Tensions, Dilemmas, and Radical Possibility in Democratizing Teacher Unions: Stories of Two Social Justice Caucuses in New York City and Philadelphia

Chloe Asselin

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TENSIONS, DILEMMAS, AND RADICAL POSSIBILITY IN DEMOCRATIZING TEACHER UNIONS: STORIES OF TWO SOCIAL JUSTICE CAUCUSES IN NEW YORK CITY AND PHILADELPHIA

by

CHLOE ASSELIN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Chloe Asselin

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

Tensions, Dilemmas, and Radical Possibility in Democratizing Teacher Unions: Stories of Two Social Justice Caucuses in New York City and Philadelphia

by

Chloe Asselin

Advisor: Stephen Brier

In response to the defunding and privatization of public schools and the attacks on public sector unions in the United States worsening the working and learning conditions in schools, a movement of social justice caucuses is growing within teacher unions (Anyon, 2014; Fabricant & Fine, 2013; Ravitch, 2013; Chicago Teachers Union, 2012; Weiner, 2012; Compton & Weiner, 2008). This dissertation examines the internal organizing of the Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE), a social justice caucus of the United Federation of Teachers in New York City, and the Caucus of Working Educators (WE), the social justice caucus of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. Inspired by the concepts of critical bifocality (Weis & Fine, 2012) and movement-relevant theory (Bevington & Dixon, 2005), this dissertation asks: What radical possibilities and structural constraints are generated and/or illuminated by educator activists in MORE and WE? To frame the research, this dissertation examines the historical, political, economic, and social contexts in which the caucuses exist and the daily realities that they face; provides an overview of educational and union politics in New York City and Philadelphia; and analyzes the role of caucuses in unions by offering a historical overview of a few influential caucuses in labor history. Then, through the conduct and analysis of interviews with members and allies of MORE and WE and through participant observation by the author of the caucuses’ meetings and events, this study
finds that social justice caucus activists in MORE and WE have critically engaged the project of democratizing their unions. They enact democratic practices beyond the narrow electoral realm including building relationships, having difficult conversations, sustaining cultures of solidarity (Fantasia, 1988), and participating in protest activity, all while developing a sharp analysis of the larger political context in which the caucuses organize that enables educator activists to raise the consciousness of those around them. These social justice caucuses fight racism through practices that democratize their unions, and at the same time, the focus on racial justice drives the need for greater union democracy. This study also explores the internal tensions in social justice caucuses that arise as a result of the use of certain motivational frames and with the extension dilemma, which explores how expanding a group decreases the coherence of that group (Jasper, 2004). In response to crisis, MORE and WE have attempted to solve the extension dilemma by adapting their internal structures, creating spaces where they can organize in the both/and rather than either/or, and through protest activity. Instead of seeking solutions for improving public education elaborated by privatizers and mainstream policy makers, educator activists in MORE and WE challenge their business/service-style unions and education “reforms” and “reformers” in public schools by fighting for educational justice grounded in workplace power, building collective struggles, and merging labor and social movements. This analysis of organized social justice caucuses within teacher unions shows the potential of caucuses to democratize their unions while transforming public education in the United States and to hopefully revitalize a declining labor movement.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ABSTRACT** .................................................................................................................. IV  
**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** .............................................................................................. VI  
**TABLE OF CONTENTS** ............................................................................................... VIII  
**LIST OF TABLES** ........................................................................................................ XII  
**LIST OF FIGURES** ....................................................................................................... XII  
**CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION** .................................................................................... 1  
  Research Questions ......................................................................................................... 10  
  Scholarly Significance .................................................................................................... 15  
  Assumptions .................................................................................................................... 18  
  The Influence of the Black Lives Matter Movement ..................................................... 19  
  Dissertation Overview ................................................................................................... 20  
**CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK** ............................................................... 27  
  A Political Economy of Competition and Lean Production ........................................ 30  
  Attack of the Hydra ........................................................................................................ 33  
  Racialized Capitalism ..................................................................................................... 39  
  Teaching as a Female and Devalued Profession ........................................................... 44  
  Tensions in Education ..................................................................................................... 48  
    Reproduction vs. Resistance in Schooling ................................................................... 48  
    Education, a Ticket Out of Poverty? .......................................................................... 50  
    Colorblindness & Dysconscious Racism among Educators ....................................... 51  
    Educator Professionalism vs. Educator Activism ...................................................... 53  
  Tensions in Labor ............................................................................................................ 56  
    Organizational Constraints ......................................................................................... 57  
    Organizing the Unorganized ...................................................................................... 60  
    Can Labor and Social Movements Reconcile? .......................................................... 64  
    Using Strategic Dilemmas for Labor ......................................................................... 66
Using Frames ................................................................................................................................. 67

Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................ 71

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY ........................................................................................................ 74

Guided by Critical Bifocality and Movement-Relevant Theory ....................................................... 75
Reflecting on Positionality .................................................................................................................. 76
Research Design ................................................................................................................................. 78
Centering Educator Caucus Activists ............................................................................................... 79
Using Constructivist Grounded Theory and Intersectionality for Analysis ................................. 85
Valuing Feedback ............................................................................................................................... 89
Validity, Limitations, and Reflections on Treacherous Data ........................................................... 90

CHAPTER 4: URBAN CONTEXTS .................................................................................................... 94

Education “Reforms” in New York City ............................................................................................. 96
The United Federation of Teachers ..................................................................................................... 103
Underfunding and Privatization in Philadelphia .............................................................................. 108
The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers ............................................................................................ 113
A Call for an Alternative Labor Organizing Model .......................................................................... 115

CHAPTER 5: THE CAUCUS ............................................................................................................ 118

Defining Union Democracy ............................................................................................................... 120
The Reuther Caucus and One-Party Control ..................................................................................... 126
The Radical and Militant Revolutionary Union Movements ............................................................. 130
Are Radical Caucuses Agents of External Political Parties? ............................................................ 132
Unity Caucus and One-Party Rule in the United Federation of Teachers ..................................... 137
The Movement of Rank-and-File Educators: “A Positive Alternative” .......................................... 139
The Caucus of Working Educators: “Grounded in its Membership” ............................................ 142
A Possible Future for Social Justice Caucuses .................................................................................. 146

CHAPTER 6: ORGANIZING DILEMMAS ...................................................................................... 148

Experiencing Membership Meetings ............................................................................................... 148
There’s This Internal Tension ................................................................. 151
Depends on the Audience ................................................................. 156
The Extension Dilemma ....................................................................... 160
  A Big Debate About Audience .......................................................... 160
  Keep Moving Them Left ................................................................. 163
Resolving the Extension Dilemma ....................................................... 169
  Lessons from the Chicago Teachers .................................................. 175
Reflections on Strategic Dilemmas ....................................................... 177

CHAPTER 7: RACIAL JUSTICE TENSIONS .................................................. 180
The Divisive March for Eric Garner ..................................................... 180
Racial Justice ....................................................................................... 182
Points of Consensus ........................................................................... 184
Points of Contention ........................................................................... 188
It Gets Real Deep, Real Quick ............................................................. 193
The Right Side of Justice ................................................................. 195
See Opportunity in that Tension ......................................................... 196
  Fighting for a Union Creates a Bond .................................................. 205
  The Deeper Nuances of our Existence ............................................... 209
A Window for Hope in an Entrenched System .................................... 212

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUDING DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS .................. 216
A Class Struggle Approach ................................................................. 216
Consciousness Raising ....................................................................... 222
Labor and Social Movement Theory .................................................. 227
Relevance for Today’s Progressive Education Movement .................. 229
Radical Possibilities .......................................................................... 231
Further Research ................................................................................ 233

APPENDIX A: UFT CAUCUSES 1960-2014 ............................................. 235

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS .................................................. 237
LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS ........................................................................ 82
TABLE 2: URBAN CONTEXTS ................................................................................. 95

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: RESOLVING THE EXTENSION DILEMMA .............................................. 171
FIGURE 2: DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES .................................................................... 199
CHAPTER 1: Introduction

I think people want something new. People want to survive, everybody wants a pension, everybody wants a livable wage. I think we also have to bring it back to what actually makes a healthy community . . . I think there is a purpose of talking about bread and butter issues and economic issues but to actually making those connections to racism, to gender inequality, to xenophobic ideas. And maybe that’s what social justice unionism is really, is making those connections. And at a broader political analysis of what is the root of a lot of the problems in our society, which I think a lot of us would say that it’s capitalism. – Janelle, high school English teacher and member of a social justice caucus

Currently in the United States, workers face weakening protections and rights in the workplace leading to greater job insecurity and economic precarity, intense job competition, declining living standards, deskillng of work, and heightened racial polarization (Moody, 2017). The politics of privatization, austerity, and white supremacy have penetrated many aspects of working life. Simultaneously, working people encounter daily assaults on their public services and institutions, including members of public sector unions and those who labor in public schools. In the spring of 2018, educators in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, Arizona, and Colorado protested against their untenable working and living conditions demanding a halt to budget cuts and a change in taxation in their states to increase funding for public schools. Since the 2008 recession, many Republican states and local governments have cut aid for schools and cut taxes in a push for austerity budgeting. However, educators were finally fed up and went on strike demanding higher pay for educators (many of whom work multiple jobs to make ends meet) and more resources for their students, who learn in dilapidated, overcrowded classrooms. Dana Goldstein (2018) reports that even Frederick Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, once considered a far-right think tank, admitted that “school reformers kind of overshot the mark, and we’re now in a pendulum swing where teachers increasingly look like good guys.” Educators in West Virginia, who enjoyed the support of parents
and students, many of whom joined educators on the picket lines, won an increase in pay not only for themselves but for all municipal workers in the state.

However, the strikes did not stop the U.S. Supreme Court from rendering the anti-union *Janus v. AFSCME* decision in June 2018, which takes away the ability of public employee unions to collect “fair share” fees, greatly weakening unions’ ability to protect workers. Moreover, the strikes also did not result in sufficient legislative changes in the November 2018 midterm elections in those states, which might have led state legislatures to overturn prior drastic budget cuts to public education. The attacks on public unions and public schools are immensely powerful; education “reformers” have massive funds and endless media coverage. For example, in January and February 2019, West Virginia educators again organized one-day walkouts as the Republican Senate in West Virginia attempted to pass a bill that would “raise class sizes, legalize charter schools, introduce school vouchers, financially penalize strikers, undercut job seniority, end wage equity by introducing ‘differential pay,’ and make it harder for unions to collect dues” thus greatly undermining the gains made by West Virginia educators in the 2018 strike to defend public education and reinvigorate the labor movement (Blanc, 2019b). The efforts to privatize education by underfunding public education and attacking teacher unions are bipartisan and occur in both Democratic and Republican-led states. Nick Hanauer, a venture capitalist and major Democratic Party donor, blames unions for “strangling our public schools to death . . . Even other unions, in

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1 *Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, Council 31* (known as *Janus v. AFSCME*) is a 5-4 U.S. Supreme Court ruling on June 27, 2018 that overturns the 1977 *Abood v. Detroit Board of Education* decision that allowed unions to collect fees from nonmembers to cover the costs of collective bargaining but not for political activities. Laws in twenty-two states required that all public employees who are not union members pay public sector unions fair-share/agency fees so that the unions could spend time and money negotiating on behalf of all employees, not only for their own members. Union members voluntarily agree to pay membership fees. Mark Janus (an Illinois state employee) and right-wing groups funding the case argued that paying the fair-share fee is a violation of his First Amendment free-speech rights. *Janus v. AFSCME* takes away the ability of unions to collect fair-share fees. The court’s decision had the potential to create a free rider/freeloader problem as workers may withdraw from paying union dues knowing that they will continue to receive without cost any rights and benefits won by the union for all workers in that bargaining unit.
private, will admit that the teachers make all unions look bad because they are so obviously counterproductive and self-interested” (Coulson, 2012). School “reformers” blame teachers for the pitfalls of public schooling and describe teacher unions as selfish special interest groups that only defend the comfort of their own members rather than putting children’s best interests first (Weiner, 2012). Such rhetoric vilifies unions, creates a social climate that supports anti-union laws, and seeks to undermine public schools.

In the face of these attacks, most teacher unions have remained on the defensive. As Sarah Pederson, a founder of the Virginia Educators United, argues, “We’re losing that quality education because both Democrats and Republican politicians have been starving our schools; both have been moving towards privatization and charterization. What these strikes are doing is that they’re igniting a coalition of working-class people to advocate for those few public institutions that are still left in our country” (Pederson & Blanc, 2019). It was a grassroots movement of rank-and-file educators rather than teacher unions that led the walkouts in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, and Arizona. Traditional business/service-style teacher unions have focused narrowly on contract bargaining and serving as grievance agents on behalf of individual members without necessarily having to organize or mobilize members en masse; their motto often is, “if it’s not in the contract, it’s not our concern” (Noonan, Farmer, & Huckaby, 2014, pg. 2).

