and all social networks that they participate in, designating either for only members of a specific job class to sign it or for it to open for anyone and everyone to sign. As the petition begins to gain traction, union members can start working with their coworkers and representatives in the graduate or faculty senate to pass resolutions that work with the campaigns they've started. How quickly a campaign moves depends on the success of members in reaching their coworkers and the efficacy of the demands that were outlined in the petition.

Once a petition has been signed by a majority of workers in the job class that the campaign is for, or once signatures have reached a truly astonishing amount like the 6,000 signatures petition for the campaign against outsourcing, union members can begin planning an event in person for workers and the public to show their support. In the campaign for the removal of mandatory for graduate assistants and associates, this event took the form of a campaign teach-in that dozens of graduate students showed up to, where union members spoke through the extent that mandatory fees impacted graduate students and people from the audience shared their experiences. This campaign is an interesting case, because the COVID-19 pandemic reached Tennessee shortly after the

teach-in; with classes and campus life going completely digital that semester, so too did the campaign.

Shortly after joining the labor union in August 2021, I was asked if I would like to support GWOC by becoming one of the co-chairs in the committee, since the former co-chair had just become a staff organizer. I said yes, and soon learned of the mandatory fees campaign, because it was still ongoing. About a year and a half had passed since the teach-in, and in that time, the faculty and graduate senate had passed the resolutions for the removal of mandatory fees, and over the summer, Chancellor Plowman had approved higher base stipends for graduate assistants and associates. Union members in the graduate committee were happy that stipends had been raised but felt that raises weren't the purpose of the campaign; graduate assistants and associates still had to pay mandatory fees to work at the university. So, GWOC decided to continue with the campaign, even though it had been a long time since any people pressure existed around the issue.

When I started out as a graduate committee co-chair, I was nervous about leading and facilitating committee meetings. I was nervous because I was barely twenty-two years old as an MA student in a space that was mainly made up of doctoral students, and because I knew very little about the campaign that we were trying to keep alive as a committee. Between September 2021 and March 2022, GWOC's focus shifted towards maintaining biweekly meetings, participating in Covid Policy campaigns that UCW was taking on among all members, and winning members in the committee space over to the strategy of pressure escalation.

That March, union members across the state of Tennessee drove to the state capitol in Nashville for the union's first in-person lobby day since the Covid-19 pandemic. Three graduate students that were participating in GWOC, me included, attended lobby day, and it was these three graduate students that spoke with Donde Plowman a week later during her Office Hours event on campus. Chancellor Plowman's Office Hours seems to be very similar to the Provost's Coffee and Conversation event that union members started attending in 2018. Once members of GWOC learned that the Chancellor was holding that event, they spent a day and a half preparing talking points about the mandatory fees campaign and planned to ask her questions about why graduate students still had to pay mandatory fees even though both senates had passed resolutions for their removal.

It wasn't until about five weeks after the meeting that graduate students heard any news about graduate fees. During a faculty senate meeting, Dean of the Graduate School Dixie Thompson explained mandatory fees for graduate students were being done away with, and graduate assistants and associates at the university would no longer need to pay them. After a nearly three-year campaign, union members had won the removal of mandatory fees.

Social tensions within committees

Campaigns are clearly a lot to keep up with and require commitment outside of any of the time that union members spend as working people at the University of Tennessee. People can lead very busy lives outside of their union work and their jobs.

As previously mentioned, some people organizing on campus may lead lives that are mired in crisis, working multiple jobs to support themselves and their families. Others may be going through breakups, divorces, or depression amid their time at UT and in United Campus Workers, limiting their participation in union spaces. The work of one's job, whether it's teaching, the pressure to publish, or the need to study, are all enough to limit a person's commitment to join the labor union, much less participate in it as a member. The birth of a new child may mean months or even years where people participate less in the organization. Not only do these currents compel union members to think deeply about their participation, but specifically during a campaign where members must plan meetings, have organizing conversations with their coworkers, and work at UT all at the same time, union members may be holding way too many things all at once. Like the role of the staff organizer who must develop the organization by teaching other members their organizing skills, union members must bring more people into the committee space so that individual members can hold less committee assignments. This process of growth and development within the committee makes it more capable. Speaking on this dynamic, one graduate worker explained,

And, the more people we bring to that top level structure, the wider the union grows, the the greater its influence and impact it can have. And so, I think every one person we bring into GWOC brings in, you know, an order of magnitude of more power into the union (Author Interview with Participant 11:7).