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2 In July 2019 Nick Hanauer published an article in The Atlantic called Better Schools Won’t Fix America in which he acknowledges being wrong about his philanthropy in education. He states, “Like many rich Americans, I used to think educational investment could heal the country’s ills—but I was wrong. Fighting inequality must come first.” He ends the article, “Fixing [educational inequality] will require wealthy people to not merely give more, but take less.” Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/07/education-isnt-enough/590611/

3 The Virginia Educators United (VEU) is a grassroots campaign of educators that met during the delegates assembly of the Virginia Education Association, the state teacher union. A few of the educators in the group are part of the American Federation of Teachers. Their “original goal was mostly to drive up union membership in both VEA and AFT, to draw more radical energy into the union, to push it to a more progressive and active stance” (Pederson & Blanc, 2019). VEU is now comprised of educators, staff members, parents, and community members fighting to defend and fund public schools in the state of Virginia. It is part of the #RedForEd movement.

4 Public sector unions in the United States negotiate collective bargaining agreements for members, administer fringe benefits for their members, and assist members with workplace problems and grievances. The terms of collective bargaining are set between the employer and employee and for educators these often include negotiating salary and
explains that after the labor militancy of the 1930s and the hard-fought rights won by the labor movement, the institutionalization of unions in post-World War II United States led to the overwhelming dominance of business/service-style unionism. He explains that the United States “sustained the largest and best-paid stratum of full-time salaried officers in the labor movement world . . . Not unexpectedly, these top-heavy, well-paid bureaucracies proved highly resistant to rotation in office” (pg. 144) or to any upheavals in efforts to change the status quo. While Lichtenstein describes private sector unions, large bureaucracies quickly grew in the public sector unions of the 1960s and 1970s, including the teacher unions. Business unions with large bureaucracies are more dependent on the continuation of capitalist class relations and the narrow role of unions as mediators in the workplace because union officials depend on negotiation with employers for jobs and increased salary and benefits.

Yet teacher unions in the United States have not always been so defensive and have a history of militancy since the formalization of the profession more than a century ago. The Chicago Teachers’ Federation, created in 1897 and led by Margaret Haley in the early 1900s, was the earliest teachers’ organization that employed real power to win major concessions for educators (Murphy, 1990). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s struggles for public employee union recognition, teachers were “far and away the most militant group of public workers during this period . . . Teacher activism would reach its high point in the late 1970s, amounting to ‘nearly 44 percent of all work stoppages by local government employees during the 1974-1980 period’” (Burns, 2014, pgs. 23-24). However, Lois Weiner (2012) argues:

From the start of mass public education, teachers unions, like most of organized labor, turned a blind eye to racism and anti-immigrant sentiment. Teachers unions’ failure to acknowledge this history has facilitated their being cast . . . as a special interest group, benefits as well as working conditions such as the length of the school day, rules governing hiring and layoffs, and teacher evaluations.
more interested in protecting teachers’ jobs than in helping poor children succeed in school . . . The unions’ unwillingness to acknowledge schooling’s past and current role in reproducing social inequality and their reluctance to work as partners with activists to take on racism, sexism, militarization, and anti-immigration prejudice have weakened their credibility with groups who should be teacher unionists’ strongest allies (pg. 193).

As Weiner claims, in the United States, the choice of many teacher unions to narrowly bargain for member salaries and benefits, while doing limited organizing around issues important to students, parents, and communities, greatly weakened the unions’ abilities to fight against the neoliberal policies in education and mounting attacks on the labor movement that followed the fiscal crises of the 1970s and that continue today.

In response to the defunding and privatization of public schools, the attacks on public sector unions, and the inability and unwillingness of teacher unions to take direct action to fight those attacks, effectively ignoring their militant past, a movement of social justice caucuses is growing within teacher unions. Caucuses form as a result of a small group of like-minded union members who come together because of dissatisfaction with the actions of union leadership and/or with the existing structures and policies within their unions and/or workplaces. School activists, who demand the labor movement look beyond the collective bargaining process, with its narrow focus on issues of wages and working conditions, and instead partner with parents, students, and progressive social groups and organizations to engage in social justice struggles beyond the workplace, compose social justice teacher union caucuses. Educator activists, in partnership with other members of school communities, use their power as workers to be change agents in their public schools.

Currently, the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) in the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) is the best example of this type of unionism. For nearly twenty years Chicago has been the petri dish for neoliberal education reform that has included school closings, privately managed
schools, more testing, merit pay, and longer school days. In 2004, Democratic Mayor Richard Daley and then Chicago Public Schools CEO Arne Duncan, launched, in partnership with the state and a group of Chicago’s business elite, the Renaissance 2010 (Ren2010) education plan that proposed remaking the city school system by closing down more than a third of all Chicago Public Schools and reopening them as private charter schools by 2010. Many of these schools were in majority African-American neighborhoods in Chicago’s South and West sides. In response to Ren2010, a small group of activist educators formed a new group called the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) and began holding regular meetings, study groups, and public forums while also frequently attending school closure hearings. In regularly attending and working alongside parents at school closure meetings, CORE was able to ally with parents, students, and community groups that had first begun the fight against school closures (Uetricht, 2014).

Inspired by its organizing with Chicago communities and coached by a past-president of the British Columbia Teachers Federation, CORE decided to run in the 2010 union elections. The caucus won bringing its entire slate into office. Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel elected in 2011 continued to push forward the privatization agenda of Ren2010. With its contract expiring in 2012, CTU, led by CORE, made its bargaining proposals through a counter narrative it offered in a booklet entitled The Schools Chicago’s Students Deserve: Research-Based Proposals to Strengthen Elementary and Secondary Education in the Chicago Public Schools, which focused on issues of social justice, equity, and equality. When Chicago Public Schools refused to meet CTU’s demands, CTU held a strike authorization vote: 90 percent of the membership participated in the vote and 98 percent of those who voted favored calling a strike. CTU used pro-teacher and pro-union frames during the strike including, “the frame of ‘teachers’ working conditions are students’ learning conditions’ [that] resonated with the interests of parents and the larger Chicago
community, and activated them to support CTU’s strike actions” (Noonan, Farmer, & Huckaby, 2014, p. 26). CTU’s demands during the strike challenged the view that teacher unions protect the needs of educators over those of students or bargain in direct conflict with the needs of students. Instead, CTU emphasized that “serving the common good isn’t tangential or an after effect of social-organizing unionism for educators” (Noonan et al., 2014, p. 26). In September 2012, the CTU and its 26,000 members went on strike for the first time in 25 years. Educators went back to work after seven days once they had negotiated a contract that was significantly stronger in terms of working and learning conditions. While this contract was far from perfect, it was an important step away from free-market education “reform” and towards what former CTU President Karen Lewis describes as “getting a fair contract which will give our students the resources they deserve” (Utricht, 2014, pg. 104). In lessons learned from the strike, Alexandra Bradbury, Mark D. Brenner, Jenny Brown, Jane Slaughter, and Samantha Winslow (2014) argue that “CTU showed that fighting against contract concessions and fighting for community demands were two sides of the same coin” (pg. 185).

During the writing of this dissertation, in January 2019, inspired by CORE, Union Power, the leadership team of the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) committed to social justice unionism, organized and mobilized educators into a six-day strike. Educators protested against the privatization of public education, especially through the proliferation of charter schools, in the Democratic city of Los Angeles, California and against the massive economic inequality in public schools and in communities in the richest state in the United States. UTLA not only fought for ameliorations to salary and benefits for its members, but also “bargained for the common good,” which involves bargaining over demands that benefit the entire community, not just union members. UTLA’s bargaining demands came from months of working with parents, students, and
community organizations and included expanding green spaces at schools, a legal defense fund for students and families facing deportation, and a stop to random searching and racial profiling of students in school (UCLA Center X, 2017). While these demands were not within the legal scope of collective bargaining, UTLA “pushed the envelope in using collective bargaining to reimagine public education for children who live in poverty” (Weiner, 2019). Like CORE, Union Power was not afraid to use its strike weapon. As Arlene Inouye, UTLA’s secretary and the co-chair of UTLA’s contract bargaining team, proudly claims about the strike, “But what really moved the dial was the fact that we had thirty-two thousand members picketing at every single school, together with fifteen thousand parents and community members. And we had fifty thousand members and supporters out here rallying almost every day. That’s real power” (Inouye & Blanc, 2019). The strike was victorious. With 73 percent of total membership participating in the vote, 81 percent voted to ratify a three-year agreement that includes salary increases for educators with no cuts to healthcare; more nurses, counselors, librarians, and mental health professionals in every school; lower class sizes for the first time in 25 years; and a 50 percent reduction in testing (UTLA, 2019).

Like CORE, when Union Power was elected in 2014 it reorganized the union to transform it into a social justice/movement union. Union Power formed an organizing department, a political department, a research department, and a parent/community division. These changes were made possible by UTLA members who voted to increase their own union dues. According to Barry Eidlin (2019), Union Power also created structures for bottom-up, one-to-one organizing and

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5 I use the term social justice/movement teacher unionism to reflect the lack of consensus among scholars and activists about using social justice unionism or social movement unionism. As a new phenomenon of study, the popularity of the term changes as more academics and activists use it. The debates in academia between social justice and social movement unionism are explained in Chapter 2, Using Frames. There are also debates among activists in MORE and WE about the use of terms to describe caucus organizing as described in Chapter 6, Depends on the Audience.
mobilizing of its members. The union developed rank-and-file leaders and formed Contract Action Teams with union members and parent representatives to educate and organize membership, parents, and community allies (Eidlin, 2019). UTLA also formed coalitions with parents, students, and community organizations that have fought together to demand a raise in taxes on commercial and industrial properties, the use of vacant land for affordable housing, and charter school regulation (Jaffe, 2019). They also confronted the Democratic Party in Los Angeles pushing Democratic politicians to support the union and public education rather than the elites who support privatization and fund the politicians’ campaigns (Weiner, 2019). In addition, since taking power in 2014, Union Power has made it clear that UTLA’s fight for educational justice is also a fight for racial justice. The union has called out the racial discrimination in public school funding, supported the Black Lives Matter movement, and opposed the racial profiling of students in schools. UTLA has also supported immigrant justice by fighting for sanctuary schools, helping Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients renew their papers, opposing deportations, and bargaining for an immigrant defense fund (Blanc, 2019a). UTLA and the CTU show the power of social justice/movement unions. As Inouye states, “We were inspired by Chicago and we were inspired by the red states. Our actions all encourage each other — and this movement is just going to grow” (Inouye & Blanc, 2019). Following the UTLA strike, educators in Oakland, Denver, and Virginia also went on strike protesting the underfunding and privatization of public education.

As someone who is also inspired by educator activists organizing within their unions for social justice, I come to this research with my own viewpoint. I believe social justice unionism can transform schools and society; policies based in privatization are a threat to public institutions and spaces for democratic practices; and racial justice must be at the center of movements for justice.
My commitment to social justice/movement unionism began when I interviewed and observed Alex Caputo-Pearl, now president of UTLA, organizing back in 2012, interviews which were followed shortly after by the CTU’s 2012 strike. It was the hope and inspiration I felt throughout 2012 that led to this dissertation.

**Research Questions**

Researchers, including the CTU itself have started to analyze the movement in Chicago (Bradbury et al., 2014; Uetricht, 2014; Brogan, 2014; Noonan, Farmer, & Huckaby, 2014; Alter, 2013; Bartlett, 2012). However, this is some of the only literature about social justice union caucuses in the United States. This dissertation broadens the focus from the demonstrated but specific organizational successes of the CTU as the exemplar of a successful social justice caucus to examine the structural constraints and radical possibilities of the Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE), a social justice caucus of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in New York City, and the Caucus of Working Educators (WE), the social justice caucus of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT). Social justice caucuses are key players in the educational justice movement with CORE and the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union strike setting the foundation for the 2018-19 teacher union strike wave. MORE and WE quickly formed after CORE’s victory and so are some of the most longstanding and most experienced social justice caucuses, making them important case studies. Unlike CORE, neither MORE nor WE is in leadership positions in their unions; yet both take on responsibilities that they believe union leadership should be fulfilling in order to strengthen the union. They also work to push the union to do a better job representing its members by taking on more militant policies, contract fights, and defense of public education. MORE and WE are member-driven caucuses within traditional business/service-style locals of the American Federation of Teachers, in Democratic cities with
rich histories of labor uprisings, especially by educators. They organize around traditional “bread and butter” services, such as improved wages and benefits, but also fight for internal union democracy and build power at the school level through collaboration with parents, students, communities, and other social movements fighting for social justice.