This process of committee growth can be easy to outline or seem simple to implement, but it's actually very difficult to successfully put into practice within committee settings. People successfully being moved to participate in committee spaces may be caused by

amazing organizing conversations that inspire them to stand with their coworkers. It could also be caused by a text-banking session where union members made a list of people that signed the petition and sent each number information on the upcoming committee meeting. Both instances require an efficiency in either skill or organization, making it difficult for committees with memberships that can quickly change to get good at either. One member that I interviewed explained that recruiting and bringing new people into the committee space was something he was good at, but a lot of those that entered the space were unwilling to take on tasks and assignments, leading to his frustration and a heavy burden on those leading the committee (Author Interview with Participant 8). Unfortunately, a campaign's success can fall on a few committed and diligent union members, and although it can be victorious, the union members leading it can still become burnt out of union work and their participation within the organization can change. Members becoming burnt out happened a lot in those first few years of the labor union during its period of serious growth, with one former union member and current organizer who was around from that time explaining,

Like in the worker side, the struggle was like, we have to constantly be developing leaders because it was a really heavy price on people. We burned through a lot of leaders because it just was really heavy and intense and life was already really hard for people (Author Interview with Participant 1:12).

Looking back at all that's described in this section of the paper, I feel that the clearest implication of what's mentioned here is that union members must become better equipped at teaching others what they know and being forthright in sharing tasks among a

wider group of people, so that the organization can become stronger and individual members can hold less at one time. Within the context of United Campus Workers, where there are no structures for it to collectively bargain, and where it would have to deal with right-to-work's impact on union dues even if it could, one can witness the true power of these laws. The difficulties that members face and the strategies they must deploy to have a voice as workers on campus are all testaments to the impact of these laws, and it is for this reason, one must bear witness to the modern wonder that this labor union is.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, I referred to the exchange that people make as workers between their bodies and their time for wages that they're paid. I believe that this paper illustrates that this exchange creates a lot of meaning, because it's this exchange that can motivate someone to join a labor union and organize with their coworkers to get their workplaces to change. All these exchanges and their meanings become bundled together in a labor union, because it's a portion of their wages that union members put into the organization to build it and make it theirs. After a certain point, whether it's a labor union having thousands of members, or when a labor union reaches a density where most workers within the workplace are a part of it, I feel that the gravity of the meaning that labor union now holds causes it to become a powerful object that can shift social circumstances. For United Campus Workers, the weight of this collective meaning within the workplace becomes the pressure that members can use to win campaigns. This union can't bargain in the state of Tennessee like other unions can, but union members can raise enough voices on campus for their demands to be something that the administration or the state legislature should acknowledge, especially in cases where members build campaigns that a majority of people on campus support.

Still, there are multiple barriers that unions face in making their visions real. However, it's the membership of public sector unions - many of which lack bargaining power across the US – that has grown immensely since the 1960s and 70s, while the membership of private sector unions has sharply declined. Historically, public sector

unions have used lobbying and appeals to the common good in funding public services as strategies to win campaigns (Slater 2016). So, although the story of United Campus Workers is unique, its strategies aren't dissimilar from what other public sector unions have been doing for decades.

I started my undergrad at UT-Knoxville in the fall of 2017. At the time, I didn't know anything about the labor union. That year, the organizational fair for undergraduate students was held outside of TRECS, and during the fair, I walked up to the PSA booth. My brother had been in the Progressive Student Alliance while he was still at UT in 2014, so I knew a little bit about the organization, but I didn't end up joining PSA until about two years later in fall 2019.

When I arrived at UT, the fight against outsourcing was still ongoing, but I hadn't heard anything about it. I spent my first few years at UT taking classes, joining student organizations, and making small talk with the workers at the dining halls or campus restaurants at the University. It wasn't until my last three years at UT, during the COVID19 pandemic, that I started to interact with and understand this other side of UT. This other side of UT, the side that one can miss as a student, was made up of people wanting their workplaces to change or for people to get the pay that they deserve. It was a world filled with people talking to their coworkers about how much of a raise they want, what statements they wanted to make to the Board of Trustees, and how much it would change their lives if they made more money as graduate students. One of my favorite memories from this period was running in the rain to a bus stop on campus so I could tell a custodian about how the custodial meeting with the Chancellor had gone.

These experiences, I believe, are representative of a world at UT that's easy to know very little about but can still mean so much for many people. As sociologists, I believe this type of investigation is one of the places that we should take on; we have the tools to illustrate different happenings and social dynamics within seemingly normal spaces, or spaces that haven't really been studied or understood in a context outside of how they seem. Although my characterization here of the work sociologists can do may sound exploitative of people and places in the same way that the social sciences has already been to people for a long time, I believe that the applied program that I was involved in for this project required me to be accountable and participatory to the organization, partly because I was a practicing and dues-paying member within it.

My orientation to sociology allowed me to look at these union members and the organization they are a part of and recognize the true magnitude of this labor union's story at UT, and the way that it makes change at the University in a way that shouldn't be possible. I recommend the applied master's program to any master's student in the sociology department because the emphasis that it places on the local community as a place of study can completely change the way one understands the city one lives in, and because it can change lives, as it has clearly changed mine.

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VITA

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