MORE is an interesting case study because it is in New York City, which has the largest public school district in the United States, with more than 1.1 million students. New York City is also the most highly unionized city in the United States at 23.4 percent, and the UFT is one of its largest unions (Milkman & Luce, 2018). Due to the city’s size and influence, New York City’s education policies are often emulated across the country, and the UFT is the staging ground for prospective AFT staff and officers. MORE’s obstacles and successes in trying to transform NYC’s education policies and the UFT’s organizing style therefore have the potential to influence education and labor nationwide. WE, which formed in 2014, is an important case study because it is organizing in Philadelphia amidst massive neoliberal education “reform” efforts, including state defunding of public schools, market-based solutions in education over the past twenty-plus years, public school closures, and the proliferation of charter schools. Over 35 percent of public school children in Philadelphia attend a charter school, while the national average is at 6 percent (see Table 2). WE’s obstacles and successes show an alternative way to fight back against the extreme privatization in education that has occurred in cities such as New Orleans and Detroit.

MORE and WE are models of social justice caucuses enacting social justice/movement unionism to transform their schools and unions. Bob Peterson, a long-time social justice activist in education who became involved in social justice unionism directly as president of the Milwaukee Teachers’ Education Association, explains social justice unionism: “Unions need all three to be balanced and strong: We organize around bread and butter issues; We organize around
teaching and learning issues to reclaim our profession and our classrooms; We organize for social justice in our community and in our curriculum.” MORE and WE embrace the concept of social justice/movement unionism as a social justice caucus in business/service-style unions. The central research questions in this dissertation on social justice caucuses are:

1. What radical possibilities and structural constraints are generated and/or illuminated by educator activists in MORE and WE?
2. What are the challenges, benefits, and limits of connecting teacher unionism to a broader struggle for economic, social, and racial justice?
3. What types of processes, strategies, campaigns, and organizational structures do educators find effective versus those that have been unsuccessful?
4. Where are the fractures and how do participants acting in those moments understand them?

This dissertation seeks to analyze the status and possibilities of social justice caucuses in teacher unions and helps to provide a framework for understanding where these caucuses are successful and where tensions and dilemmas complicate the organizing and mobilizing in schools. Leon Fisk and Brian Greenberg (2009) argue that labor scholars often write about unions from a sympathetic point of view and thus focus on victories without exploring the inner tensions. I believe it is important to understand the fractures and tensions in union caucuses trying to create fragile solidarities and protect public education and labor against a U.S. status quo that values individualism, profit, privatization, and white supremacy. Change is not linear and often takes a contentious path.

My argument in this dissertation is threefold. First, social justice caucus activists in MORE and WE have critically engaged the project of democratizing their unions, enacting democratic practices beyond the narrow electoral realm including include building relationships, having difficult conversations, sustaining cultures of solidarity, and participating in protest activity, all while developing a sharp analysis of the larger political context in which the caucuses organize. Through these practices, they attempt to raise working-class consciousness on issues of race, class,
gender, sexuality, dis/ability, immigration, and politics believing that workers’ beliefs are not immutable. In fighting for racial justice, social justice caucuses are enacting a robust democratic process necessary to transform both unions and schools and, in the process, win racial justice struggles. Educators in social justice caucuses bring strategies of solidarity and collectivity into schools and beyond as they attempt to democratize their union and improve working and learning conditions in their schools.

Second, the road toward transformation is not a progressively linear movement forward and MORE and WE face considerable challenges to realize their aim of union transformation. While fault lines can occur in diverse places and circumstances, in MORE and WE, they occur around organizing dilemmas and issues of criminal/racial justice. These internal tensions and dilemmas are challenging for caucus members and are also sources of creativity and adaptability. While it can be difficult and frustrating, activists embrace social change as a process that involves reflection, debate, experimentation, and adjustments to their own frames, structures, and strategies to reach their goals and expand union democracy. Caucuses may reorganize or splinter as ebbs and flows are integral parts of union democratization. Debates and tensions do arise, but educator caucus activists highlight the importance of creating movements that can articulate, embrace, and grow from and with the complexity of what it means to be human in school, community, and society.

Finally, I argue that educator activists in MORE and WE have a unique practical knowledge as educators who see themselves as workers with daily experiences in schools but also within a larger historical context and political economy that extends far beyond the school walls. Social justice caucus activists are making decisions in a neoliberal and white supremacist climate in which competition and lean production are rampant at the workplace, including in schools. In
educational literature, the nature of teachers’ work is often narrowly confined to the classroom without an examination of the larger social, political, and economic dynamics that might affect it (Rousmaniere, 1997). For educators in social justice caucuses, work is in schools, but also in communities, in politics, and in the streets. This organizing and mobilizing beyond the school additionally fights against teacher isolation and workplace fragmentation.

This dissertation also seeks to bring to light the role that caucuses—specifically social justice ones—play within unions. The process is messy and imperfect, but as they critique and contest power, challenging the status quo within the union and in their public schools, educator activists in social justice caucuses provide an alternative way of transforming public sector unions and public schools to improve education. Instead of seeking solutions for improving public education elaborated by privatizers and mainstream policy makers, educator activists in MORE and WE challenge their business/service-style unions and education “reforms” and “reformers” in public schools by fighting for educational justice grounded in workplace power, building collective struggles, and merging labor and social movements. There are few studies in labor literature on the nature of caucuses. Social justice caucuses, with their emphasis on democratizing unions and social justice, provide a model for how a small but dedicated internal organization can be a force for social change within a larger organizational entity.

This dissertation does not claim to explore all of the contested aspects of democracy nor define its scope as a political system. In referring to the democratization of the union, I rely on the democratic ideals that MORE and WE seek in organizing as social justice caucuses. In its mission statement, MORE states, “We insist on a strong, democratic union emerging from an educated and active rank and file. We oppose the lack of democracy and one-party state that has governed our union for half a century” (Mission Statement, 2018). In its platform WE asserts, “WE believe in
democracy. We believe that we, the members, are the union. Our active participation is what makes our union strong. We believe that union leadership must listen and respond to members’ concerns and priorities. We believe in transparency” (Our platform, 2018). For MORE and WE, union democracy involves collective, rank-and-file participation in the decision-making and activities of the union, leadership accountability to members, and transparency. However, the two caucuses’ definitions of democracy are dynamic and adaptable as they organize for justice for workers and for communities in schools in particular and in society as a whole.

Scholarly Significance

A study of educators and their unions is important because public education and public unions remain contested fields with the potential to be transformative and counter ongoing assaults on the public. This dissertation seeks to contribute to the literature challenging education “reform” models implemented by individuals who have never worked in schools and who believe in privatization and competition as neoliberal solutions to the difficulties public schools face (Fine & Fabricant, 2013; Ravitch, 2013; Lipman, 2011). The dissertation explores social justice/movement unionism, which defends public schools through public sector union power, as a means to fight for urban public schools that all children deserve. Weiner (2012) argues that educators are idea workers who “have the potential to affect social arrangements, challenging the authority of elites who have an interest in maintaining their own power and privilege” (pg. 22). There are a number of dissertations focusing on educators in social justice unions and caucuses challenging the status quo (Bocking, 2017; Brogan, 2016; Maton, 2016; Rottman, 2011); however, this one uniquely theorizes the caucus itself as the unit of analysis.

Caucuses form as a result of a small group of like-minded union members who come together because of dissatisfaction with the actions of union leadership and/or with the existing
Structures and policies within their unions. Caucuses act as political parties within a union creating spaces for debate. What makes social justice caucuses particularly powerful in their potential to change the labor movement is that they are member-controlled groups committed to democratizing the union as a necessity for organizing and by reorganizing internal union structures—Union Power and CORE are good examples of how social justice caucuses internally transform unions. Historical literature exists about influential caucuses in U.S. labor history, including the Reuther Caucus and the Revolutionary Union Movements in the United Auto Workers, Miners for Democracy of the United Mine Workers of America, and Teamsters for a Democratic Union of the Teamsters Union (Brenner et al., 2010; Thompson, 2001; Georgakas & Surkin, 1998; Lichtenstein, 1995). A few scholars have also written about the Unity Caucus that has controlled the UFT since its creation in 1961 (Weiner, 2012; Maier, 1987). Still, the body of literature about union caucuses is quite scarce overall. This dissertation seeks to contribute to a deeper analysis of caucuses in general and social justice caucuses in particular.

Teaching is one of the most unionized jobs in the United States (BLS, 2018). The national teacher unions represent almost 5 million workers—The American Federation of Teachers includes 1.7 million members in over 3,000 local affiliates (About, 2018) while the National Education Association has 3 million members with locals in every state (About NEA, 2018). Labor activist Jane McAlevey (2016) maintains that “education and health care are the strategic sectors . . . because of their social and geographic placement in the community.” A strong labor movement won many of the rights and benefits—Social Security, welfare, minimum wage, job security, and workplace protections—that capitalists and their supporters are actively challenging today. Teacher unions also protect academic freedom and educator creativity, assure workers due process and legal protection, and allow for teaching and organizing without reprisals (Hagopian & Green,
Moreover, teacher unions are successful vehicles of struggle as evidenced by these recent examples: The Puerto Rican Teachers’ Union led a successful island-wide strike in March 2008 against charter schools; the Chicago Teachers Union led a 2012 strike against school closings and disinvestment in public education; in 2014, the Seattle Education Association strike won mandatory recess for all students and diversity committees in thirty of its schools as part of the union contract; and United Teachers Los Angeles led a successful 2019 strike against privatization and for greater funding of public schools 10 years after successfully preventing charter takeovers in 2009. This dissertation seeks to highlight the role of educators as agents of change and the important role that teacher unions play in the labor movement. Intersecting educational studies, labor sociology, and social movement theory, this dissertation explores how educators, caucuses, and unions play active roles in movements for social justice.

In being interdisciplinary, this dissertation reunites labor and social movement literature, centering on educators as the activists. The new social movement literature of the 1980s shifted away from the study of Marx, class struggle, and social systems to a focus on pluralistic culture and meaning (Goodwin & Jasper, 2009; Maddison & Scalmer, 2006). This dissertation seeks to re-center the workplace and labor organizations as sites of struggle that have an important role to play in social movements. In addition, the field of education rarely addresses teacher unionism and labor studies often ignore schools as sites of labor struggle. The current wave of teachers strikes may be reuniting these areas of study, as does this dissertation.

There is a body of literature on struggles for social justice in schools. While it is relatively new, studies on community organizing in schools brings to light the efforts of parents, students, educators, and community groups working together to improve schools (Warren et al., 2011; Fabricant, 2010; Oakes, Rogers, & Lipton, 2006; Mediratta & Fruchter, 2001; Shirley, 2002).
However, the literature focuses on community organizers as change agents organizing parents, students, and the community, while educators play supporting roles. Educators are rarely the focus of community efforts for social justice in schools. This dissertation places educators at the center of social movements for progressive educational reform through collaborations with communities (Anyon, 2014). It also spotlights educators as activists, which is rare in educational and social movement literature, and seeks to make the research relevant to activist struggles (Smucker, 2017; Maddison and Scalmer, 2006; Bevington & Dixon, 2005).

Assumptions

In focusing on social justice caucuses in teacher unions, this dissertation emanates from a specific theory of change. Echoing activist scholar Jonathan Smucker’s (2017) critique of the Occupy Movement’s lack of institutional strategy, I believe organizations are needed for social change. I argue that public sector unions can be places of worker consciousness and potential sites for challenging and contesting issues of privatization and public dispossession by embracing social justice/movement unionism. However, unions need to be accountable to their members and to the broader working class. History shows that radical caucus movements can democratize unions and keep union leadership accountable to their members and to society, demonstrating the importance of caucuses within unions (Brenner et al., 2010; Stepan-Norris & Zeitlin, 2003; Georgakas & Surkin, 1998). While an ideal union democracy may be unattainable, I believe it is possible to develop practices and processes that can work toward democratizing unions. Since social inequality is an impediment to democratic participation, struggles against intersecting oppressions are an integral part of any process of democratization. In writing about teacher unions, I also argue that educators must see themselves beyond the school as political actors working with students,
parents, and communities. The work of educators is in schools but also in politics, communities, and the streets.

**The Influence of the Black Lives Matter Movement**

Early on in my dissertation journey, I read and wrote with a disproportionate emphasis on racism and racial justice. My advisors and colleagues suggested that I broaden my reading and writing to include other oppressions, especially sexism in schools as the majority of educators are women. I was also encouraged to theorize beyond a racially black-white binary. In thinking about the methodology for my dissertation, I thus prepared interview questions based on broad definitions of oppression, social justice, and union democracy.

However, when I finally conducted the interviews, they happened at a moment in time when the Black Lives Matter movement was raising the country’s awareness on issues of police brutality and the lack of responses to it. This social movement issue brought on by social protest was too powerful to ignore and forced the labor movement, including social justice caucuses, to take up issues of racial justice. While the caucuses did address other oppressions, the 2014 police murders of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Eric Garner in New York City, Laquan McDonald in Chicago, Tamir Rice in Cleveland, and of many other black men and women greatly influenced the conversations happening within the caucuses. Debating whether or not to support the wave of Black Lives Matter movement-led protests that followed exposed racist views within social justice caucuses that surprised many activists who believed there was more consensus within the caucuses around issues of racial justice. Thus, the participant observation and interviews that I conducted with educator activists in social justice caucuses in the mid-2010s disproportionately address issues of racial justice focusing on the black-white binary of police violence in the United States. The Black Lives Matter movement nuanced my own understanding of racial justice and exposed
the complicated relationship between educator and police unions, which I explore in Chapter 7 of this dissertation.

Moreover, Amy Brown and Mark Stern (2018) found that like much of the literature about social justice unionism and social justice in education, activist educators often have an anti-neoliberal and antiracist analysis of education policy but lack “a coherent and explicit gender critique” (pg. 173). Brown and Stern (2018) noticed that the Caucus of Working Educators enacted feminist devices, insights, traditions, and pedagogy but “weren’t quite as vocal about how and why neoliberal policies (education and otherwise) are made possible by and through gender” (pg. 178). Similarly, the educators that I interviewed rarely raised issues of gender in conversations about neoliberal education policies. In twenty-five interviews, only one educator had an explicitly feminist, antipatriarchal analysis. Since the interviews and participant observation drove my data analysis, this dissertation only introduces a gendered analysis while focusing mostly on anti-neoliberal and antiracist critiques. I acknowledge this as a limitation of this study.

**Dissertation Overview**

I assess the organizing and mobilizing of MORE and WE by analyzing the historical, political, economic, and social contexts in which they exist and the daily realities that they face. In looking at structures that influence MORE and WE, I provide an overview of educational politics in New York City and Philadelphia as well as a history of the United Federation of Teachers and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. In addition, I analyze the role of caucuses in unions by offering a historical overview of a few influential caucuses in labor history. I then move from the structures to the daily experiences of educators within MORE and WE as they produce, reproduce, and contest these structures. I consider the processes, strategies, and campaigns the caucuses engage in and the tensions and dilemmas that arise from caucus
organizing. In doing so, I explore the radical possibilities of social justice caucuses in teacher unions.

Chapter 2 is an exploration of the theoretical frameworks that shape this interdisciplinary dissertation. It begins with the political-economic context in which social justice caucuses in business/service-style unions organize, including an analysis of the effects of capitalist competition and lean production, neoliberalism, and racial capitalism. It explores the dynamics of education as an overwhelmingly female profession that has historically and currently been underpaid and undervalued. This dissertation also investigates the many contradictions in the two main institutional spaces educator activists inhabit: the public school and the labor union. This dissertation acknowledges that throughout history and today, some people and institutions within education and labor have been racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist, and xenophobic, among other oppressions and prejudices. Major debates and contradictions in education include whether the school is a site of reproduction of societal inequality or a place of contestation and resistance, whether education is the ticket out of poverty, and whether the idea of educator professionalism is helpful or harmful to educators in schools. Major debates and tensions in the labor movement include the effects of the bureaucratization of unions, the (in)ability to organize the unorganized, and the relationships between labor unions and social movements. I conclude the second chapter by arguing that trade unions can be places of worker consciousness and potential sites for challenging and contesting privatization and public dispossession, just as public schools can be spaces for contestation and liberation.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology employed in this research. This study responds to Douglas Bevington and Chris Dixon’s (2005) call for movement-relevant theory having practical implications for activists. The interview questions for this research were based on a pilot study
conducted by the author with MORE members and on topics that surfaced during my attendance at MORE and WE meetings. The findings for this dissertation arise from twenty-five interviews and over 125 hours of participant observation with social justice caucus members in New York City and Philadelphia. The research design for this study focuses on MORE and WE and uses scholarly articles and books written by and about the CORE caucus in the CTU as context for social justice unionism. The interviews and participant observation with MORE were theory generating, the interviews and participant observation with WE produced similar themes, and the literature on CORE confirmed the analysis. The data for this study was analyzed using constructivist grounded theory, which recognizes that theory is co-constructed in an active engagement between the researcher and participants throughout the research process.

Chapter 4 explores the educational “reform” policies in New York City and Philadelphia and the current and historical responses of the United Federation of Teachers and Philadelphia Federation of Teachers to those neoliberal efforts. Since the fiscal crises of the 1970s, both New York City and Philadelphia have experienced intense neoliberal policies including the financialization of their urban economies alongside massive deindustrialization and cutbacks in government spending. These developments occurred as part of a larger shift throughout U.S. society in the 1970s, and especially in education, from liberalism, social democracy, and the Great Society programs to individual competition in the marketplace. Today, both cities are exemplars of portfolio districts that promote school choice, school closures, franchised charter schools, accountability through standardized testing, and philanthrocapitalism in the name of reducing the achievement gap. These educational “reforms” are occurring even with New York City’s and Philadelphia’s legacy of strong teacher unionism; major strikes occurred in each city throughout
the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s as teachers fought budget cuts that involved layoffs and school closures and for more control over their workplaces.

Chapter 5 theorizes the caucus as it functions within labor unions. Social justice caucuses are attempting to do difficult work that comes with many tensions, so learning from past caucus attempts to change unions can educate activists and help move the labor movement beyond its typical “business as usual” stance. I focus on caucuses of the United Auto Workers (UAW)—the Reuther Caucus and the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM)—as they show different ways caucuses can operate within a single union. In addition, I believe that Walter Reuther’s power in the U.S. labor movement and the structure of his caucus helped shape the Unity Caucus within the United Federation of Teachers with Albert Shanker at its leadership. In response to the UFT’s business/service-style unionism, over the years, many dissident caucuses have formed within the UFT, including the Movement of Rank-and-File Educators. Similarly, in response to the Philadelphia Federation of Teacher’s decreasing power due to its traditional business/service-style unionism, the grassroots, educator-led Caucus of Working Educators formed with the goal of pushing the union to take on more militant and radical policies, contract fights, and defense of public education (Maton, 2015). I also analyze the relationship of caucuses to left-wing parties as a recurrent charge against dissident caucuses is that they serve the interests of outside political parties and not that of the union. I locate educators in the Communist Party as being one radical group, similar to others, which were able to both support the politics of their party and fight for the interests of their union without undermining the American labor movement.

In Chapter 6, I write about the organizing dilemmas that MORE and WE activists face. Sociologist James Jasper (2004) states, “Anyone who has sat through the endless meetings of a typical protest group knows how many decisions are made, and how much attention, disagreement,
and struggle they entail” (pg. 6). In MORE and WE there are internal tensions around the use of certain motivational frames and with the extension dilemma that balances breadth and depth in organizing. As Jim Jasper (2006) explains, “The further you reach out to expand your team or alliance, the more diverse it will be and the less unified—in goals, resources, skills, and contacts” (pg. 127). Some caucus activists in MORE and WE fear that having broad, less coherent goals reproduces the concessionary organizing of business/service-style unions and weakens the caucus’ ability to transform the union. Others fear emphasizing their social justice identity will exclude too many educators and prevent the caucus from ever gaining power. While many groups face the extension dilemma, there are differing ways to solve it. Often it takes a special moment, a crisis, an opportunity, a moral shock, and/or a charismatic leader. In response to crises, MORE and WE have attempted to solve the extension dilemma by adapting their internal structures and creating spaces where they can organize in the tensions that allow for the both/and rather than either/or. For example, MORE and WE seek to organize more union members and also take a stand on social justice positions that dare to challenge the status quo. The caucuses, including CORE, also momentarily solve the extension dilemma through protest activity, like the CTU’s 2012 strike. These tensions and dilemmas are challenging for caucus members and are also sources of creativity and adaptability. Educator activists believe that change is possible and use their practical knowledge to modify their own frames, structures, and strategies to reach their goals.

While fault lines can occur in diverse places and circumstances, in MORE and WE, they occur around organizing dilemmas, as explored in Chapter 6, and issues of criminal/racial justice. A weakness of the labor movement and specifically teacher unionism over the decades has been their failure to confront racism. In Chapter 7, I explore both the points of consensus in organizing for racial justice and the major fault lines involving police officers and/or police unions, which I
refer to as issues of criminal justice. I argue that in fighting for racial justice, social justice caucuses are enacting a robust democratic process necessary to transform both unions and schools and, in the process, win racial justice struggles. Many educators participate in Black History month, teach aspects of anti-racist curricula, and support the hiring of more black and brown educators. However, racial justice struggles associated with the police, such as supporting Black Lives Matter, generate tremendous internal tensions in the caucuses and in unions – both business/service-style and social justice/movement unions. This chapter examines the fractures in the UFT, CTU, MORE, and WE caused by struggles for criminal justice. In facing the criminal justice fault lines, social justice caucuses become spaces in unions that enact broad democratic practices which include building relationships, having difficult conversations, sustaining cultures of solidarity, and participating in protest activity, all while developing a sharp analysis of the larger political context in which the caucuses organize that enables educator activists to raise the consciousness of those around them. It is through these difficult, time-consuming, creative practices and processes that social justice caucuses win support for all racial justice struggles to transform their schools and unions. Anti-racism is necessary for the democratization of teacher unions. Social justice caucuses expand conceptions of union democratization and create moments and spaces of radical possibility.

Finally, I conclude with lessons learned from MORE and WE and their role within their respective teacher unions, and I highlight the obstacles MORE and WE must still overcome. I argue that organized social justice caucuses within teacher unions show the potential of caucuses to democratize their unions. Educator activists in MORE and WE organize beyond the electoral realm through a class struggle approach. They form cultures of solidarity, protest together, are willing to have difficult conversations with coworkers, critique power rather than blame
individuals, and seek spaces for reflection and political education in schools and in the union. Through these practices, they build working-class consciousness and organize arguing that workers’ beliefs and attitudes regarding class, race, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and immigration are not immutable. Social justice caucuses like MORE and WE show that the labor movement can and should be an integral part of social movement theory. I conclude this chapter with a reflection on the relevance of social justice caucuses for today’s progressive education movement and suggestions for further research.
CHAPTER 2: Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this study is twofold: 1) to understand the potential for social justice caucuses in business/service-style teacher unions to counter neoliberal education “reforms” by actively engaging in progressive efforts to win education reforms; and 2) to illuminate opportunities for social justice teacher unions to fight for and improve the working and living conditions within the broader communities where they work. The only research that offers specific example of the growing movement toward social justice teacher unionism in the United States focuses largely on the Chicago Teachers Union (Uetricht, 2014; Brogan, 2014; Noonan et al., 2014; Alter, 2013; Bartlett, 2012). Therefore, this dissertation seeks to contribute to the small but emerging field of research on social justice teacher unionism by focusing on two social justice teacher caucuses, MORE and WE.

Weiner (2014) argues, “To protect teaching as a profession and public education we need to win the ‘trifecta’ of democracy, mobilization, and social justice, in union life.” Reflecting on Weiner’s claim, I became interested in the tensions that arise in attempting to win democracy, mobilization, and social justice as unionized educator activists try to integrate issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and immigration into unions typically established and structured to address narrower economic issues of wages and benefits. This study acknowledges that labor’s fight for social justice and public education’s role in that fight are complicated with a history of victories, compromises, and ruptures, as epitomized in the 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville teacher strike in New York City (Brier, 2014; Perlstein, 2004; Podair, 2002; Freeman, 2000). Tensions have existed and continue to exist between labor and the fight for civil rights of all kinds (Lichtenstein, 2002; Nelson, 2001). The tension is also ever present in schools as illustrated in the works of Jean Anyon (2014), Michael Fabricant and Michelle Fine (2013), and Pauline Lipman
(2011), who have all theorized and analyzed the current political economy in which schools operate, the varied political commitments of educators in relation to communities, and opportunities for educational justice. This study seeks to add to the literature about tensions and dilemmas in institutions and institutional change and how players in different arenas work through their conflicts and differences (Jasper, 2006).

In this chapter, I first describe the political-economic context in which social justice caucuses in business/service-style unions organize. Economic insecurity, lowered standards of living, and deteriorating work conditions tend to intensify racist ideas leading white people to blame the gains of the disadvantaged for their misery rather than blame corporate profits and capitalist competition (Moody, 2017). In education, “neoliberalism, structural racism, Whiteness and White supremacy, racial capitalism, and accumulation by dispossession” (Picower & Mayorga, 2016, pg. 4) have worsened working and learning conditions in schools. David Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (pg. 2). In cities, racialized neoliberal policies have led to the displacement of working-class communities and people of color for speculative development, gentrification financed by investors and facilitated by the state through corporate subsidies and tax cuts, increased reliance of local municipalities on private funding, aggressive policing and racialized containment for social control, and the privatization of schools (Lipman, 2011). Neoliberalism, as today’s manifestation of capitalism, depends and thrives on racial and gender divisions in the workplace and in society to maximize exploitation and profit. In schools, educators are overwhelmingly female, and as such, the profession has historically and currently been underpaid and undervalued as male policymakers
and administrators make decisions for female educators who male decision makers see in their “natural” role as caregivers (Blount, 2005).

Education and labor have both been historically infused with racist, sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic policies, among other oppressions and prejudices (Taylor, K.Y., 2016; Au, 2015; Leong, 2013; Brenner, Brenner, & Winslow, 2010; Taylor, C., 2010; Picower, 2009; American Social History Project, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Melamed, 2006; Yosso, 2006; Singh, 2004; Kelly, 2001; Nelson, 2001; Georgakas & Surkin, 1998; King, 1997; Tatum, 1997; Kelley, 1990; Fordham & Ogbo, 1986). This dissertation addresses movements for racial justice primarily because of the crucial role racial oppression plays in building and maintaining capitalist societies. As W.E.B. Du Bois (1935/1962) explains, “Black labor became the foundation stone not only of the Southern social structure, but of Northern manufacture and commerce, of the English factory system, of European commerce, of buying and selling on a world-wide scale” (pg. 5). Thus, movements for racial justice “destabilize all political life in the United States” (Taylor, 2016, pg. 205) because as Martin Luther King reasoned “the Black movement ‘forc[es] America to face all its interrelated flaws – racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism. It . . . expos[es] the evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society. It reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws’” (as quoted in Taylor, 2016, pg. 205).

I then explore the many contradictions in the two main spaces educator activists inhabit: the public school and the labor union. Major debates and contradictions in education include whether the school is a site of reproduction of societal inequality or a place of contestation and resistance and whether education is the ticket out of poverty. Critical theorists agree education has not served the majority of students well but range on the spectrum between two poles that might be described as overemphasizing determining structures and excessive emphasis on human agency.
(Goldstein, 2014; Bowles & Gintis, 1976/2011; Anderson, 1988; Giroux, 1983; Katzenelson & Weir, 1985; Anyon, 1981). In addition, there are tensions about teacher professionalism (Brier, 2014; Connell, 2009; Sachs, 2000; Biklen, 1995; Murphy, 1990). Marjorie Murphy (1990) and Sari Knopp Biklen (1995) argue that defining teachers as professionals removes teachers from community politics and prevents cooperative relationships from forming thus creating a divide between teachers and the communities that they serve. Major debates and tensions in the labor movement include the strength of the “iron law of oligarchy” (Michels, 1911/1962) on unions, the (in)ability to organize the unorganized, and the relationships between labor unions and social movements (Windham, 2017; Gindin, 2015; Cox & Nielsen, 2014; Mann, 2014; Ahlquist & Levi, 2013; Lerner, 2011; Milkman, 2006; Voss & Sherman, 2000; Ofé & Wiesenthal, 1980; Piven and Cloward, 1979). Finally, I conclude by arguing that trade unions can be places of developing worker consciousness and potential sites for challenging and contesting privatization and public dispossession, just as public schools can be spaces for contestation and liberation (Gindin, 2016; McAlevey, 2016; Peterson, Winter 2014/2015; Burns, 2014; Uetricht, 2014; Hagopian & Green, 2012; Weiner, 2012; Fletcher and Gapasin, 2008).

**A Political Economy of Competition and Lean Production**

The tensions and ruptures in social justice caucuses are happening at a specific time in history when scholars and activists are exploring the increasing appeal worldwide of conservative ideas. Howard Botwinick (1993) argues that capitalism creates constant differentiation, heterogeneity, and competition with an intensity that makes workers feel alienated and degraded with no avenue for change. He claims high levels of competition do not significantly increase wages and alter patterns of wage disparity. Building on Botwinick’s Marxist analysis of capitalist competition, Kim Moody (2017) argues competition has in recent years become “more intense not
only globally but within the major developed economies” (pg. 2). In a competitive environment with the need to increase production and efficiency, firms have turned to lean production, which consists of stressing the production system in order to “eliminate all non-value-producing labor” (Moody, 2017, pg. 14). Ways of achieving lean production include programs that measure, monitor, and standardize the work process; the emphasis on time and new technology in order to intensify work; and the destruction of labor unions. Moody (2017) states, “Lean methods have also penetrated America’s public schools, where teams promote speedup in the name of ‘continuous improvement’ and teachers are evaluated by how their students do on standardized tests. Just as much as those who produce things ‘you can drop on your toe,’ as the Economist famously put it, these service workers are being stressed to the max” (pg. 22). Competition through lean production methods has decreased autonomy in various professions, including teaching, so that many in the professional class are experiencing the same increase in income inequality, decline in living standards, deskilling and degradation of work, and economic precariousness as the working class. In addition, in the public sector, budget cuts by both Republicans and Democrats have led to competition over limited resources for public employees and those who depend on public services (Moody, 2017). With increased misery at the workplace and no hope in sight, workers compete with one another for these scarce resources.

On the other hand, both Botwinick (1993) and Moody (2017) argue that when there is strong class organization then workers are able to overcome the hopelessness and fear of competition and unemployment so that protecting one’s own limited interest has less of a pull (Brenner, Brenner, & Winslow, 1981). This type of solidarity occurred at the high point of class struggle during the massive strikes of the 1930s in the United States. However, radical rank-and-
file organizations were decimated during the purges of the Cold War era and in the layoffs of the 1970s. Mike Parker and Martha Gruelle (1999) argue that:

Unfortunately, tough economic times tend to inflame racist ideas and racial conflict. Scapegoat explanations (“the Blacks,” immigrants, welfare mothers) flourish in this atmosphere of economic insecurity. The cause of the declining prospects for good jobs and the lowered standard of living experienced by most working people these days is corporate profit lust, uncontrolled business competition, and right-wing economic and social policies, not the gains of the disadvantaged (pg. 77).

Today’s austerity politics have furthered the attacks leading to exaggerated tensions among workers who reproduce the racial and gendered divisions inherent in the current political economy (Roediger, 1991), as will be explored further in this chapter.

In schools, Andy Hargreaves (2010) shows how teachers’ feelings of limited control over their work, intensified work demands, and scarcity of time and resources imposed on schools by reformers “of all political persuasions” have led teachers toward more individualistic tendencies and “restricted conceptions of curriculum and learning” (Hargreaves, 2010, pg. 151). Hargreaves (2010) argues that “data-driven improvements and just-in-time interventions to accelerate progress in narrowly defined basics of literacy and numeracy . . . gives no attention in teaching, curriculum, and learning to goals and contents such as environmental sustainability, human rights, local history, or creative and performing arts” (pg. 150-151). The intensification of teachers’ work through lean production – including programs that measure, monitor, and standardize the work process; the emphasis on time and new technology in order to intensify work; and the destruction of labor unions— is not a new phenomenon and has had devastating effects on teachers’ work (Apple, 1989; Hargreaves, 1989, 2010). Hargreaves (2010) argues that even efforts promoting collaboration between and among teachers, such as professional learning communities, are “hurried, technical, uncritical, and narrow” (pg. 150). In this time-based competitive environment, teachers focus on their individual job performance and on short-range outcomes and are resistant
to change (Hargreaves, 2010). For Hargreaves (2010), “the prime enemy of educational change, is actually social and political conservatism” of educational reformers that limit the scope of teachers working conditions and student learning conditions in schools (pg. 153).

A similar phenomenon is happening in teacher unions. In writing about social justice teacher unions, Kim Scipes (2015) suggests that “union members [are] becoming discontented over working conditions in the schools and feeling a definite lack of union power on the job” making it difficult for some union members to prioritize social justice issues in times of expired contracts, deteriorating working conditions, and attacks on union resources and benefits. He also contends that the “two groupings have emerged despite people on both sides of the issue having long-established positions fighting for union power and social justice.” This study explores how tensions in a competitive political economy, one that stresses workers to the max, can create obstacles to solidarity and social justice.

**Attack of the Hydra**

A political economy based on lean production in the United States is inseparable from the aggressive undermining of public institutions, including public sector unions and public schools. For example, the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2018 *Janus v. AFSCME* decision greatly weakened public sector unions by turning the entire country into a “right-to-work” environment. In education, Bree Picower and Edwin Mayorga (Eds.) (2016) describe the attack on public education as a Hydra with “the internal organs of the Hydra [being] neoliberalism, structural racism, Whiteness and White supremacy, racial capitalism, and accumulation by dispossession” (pg. 4). The multiple heads of the Hydra include standardized testing, mayoral control, school closings, attacks on teacher unions, school choice, franchised charter schools, philanthrocapitalism, and the standardization of curriculum all the way up to teacher preparation programs. All of these Hydra heads reinforce
white supremacy, disproportionately negatively affect low-income communities of color, and facilitate capital accumulation (Picower & Mayorga, 2016). They also all depend on corporate “experts” to sponsor public projects and take over state functions. The state is then absolved from funding public education, and private entities, invested in profitmaking and defending the status quo, dictate what is best for working-class students and students of color. The responsibility for educational failure is then shifted away from the state and its policies onto individual students, teachers, parents, and schools for being unable to succeed (Picower & Mayorga, 2016). The lack of public funding for education also undercuts public sector unions that depend on public funding for the wages and benefits of their members.

Also building on Harvey’s (2005) concept of accumulation by dispossession, Michael Fabricant and Michelle Fine (2013) explain, “The dispossession of those living in poverty, communities of color, and immigrants is intimately linked to the elite accumulation of capital, real estate, opportunities, and bright futures for the young” (pg. 136). The authors show how the effort to make education efficient through privatization by divesting in public schools, overreliance on the financial sector, and redistribution of public assets to for-profit entrepreneurs has reinforced and exacerbated social and economic inequality in schools and society. By rerouting money away from social responsibilities through budget cuts, less taxation of the wealthy, and the interlocking of political, corporate, and philanthropic interests, the private sector has capitalized on “the $500 billion of public assets being redistributed from neighborhood K-12 public schooling to the marketplace” (pg. 25) as overaccumulated capital desperately seeks new sites of profit. Fabricant and Fine (2013) argue that “it is clear that privatization is rolling over public schools—and increasingly universities—in the form of testing, standardization, attacks on tenure and academic freedom, charter networks, vouchers, virtual charters, online education, school closings, stealth
invasion of Boards of Education or Boards of Trustees, and heavy investment in policing and private security forces on site” (pg. 1).

The attack on public institutions is one of the tenets of neoliberalism, which is the current iteration of advanced capitalism. *Business Week* noted as early as 1974 that “it will be a hard pill for many Americans to swallow—the idea of doing with less so that business can have more . . . Nothing that this nation, or any other nation, has done in modern economic history compares in difficulty with the selling job that must now be done to make people accept the new reality” (quoted in Smith, 2006, pg. 229). Neoliberalism gives power to business by drastically reducing workers’ living standards and restoring the power of the ruling class (Harvey, 2005). For example, at the present time as the public is forced to accept budget cuts due to the current economic “crisis,” corporate profits and management bonuses are larger than they were before the 2008 recession, greatly exacerbating income inequality in the United States. In a study of austerity urbanism, Jamie Peck (2015) states, “Analyses conducted by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) have confirmed that the revenue reductions experienced by U.S. states in the protracted economic slump since 2007 have far exceeded those experienced in the three preceding ‘neoliberal recessions.’ . . . At least 46 states and the District of Columbia have enacted deep cuts to services as a result. 43 of the 50 states have cut funding to colleges and universities, 34 have cut K-12 education” (pg. 13). Federal and state governments continue to cut education budgets at the same time as Amazon made $11.2 billion of profits in 2018, practically doubling from the previous year, while not paying any income taxes (Rushe, 2019).

While certain states have struggled to recover from the 2008 recession and per-pupil funding in many states was lower in 2016 than before the 2008 recession, New York State and Pennsylvania are now spending more per student than they were pre-recession. For example, in
Arizona funding was 23 percent lower in 2016 than in 2008 and in Oklahoma funding was 13 percent lower, whereas funding in New York was 15 percent higher in 2016 than 2008 and funding in Pennsylvania was 11 percent higher (Barnum, 2019) (see Appendix C). However, in 2007, the New York State Legislature enacted the Education Budget and Reform Act that committed to a funding formula that would increase investment in schools based on need. Even though funding is higher post-recession, the state must still invest $4 billion to meet the funding commitment it made in 2007 (AFT, 2018). As the AFT (2018) reports, “This is important context for understanding the extent to which all states are underfunding education—New York ranks first for its support for schools simply because austerity and tax cutting has been worse in other states” (pg. 91). In 2011, as explained in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, former Governor Tom Corbett cut education funding by 13 percent in Pennsylvania. While local funds have helped recover per-pupil spending, “poorer school districts [like Philadelphia] suffered disproportionately from the harm of the cuts” (AFT, 2018, pg. 103).

Pauline Lipman (2011) argues that educational policy is an essential part of neoliberal urban restructuring. The same way neighborhoods are neglected, excluded, and then “revitalized,” public schools are also underfunded and segregated—set up to fail—and then privatized to prevent further obstacles to the neoliberal project. Lipman shows how schools are “unique drivers of gentrification processes [and] . . . produce the necessary conditions for [urban] restructuring through the erasure and production of neighborhood and city identities” (Nguyen, Cohen, & Huff, 2017, pg. 5). Geographers, on the other hand, portray schools as a late-stage aspect of gentrification and displacement processes rather than the driving force. Middle-class families try to change schools or open new schools once they move into communities that have differing identities from their own (Nguyen et al., 2017). Either way, in a review of the literature, Bradley Quarles and
Alisha Butler (2018) found that lower income and minority children of long-time residents did not always benefit from gentrification and that schools were less responsive to their needs. Sarah Diem and Anjalé Welton (2017) similarly found that “While on the outset gentrification may look beneficial, attracting tourists and increasing the economy in areas once thought to be left behind, when it comes to education, ‘gentrification, it turns out, usually stops at the schoolhouse door’ . . . schools remain segregated and of low quality, making them prime for school closure and/or reconstitution as charter schools” (pg. 222).

Lipman (2011) admits that:

There is an urgent need to transform public institutions, starting with a thoroughgoing critique of the racism, inequity, bureaucratic intransigency, reproduction of social inequality, reactionary ideologies, disrespect, and toxic culture that pervades many public schools and school districts that purport to serve working class and low-income children of color . . . The resonance of the neoliberal discourse speaks to the failure of progressives to frame a counter discourse and vision of a more inclusive, democratic, robust ‘public’ that brings to the fore perspectives, interests, and visions of marginalized groups: women, people of color, immigrants, sexually marginalized people, and so on (pg. 65).

While the neoliberal discourse may resonate, it also expresses major contradictions between creating democratic and inclusive conditions for capital accumulation in the free market filled with choice and opportunity and managing potential resistance to exploitative conditions through violent control (Lipman, 2011). At the same time as neoliberal policies were beginning to spread in the early 1970s, Kathleen Nolan (2018) explains that the United States prioritized crime as a main issue so that the “societal crime control project has expanded into virtually all civil institutions, supported by the growing use of private security forces, new security technologies, and the police” (pg. 310) and, as a racialized process, has been used to control “poor people of color, particularly those living in urban communities that have been decimated by deindustrialization, drastic cuts in social welfare, and growing economic polarization” (pg. 311). Schools modeled their policing structures after their growing local policing programs and, today,
hire more police officers than counselors. Nolan (2018) argues that school policing programs are reflections and extensions of larger social inequalities so that black, native, and Latinx students are more likely than white students to be arrested. In addition, the arrest rate is higher for students with disabilities and students living in poverty. Nolan calls for a shift from a law enforcement paradigm in schools to one focused on education and child development. She warns that policing will continue to have unequal outcomes based on race, class, and disability status in a country like the United States that relies on the criminal justice system and aggressive policing to deal with its social problems, to facilitate accumulation by dispossession, and to control those who are most likely to resist the neoliberal project.

The racialized discourse needed for neoliberalism to succeed also militates against the historical struggles of people of color and neighborhoods of color as sites of intellectual, political, and cultural production (Lipman, 2011). For example, those advocating for gentrification and privatization of public spaces often blame people in poverty and people of color for not caring for their neighborhoods and education, even though, throughout history, these same people have been willing to die for their communities and for their schools. Recently, in 2015, 12 parents, grandparents, and community members staged a successful 24-day hunger strike to fight against the closure of Walter H. Dyett High School, which was the last remaining public high school in Bronzeville, a black neighborhood in the south side of Chicago. Dyett reopened in 2016; however, the hunger strike was not only about public education but also about “racial justice, self-determination, and community control over urban space” in a quickly gentrifying neighborhood (Nguyen et al., 2017, pg.2). Nguyen et al. (2017) argue, “In confronting the racialized destruction of public schools, communities construct strong emotional and place-based attachments to neighborhood schools. Such attachments transform schools into critical rallying points for
community resistance to racialized gentrification projects” (pg. 5). Privatization, gentrification, and policing make Lipman’s call for a “more inclusive, democratic, robust ‘public’ that brings to the fore perspectives, interests, and visions of marginalized groups” an urgent project.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and many of its locals across the country, including those in New York City and Philadelphia, has been complicit in the erosion of public unions and public schools. In a quest to keep a seat at the table with big business and the government that supports the union in defensive times, the AFT compromised over charter schools and school closings, accepted an evaluation system for teachers based on standardized tests, and gave up the fight for greater control of curriculum and smaller class sizes. With its concessionary bargaining tactics, the AFT is in a weakened position to fight deteriorating working conditions and job security. The 2018 strikes in Republican states that forced an increase in state funding for education began with the disapproval of the AFT and the National Education Association (NEA). An integral part of the neoliberal project is attacking labor unions into conciliation and submission. One of the goals of this dissertation is to provide a potential counter narrative as framed by social justice activists in teacher unions fighting to defend public education.

**Racialized Capitalism**

Picower and Mayorga (2016) name neoliberalism as one organ of the Hydra and racial capitalism as another. Barbara Jeanne Fields (1990) explains that race is an ideology that came into being for historical reasons and can thus change with historical times. She contends, “Ideologies do not need to be plausible, let alone persuasive, to outsiders. They do their job when they help insiders make sense of the things they do and see—ritually, repetitively—on a daily basis” (pg. 110). Racial ideology was needed in the United States so that “free” society would accept a group of enslaved people in a nation founded on liberty. Fields argues racial ideology maintained a
hierarchy between planters, overseers, poor white non-slave-holders, and enslaved African Americans in order to make profit, since “the object [of slavery] was to produce cotton or sugar or rice or tobacco, not to produce white supremacy” (pg. 111). Racism and capitalism are intricately connected in the United States; the construction of race is based both in ideology and material conditions.

For W.E.B. Du Bois (1935/1962), race and class are mutually determining under capitalism. “Black men became a central thread in the history of the United States,” Du Bois explains, “At once a challenge to its democracy and always an important part of its economic history and social development” (pg. 3). Du Bois argues that at first the white worker opposed “slavery not so much from moral as from the economic fear of being reduced by competition to the level of slaves . . . Then, gradually, as succeeding immigrants were thrown in difficult and exasperating competition with black workers, their attitude changed” (pg. 18). As Botwinick (1993) and Moody (2017) also argue, competition divides the working class, which is then internalized and reproduced by workers as they feel unable and hopeless to change the system. The missed opportunity for solidarity has clear origins: “The plight of the white working class throughout the world today is directly traceable to Negro slavery in America, on which modern commerce and industry was founded” (Du Bois, 1935/1962, pg. 30). Labor in the United States still bears the marks of how capitalism and white supremacy, another way of describing “racialized social systems” (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, pg. 9), often, but not always, prevented black and white workers from uniting as a class, to the detriment of both.

Historian David Roediger (1991) states, “Du Bois argued that white supremacy undermined not just working-class unity but the very vision of many white workers” (pg. 13), since white workers, upon their arrival to the United States between 1800 and 1865, developed working-class
consciousness and a sense of whiteness simultaneously. In order to find their place in the exploitative and oppressive capitalist system, white workers defined themselves as not black in order to differentiate “free” labor from slave labor and to later decelerate job competition from freed slaves. However, in describing how white workers have historically internalized whiteness, Roediger at times overemphasizes the agency of white workers without naming the limited opportunities often available to white workers in an exploitative system dependent on racial oppression. As Fields (1990) reminds us, “The object [of slavery] was to produce cotton or sugar or rice or tobacco, not to produce white supremacy” (pg. 111). Nonetheless, Roediger (1991) provides valuable examples of white workers enacting whiteness within an alienating and degrading capitalist society, and Du Bois (1935/1962) provides a powerful argument that capitalism harms the class interests of both black and white workers. The moments of interracial solidarity throughout U.S. labor history, such as in the Knights of Labor, the Alabama and West Virginia coalfields of the early 1900s, the 1934 International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union strike in San Francisco, and the Communist-led Alabama sharecroppers’ union during the Great Depression show that some white workers responded to competition by building interracial class movements rather than reproducing racial divisions (Kelly, 2001; Nelson, 2001; Letwin, 1998; Goldfield, 1997; Kelley, 1990). These interracial labor movements are

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6 Roediger (1991) is one of the early scholars in the field of critical whiteness studies, which analyzes whiteness as a means to expose and work towards eliminating racism and white privilege (Picower, 2009; Gillborn, 2005; Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Ignatiev, 1995). There are tensions in the field as to whether scholars of whiteness, who are mostly white themselves, are part of the field of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and/or Ethnic Studies, as some scholars are skeptical that white scholars can use CRT without co-opting the voices of people of color, appropriating the experiences of people of color, and/or using CRT to promote the interests of white people (Bergerson, 2003).

7 Wage gaps do exist between black and white workers. In addition, overall hourly wages have been dropping for all workers since the 1980s, and workers in the South, with a history of de jure segregation and discrimination, are the lowest-paid workers in the United States (Parker & Gruelle, 1999). Parker and Gruelle (1999) argue, “The white advantage accrued from centuries of racism has never prevented low wages for many white workers nor employer attacks on white workers’ living standards. On the contrary, it weakens the ability of unions to fight to raise everyone’s living standards” (pg.74).

8 These examples of interracial unionism are impressive and still fraught with racial tensions. Labor struggles in an interracial union do change the views of many white workers on race and lead some to fight for racial equality beyond
necessary because racial wage gaps decrease with high unionization. As Mike Parker and Martha Gruelle (1999) argue, in 1979, “In the then highly unionized industrial Midwest, the racial wage gap was less than one percent . . . The decline of unions in that region since that time, along with concessions and the decay of pattern bargaining, brought the Black-white wage gap among workers in the Midwest doing the same work back up to 14 percent by 1989” (pg. 75). They then add, “Not coincidentally, everyone’s real pay fell during the same period” (Parker & Gruelle, 1999, pg. 75).

In discussing a different period of racial capitalism, Jodi Melamed (2006) uses the concept of racial liberalism to show how the state today uses “economic, ideological, cultural, and religious distinctions to produce lesser personhoods” while at the same time defining itself as an antiracist state that gives every citizen equal opportunity through the market and thus can “justify inequality for some as fair or natural” (pg. 14). Racial liberalism promotes the idea of a racially inclusive U.S. national culture. However, it becomes a liberal freedom that works to rationalize some forms of humanity as less worthy than others. She states, “Race remains a procedure that justifies the nongeneralizability of capitalist wealth. Race continues to fuse technologies of racial domination with liberal freedoms to represent people who are exploited or cut off from capitalist wealth as outsiders to liberal subjectivity for whom life can be disallowed to the point of death” (pg. 2). In

the union. However, other white workers choose to fight their employer alongside workers of color because of interest convergence rather than a deep commitment to racial equality and racial justice (Bell, 1980). For example, in reflecting on the 1920 United Mine Workers (UMW) strike in the Alabama coalfields, Brian Kelly states, “Exceptional though the UMW’s interracialism was by contemporary standards, however, among most white miners—including union stalwarts—thoroughgoing egalitarianism never managed to supplant the racialist assumptions they shared with every stratum of the white South” (pg. 188). He adds, “As an interracial organization, the UMW became a site where black miners attempted to push the limits of racial justice, but in a society that inscribed white supremacy so indelibly in everyday life, relations between black and white trade unionists inevitably reflected the potential for a break with tradition and the enduring power of racial custom to shape the present” (pg. 188). During the strike, all workers “navigated the treacherous boundary between conforming to racial protocol and challenging it openly” (pg. 190); it was the struggle itself that opened up the possibility for defying racial norms. Many white workers changed their views of race in struggle with black workers, however, the racism and “color line” ingrained in every societal structure in the South and the aggressive tactics of employers to divide workers by race meant interracial unionism, though it had the potential, was unable to be sustained over time and to change the racist social structures of the U.S. South beyond the union.
this way, corporate school reformers use the language of the Civil Rights Movement to claim that their free-market educational policies are the solution to racism. Brian Jones (2015) explains that New York City schools Chancellor Joel Klein “praised charter school chain CEO Eva Moskowitz as literally fulfilling the promise of the Supreme Court’s historic Brown v. Board of Education decision” (pg. 85) and at a fundraiser organized by hedge fund managers for charter schools, a banker from Goldman Sachs, “referred to charter schools as ‘the civil rights struggle of my generation’” (pg. 84). Charter schools, school choice, and vouchers are presented as civil rights against unequal and racist public schools. However, Jones (2015) argues, “The ‘antiracism’ of education reform actually reduces the wealth and power of Black people [by undermining the public sector unionization of African Americans] . . . and the actual Civil Rights Movement explicitly challenged the idea that the free market could deliver Black people from racism” (pg. 82). The use of the free market in the name of “antiracism” actually is an attack on black teachers and public sector unions that have historically been a means of social mobility for many African Americans in the United State (Jones, 2015). Fabricant and Fine (2017) add, “No longer tethered to a collective notion of equity, ‘choice’ has become a proxy for exit from, not integration within, the public sector” (pg. 90).

In the framework of racial liberalism, a commitment to “diversity” is used in education to mask racial injustice. It is a superficial “thin” diversity about numbers that makes white people feel better about themselves rather than a “thick” diversity that is inclusive and actually corrects past injustice to improve the lives of nonwhite individuals (Leong, 2013). For example, universities overrepresent students of color in their promotional material as a marketing tool for students and faculty who value diversity. “The percentage of blacks and Asians portrayed in viewbooks is more that [sic] 50% higher than the percentage of blacks and Asians enrolled in
schools. Moreover . . . 75% of schools in the sample appeared to overrepresent black students in their materials” (pg. 2192), Leong (2013) highlights. In addition, enrolling diverse student bodies helps universities increase their status in *U.S. News rankings* (Leong, 2013). Leong (2013) explains further:

The diversity rationale thus provides a classic example of Bell’s theory of interest convergence: progress for nonwhite people occurs only when it benefits white people as well. The second irony, related to the first, is that the diversity rationale confers on white people and predominantly white institutions the *power* to determine the value of nonwhiteness. . . . If a white majority at a school comes to perceive that there is “enough” diversity, for example, the marginal value of nonwhiteness diminishes. For instance, overrepresentation of Asian students in higher education has led to their exclusion from many affirmative action programs, indicating a devaluation of their nonwhiteness (pg. 2171-2)

While white workers competing for scarce resources reproduce racial prejudices, wealthier white Americans and the U.S. state embrace racial capitalism as they hide behind a discourse of diversity and of equal opportunity in the market.

**Teaching as a Female and Devalued Profession**

Not only is race used to divide workers in a competitive workplace, but divisions based on gender are also used to enhance profitmaking. While omitted from the metaphor of the Hydra, women’s oppression is endemic to capitalism based on women’s traditional role in the property-owning family. Women are held responsible for paid labor, unpaid domestic labor, and the reproduction of labor power, which remains in the private sphere so as not to be a social burden for capital. Women today still make significantly less than men for the same job. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), women make 80.7 cents for every dollar a man makes and earn almost $10,000 less than men each year. In addition, sexual harassment continues to be rampant, as exposed by the #MeToo movement, and control over women’s bodies remains a contentious social
and political issue with a plethora of states passing restrictive abortion laws in 2019.\textsuperscript{9,10} Also, teachers, overwhelmingly female, in most U.S. states do not receive paid parental leave.

Work in schools in the United States has always been gender polarized: women are teachers and men are administrators (Blount, 2005). The beginnings of public education and teacher training in the United States occurred in the 1830s when classroom teaching was done largely by women. Female educators were less expensive for the state to pay than male educators because female educators were assumed to be carrying out their “natural” attributes of caring for children, while men were “professionals” (Goldstein, 2014; Ravitch, 1974/2000).\textsuperscript{11} Until women’s suffrage was legalized in 1920, women could not vote on school issues that had direct effects on their working conditions, and married women could not teach until after World War II. As women gained more independence as educators earning wages and living independently, male supervisors were hired for oversight (Blount, 2005). The statistics of staff by gender in schools has not changed much over the last hundred years. In 2000, 87 percent of administrators in the United States were men, and in 2001, 79 percent of teachers were women. Similarly, in 1910, 91 percent of administrators were men, and in 1912, an article in \textit{Atlantic Monthly} reported that 89 percent of

\textsuperscript{9} The \#MeToo movement began in 2017 in the United States and is a movement against sexual harassment and sexual assault. Activist and community organizer Tarana Burke began using the phrase “me too” in 2006. The hashtag \#MeToo went viral in the fall of 2017 when tens of thousands of people, including many celebrities, shared \#MeToo stories. Workplaces across the United States were forced to make changes in response to the \#MeToo movement to improve sexual harassment policies.

\textsuperscript{10} In 2019, the state of Alabama passed the most restrictive abortion legislation in the United States making abortion at any stage a felony, even in the case of rape and incest. Georgia and Ohio passed “heartbeat” laws banning abortion once a fetal heartbeat is detected. Mississippi and Kentucky also passed fetal heartbeat laws that have been challenged in the courts. Other states have also passed restrictive abortion laws as anti-abortion groups and politicians seek to overturn \textit{Roe v. Wade}, the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that protects a pregnant woman’s right to choose to have an abortion.

\textsuperscript{11} Throughout this dissertation, I use the term “educators” rather than “teachers,” especially when referring to social justice caucus members. A teacher is someone who is qualified to teach through having a certification and treats teaching like a job. An educator is someone for whom teaching is a passion and a deep personal commitment and who builds relationships with students and attempts to improve their learning conditions. There are many educators working with children in schools who do not have a teaching certification. In some cases in this dissertation, I use the term “teacher” if it is used in a citation or when referring to the job of the teacher in its technical signification.
New York City teachers and 91.4 percent of Philadelphia teachers were women (Blount, 2005, pg. 25). Female educators have always wanted more autonomy in their classrooms, but male administrators exclude classroom educators from making decisions about their most basic needs, including overcrowding, scheduling, and control of space and movement in schools (Rousmaniere, 1997).

In addition, while men were able to have careers in schools, traditional definitions of “careers” demeaned women who worked as educators. Biklen (1995) explains: “Teaching, nursing, and social work, labeled ‘semiprofessions’ (Etzioni, 1969), are differentiated from ‘full’ professions by shorter training, a lack of control over technical knowledge, lower status, less right to privileged communication, and decreased autonomy from supervision or societal control. Teaching, like other semiprofessions, is women’s work” (pgs. 26-7). When teaching is defined within male working patterns there is no consideration of family life, interruptions in work due to childcare, and the few promotions within teaching. “Measured against categories that divide life into public and private realms and privilege,” Biklen (1995) argues, “the public realm while excluding women from leadership in that realm, teachers appear not to have careers” (pg. 46).

With little control in the workplace and a devalued profession, female educators began to demand changes beginning in the late nineteenth century. In 1900, the Chicago Teachers Federation, with Margaret Haley as its leader, fought for higher pay, educator autonomy in the classroom, and political power for female educators against the male-dominated management of the school system (Murphy, 1990). Haley argued, “The teacher must have recognition in the educational system as an educator. The tendency is to relegate her to the position of a factory hand, or a taker of orders from above” (cited in Murphy, 1990, pg. 56). In New York City, female educators were also politically active in response to the centralized management of education in
the early 1920s that severed the connection between educators and their communities. New York City educators fought for salary raises, job protections, and employment benefits as well as women’s rights to equal salary schedules and challenged laws against married women educators (Rousmaniere, 1997). However, according to administrators, “The truly ‘professional’ teacher was one who accommodated to and voluntarily participated in the expectations of the established authority structure” (Rousmaniere, 1997, pg. 24). Those in power in education in the early 1900s described activist educators as “descending ‘to a lower plane of social life’ where ‘selfishness and acquisitiveness’ replace ‘honor, integrity, patriotism and love’” (Murphy, 1990, pg. 59).

These views of female educators continue today. In April 2016, the Chicago Teachers Union led a day of action against the lack of a state budget, which had placed a tremendous financial burden on public institutions across the city and state. Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner, who had refused all year to provide any funding for both K-12 schools and the state’s public higher education system, issued a statement in response to the strike, saying, “It’s shameful that Chicago’s children are the victims in this raw display of political power. Walking out on kids in the classroom, leaving parents in the lurch and thumbing their nose at taxpayers—it’s the height of arrogance from those we’ve entrusted with our children’s futures,” (Perez, J, Eltagouri, M., Lee, W., & Kuang, J., 2016). Jon Shelton (2017) argues that the backlash against striking educators is in large part the result of teaching being largely a female profession and so educator strikes defy gender norms in the United States. First, female educators are playing their “natural” role as caregivers and so striking is selfish. Second, “women’s natural affinity for moral guidance” makes striking subversive as female educators seize control over their workplace, often by breaking the law (Shelton, 2017, pg. 29). Female educators then and now attempting to resist and transform
education are seen as selfish, while female educators who reproduce society’s mainstream narratives are seen as having honor and integrity.

While female educators continue to face subordination in schools, lesbian educators are further harassed in schools. During the McCarthy era, it was necessary to abide by gender norms as educators considered Communists or homosexuals would lose their credentials. In addition, it was not until 1974 that the NEA added sexual orientation to its nondiscrimination statement in response to a rank-and-file movement of the Gay Teachers Caucus. The AFT finally took a stance in 1977 on discrimination on the basis of personal rights rather than support of homosexuality (Blount, 2005). Queer educators in many parts of the United States continue to face social resistance, are harassed, and lack job protections. Blount (2005) argues that “without question, school work remains highly sex-stratified, gender-polarized, and hostile to those who desire persons of the same sex or manifest unconventional gender” (pg. 186). Throughout history, gendered divisions among school staff have reflected the gendered divisions in capitalist society, keeping a majority female teaching profession underfunded, undervalued, and with little power in the workplace.

**Tensions in Education**

Education, like every space in our society, is riddled with tensions, contradictions, and fissures; it is a gateway to liberation for some and a prison for others. In a dissertation that attempts to understand the tensions within teacher union caucuses, it is important to examine the contradictions in the two main spaces these educator activists inhabit: the school and the labor union.

*Reproduction vs. Resistance in Schooling*
A major debate in education among critical theorists is whether education is a site of reproduction of societal inequality or a place of contestation and resistance. Critical theorists agree education has not served the majority of people well but vary between overemphasizing either determining structures or human agency. While the arguments are more nuanced, they are overwhelmingly cited in opposition to one another. On one side of the debate, Marxist social reproduction theorists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976/2011) argue public schools have been overwhelmingly used to spread the ideas needed for capitalism, including the need to discipline children in order to produce subordinate adults who will serve the capitalist imperatives of profit and domination over human need. Schools thus reproduce and perpetuate the class structure and the system of gender and racial power relationships found in U.S. society under the capitalist mode of production. On the other side of the debate, Henry Giroux (1983) argues social reproduction theorists overemphasize the determining structures of domination and fail to account for the agency and struggle of educators, students, and other school actors. He shows how students do challenge hegemony through complex forms of resistance that go beyond anti-authoritarian behavior. Giroux (1983) states, “Inherent in a radical notion of resistance is an expressed hope, an element of transcendence, for radical transformation” (pg. 108). Giroux believes in the potential of schooling as a site of social transformation.

In the middle of the spectrum, Ira Katznelson, Kathleen Gille, and Margaret Weir (1982) argue that both the progressive tradition and revisionist scholarship “fail to specify an appropriate place for the analysis of the working class and schooling” (pg. 112). They maintain that the working class either appears “so constrained by the logic of capitalism that its members are not free to make meaningful choices” or as inhabiting a world in which there are “virtually no constraints on democratic choice, thus rendering moot a focus on schooling and class” (pgs. 112-113). The
authors show that working-class people are a distinctive group actively making demands within a system that constrains them (Katznelson & Weir, 1985). Schools can be sites of both reproduction and resistance, rather than either/or, depending on the many factors that make education a complex and contradictory terrain.

*Education, a Ticket Out of Poverty?*

Another contradiction lies in the idea that schools are the solution for all social ills; work hard and schooling can be your ticket out of poverty. However, this narrative positions the individual as solely responsible for his or her liberation without questioning larger structural inequalities. For education to be a site of radical possibilities, as a society, Anyon (2014) and Richard Rothstein (2004) argue that we must address policies that maintain poverty, including increasing the minimum wage and Social Security, creating good jobs with benefits and decent pay, supporting union membership, providing affordable housing and comprehensive health services, and enforcing penalties for discrimination, as well as tackling the lack of educational opportunities for all children. According to Anyon (1997), this must be done because “attempting to fix an inner city school without fixing the neighborhood is like trying to clean the air on one side of a screen door” (pg. 168). Rothstein (2004) adds, “Doing something about the wide income gap between lower- and middle-class parents could be one of the most important educational reforms we could consider” (pg. 133) rather than today’s education “reform” policies of standardized testing, school closures, and over-policing. Starting from the lives of students, Fabricant and Fine (2013) show that these “reforms” are branded as demographically neutral and colorblind but are in fact race and class specific and adversely affect low-income youth of color by sending them the message that they are disposable.

Neoliberal education “reforms” focus on the “achievement gap” and on closing that gap to
lift individual students out of poverty. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) demands that we “move from focusing on the gap to tallying the debt” (pg. 9) in order to actually alleviate suffering caused by “the cumulative effect of poor education, poor housing, poor health care, and poor government services [which] create a bifurcated society that leaves more than its children behind” (pg. 10). She points to the historical debt in which students of color historically and today attend segregated schools with fewer resources; the economic debt which assures that schools serving majority students of color continue to receive less funding than schools serving white students and that wealth throughout society is disproportionately distributed in favor of its white citizens; the sociopolitical debt that has prevented communities of color from participating in civic life thus excluding them “from the decision-making mechanisms that should ensure that their children receive quality education” (pg. 7); and finally the moral debt of a nation built on slavery and imperialism. While education can be a powerful liberatory tool for some, schools are constrained by and reproduce larger structural inequalities that affect student learning on a daily basis. Focusing only on schooling will never be a society’s way of abolishing poverty.\textsuperscript{12}

\textit{Colorblindness & Dysconscious Racism among Educators}

Not only are there contradictions in the idea of schools as great class equalizers but also in their supposed ability to be race equalizers. Schools are tasked with giving every child an equal opportunity to learn and succeed. However, nationally, over half of public school students are now from minoritized groups compared to an overwhelmingly white—84 percent—teaching force (Hrabowski & Sanders, 2015).\textsuperscript{13} In New York City, about 85 percent of the student body is students of color (Data at a Glance, 2018) and 58 percent of teachers are white (Disare, 2018). In

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\begin{enumerate}
\item See footnote 2
\item The term “minoritized” refers to the structural and institutional “process [action vs. noun] of student minoritization” that led to the [mis]construction of certain students as “minorities” (Benitez, 2010, pg. 131).
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Philadelphia, 86 percent of the student body is students of color (District View, 2018) and approximately 71 percent of teachers are white (Mezzacappa, 2017). Many educators lack the training needed to understand the racial dynamics that exist in schools and classrooms. Studies of white pre-service teachers expose the seemingly race-neutral views of these educators. Picower (2009) found that pre-service teachers expressed a sense of anxiety in situations with people of color based on stereotypes, had deficit understandings of students and their families, believed white people were the real victims of racism, and kept silent about issues of race. In another survey of white pre-service teachers, Christine Sleeter (1993) found that not a single educator critiqued white-supremacist institutions when being surveyed about the effects of race in their classrooms. Joyce King (1997) calls it a “dysconscious racism” among white educators, who take for granted a system of racial privilege and societal stratification that benefit white people. White educators may deplore racism but often lack an understanding of white privilege and white supremacy. In her famous essay, Peggy McIntosh (1997) explains, “As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage” (pg. 291). Many educators embody the ideology of color-blind racism, which “explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics . . . Whites rationalize minorities’ contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks’ imputed cultural limitations” (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, pg. 2). In his study, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2014) found that all white people, even the most progressive, denoted the influence of color-blind racism in their interviews.

I am not arguing here that white educators lack racial knowledge. Instead, as Zeus Leonardo (2009) argues, “Constructing whites as knowledgeable about race has two advantages:
one, it holds them self-accountable to race-based decisions and actions; two, it dismantles their innocence in exchange for a status as full participants in race relations” (pg. 108). It is of critical importance that white educators understand and fight against white privilege and white supremacy, as the formation of racial identity in schools greatly effects all students but adversely influences students of color leading to lower levels of academic success. Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986) claim black students deliberately resist academic success to avoid “acting white” in order to oppose the white dominated school system. The oppositional social identity protects black youth from the psychological assaults of racism. Analyzing African-American racial identity formation, Beverly Tatum (1997) agrees, “Joining one’s peers for support in the face of stress is a positive coping strategy. What is problematic is that the young people are operating with a very limited definition of what it means to be black, based largely on cultural stereotypes” (pg. 62). In addition, “acting white” means society places authentic identity for black students “in poor, segregated neighborhoods. Real blacks reside there and they act, talk, and behave in legitimately black ways. When they do not follow these prescriptions, their authenticity is questioned” (Leonardo, 2009, pg. 151). Tatum (1997) adds that since white students have no understanding of the systematic advantages afforded to them because of their race, they perpetuate racial inequalities in school due to ignorance, fear, and misunderstanding. Leonardo (2009) exposes how educators, policy makers, and white people perceive urban children of color as hopeless, uneducable, and unworthy of the right to a good education because they come from a “culture of poverty” that makes their families lazy, irresponsible, and deviant. While schools are spaces of liberation for many students, the racial dynamics within schools prevent all students from activating their full potential.

*Educator Professionalism vs. Educator Activism*

Not only do tensions arise between educators and students around race issues in schools,
but also because of the positions of power educators hold within schools. First, students are forced to attend school while educators choose this as a profession. Second, teaching has been an avenue for upward mobility for working-class people and for minoritized people setting them apart from the communities they may have grown up in. Third, Murphy (1990) and Biklen (1995) argue that defining teachers as professionals removes teachers from community politics and prevents cooperative relationships from forming creating a divide between teachers and the communities they serve. For example, during the 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville United Federation of Teachers strike, UFT President Albert Shanker stated that “unionized teachers would never ‘teach in any school or district where professional decisions are made by laymen’” (quoted in Brier, 2014, pg. 192). While the first educators in the United States relied heavily on communities for housing, their livelihood, and support, during the Progressive reform era of the 1890s, professionalization was used to instill in educators “a sense of loyalty not to the community, but to the school principal, superintendent, and educational professoriate” (Murphy, 1990, pg. 23). In addition, Biklen (1995) argues that women’s lack of leadership roles in schools and lack of agency in the bureaucratic educational system and the demeaning definitions of teaching all due to gender discrimination led many female educators to seek power in professionalism. However, the professional model made educators and communities adversaries rather than partners. In addition, Biklen (1995) argues that it “cannot question the social devaluation of women’s work. It simply attempts to change the nature of the category by constructing the occupation more closely to the gendered model of the professions” (pgs. 45-6). Over time, educators reported feeling alienated by the ideology of professionalism as it put more emphasis on the individual rather than the collective at work (Rousmaniere, 1997). Nonetheless, professionalism was embraced by school educators because professionalism has always been “Janus-faced:”
On one side it would inure teachers to a hierarchical system that automatically defined their subordinate position, first as perpetual student, and then in the classroom as subject of supervision. On the other side professionalism promised autonomy and dignity. . . to promote professionalism was to tempt professional organization, to beg the question of salaries, and to instill notions of autonomy in the classroom (Murphy, 1990, pg. 44).

While professionalism is important to educators, the way it was enacted in the 20th century has been problematic in dividing educators and the communities they serve.

More recently, the neoliberal attacks on the teaching profession have led many to question the condition of teachers’ work and the position of educators in U.S. society. Raewyn Conell (2009) argues that across the English-speaking countries “neoliberalism is profoundly suspicious of professionalism; it regards professions as anti-competitive monopolies. Specifically, neoliberalism distrusts teachers” (pg. 217), and especially teacher unions since neoliberal school management focuses on the individual and tries to eliminate any collective agency of workers. The increased feelings of powerlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement that educators experience in the neoliberal era have led educators to question their place in society and realize the need for alliances with communities rather than antagonistic relationships (Ravitch, 2013; Hagopian & Greene, 2012; Lipman, 2011). For example, during the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union strike, the message of the strike was that teachers’ working conditions are students’ learning conditions. Teachers can be professionals and embrace the needs of the communities they serve.

Many analysts argue for the liberatory and transformative potential of educators and their professional organizations (Connell, 2009; Weiner, 2012; Sachs, 2000; Aronowitz & Giroux 1985). Judyth Sachs (2000) presents a new type of educator professionalism that is based on inclusiveness, collaboration, respect of all parties involved, and trust: “its raison d’être is fundamentally political” (pg. 77). “Activist professionals” challenge the stereotype of the passive, selfish, and apolitical educator in order to create partnerships with students, parents, and
communities that lead to collective action to improve schools. Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux (1985) call educators “transformative intellectuals,” who are aware of societal inequities and consider schools as sites of political struggle providing students with alternative discourses and critical social practices. Transformative intellectuals have the potential to be counterhegemonic and can collectively organize with parents, students, and community members to challenge inequality and injustice while enabling students to be critical agents who have the tools to change and transform their lives. Furthermore, they understand that teacher unions and collective teacher action can bring about social change (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985).

Educator activism is rare in discussions around educator preparation and educator professionalism, but it is necessary, in order to make structural changes to the system, to see educators existing beyond the classroom and the school. Picower (2012) argues that for teacher activists “there is no clear path and the most helpful literature is often split across many disciplines and topics . . . the literature of these fields is often theoretical . . . [and] focuses on individual teachers and what they do inside their classrooms rather than looking at collective action and movement-building” (pg. 562). This dissertation focuses on educators who are aware of the tensions and contradictions inherent in public schooling and who organize as political change agents to move in and through these tensions in their attempts to transform education with and for the entire community.

Tensions in Labor

Like education, unions give working people opportunities for social mobility, while also being sites of contradictions and exclusions.¹⁴ Throughout history and still today, the labor

¹⁴ Social mobility is inherently contradictory as it gives credence to the capitalist system; traditional unions help workers fight for a place within an exploitative, unequal, and oppressive system rather than demanding an alternative to capitalism.
movement has been constrained and empowered by its formal organizational structures. It has also been slow to organize certain marginalized groups of workers such as immigrant, women, black, and unskilled workers, and at times has failed to support important social movements. Nonetheless, the labor movement has been a source of social mobility and enabled workers to defend themselves against exploitation, and so has always been a site of struggle and liberation.

Organizational Constraints

Labor unions are one of the main vehicles that the working class uses to defend itself and the main means of organization of the working class under capitalism. Unions enable workers to develop class consciousness and defend themselves against their employers but also to act as mediators that negotiate the terms of exploitation of workers under capitalism. Claus Offe and Helmut Wiesenthal (1980) argue that unions are a specific type of organization that emerges at a unique time in the history of the class struggle and exist as worker associations at the hands of capitalist employers. Unlike other organizations, unions face certain dilemmas: First, unions depend on both members’ “willingness to pay” and “willingness to act” (Offe & Wiesenthal, 1980). However, as unions gain power in numbers and in funds, they are prone to becoming more bureaucratic and losing member mobilization; but if unions remain small and militant, they do not have enough funds to strike. In addition, “As union size increases, heterogeneity of members’ positions, occupations, and immediate interests tends to increase, too, which makes it more difficult to formulate generally agreed upon demands to mobilize a common willingness to act” (Offe & Wiesenthal, 1980, pg. 81). These dilemmas are at the center of why many unions in the United States are large, conservatized, hierarchical organizations with little rank-and-file mobilization that rely on external politics more than on membership participation and decision making. Unions are simultaneously the formation workers use to fight exploitation at the
workplace and institutions that limit struggle as they support a capitalist framework that legitimizes their very existence.

Some argue that the institutionalization of unions is a major contributor to labor’s downfall. Succumbing to what Michels (1911/1962) calls “the iron law of oligarchy,” unions prevent and contain worker power and abandon the majority of the American working class through the elevated financial status of union leaders, massive bureaucracies, limited turnover in leadership, and embrace of conservative tactics such as a lack of mobilization of members and the acceptance of no-strike clauses and concessionary contracts. Union leaders are beholden to the organization itself rather than agitating at the workplace (Lichtenstein, 2002; Aronowitz 2014). However, Moody (2010) warns that union bureaucracy was not inevitable but was largely aided when “the state’s wartime labor policy shifted bargaining between the unions and management away from the shop floor and the local union to the level of the federal government . . . The struggle to establish bureaucratic power in the CIO unions was inevitably difficult, long, and politically complex” (pg. 110).

Another constraint for unions is that many are tied to the Democratic Party, though it is not a party of labor. Aronowitz (2014) maintains:

Unions rely on the mainstream political power structure rather than their own resources for gains. They have poured hundreds of millions into electing Democrats to national and state offices and relegated the grassroots organization of workers to the margins. Make no mistake. The major unions have the money to organize, but their strategy has shifted decisively to the political arena (pg. 10) . . . Organized labor is integrated into the prevailing political and economic system; so much so that it not only complies with the law but also lacks an ideology opposed to the prevailing capitalist system (pg. 20).

Throughout its history, the Democratic Party has successfully coopted and absorbed key activists in the labor movement, Populist and Progressive parties, Civil Rights movement, and Black Power movements, while organized labor has been one of the most powerful interest groups inside the
Democratic Party. As Howard Zinn (1980/2013) explains, “[W]here a threatening mass movement developed, the two-party system stood ready to send out one of its columns to surround that movement and drain it of vitality” (pg. 295). Moreover, the government, led by both Democrat and Republican presidents, passed laws, such as the 1947 Taft-Hartley and 1959 Landrum-Griffin acts, and secured various U.S. Supreme Court decisions that drastically limited the strike power of unions and further bureaucratized and narrowed the functions unions could provide for their members (Lichtenstein, 2002). In teacher unions specifically, Karen Lewis, former president of the Chicago Teachers Union, states, “In education, we don’t have political allies we can count on. It’s one place Democrats and Republicans can agree” (Bradbury et al, 2014, pg. 183).

Nonetheless, Kim Voss and Rachel Sherman (2000) argue that conservative, business/service-style unions can and have changed due to a “political crisis within the local union, an influx of outsiders into the local, and centralized pressure from the international union” (pg. 305). John Ahlquist and Margaret Levi (2013) add that unions can have strong political activism if they have already won the material successes members need and demand. They argue, “Even trusted and principled leaders must first provide for the material well-being of their constituents before they can effectively expand the scope of actions around which they can readily expect member compliance” (pg. 276). As activists transform business/service-style unions into social justice unions, bread and butter issues still remain a focal point of labor organizing.

Although the failures of business/service-style unionism have played a major role in the decline of the labor movement, falling rates of profit, deindustrialization, automation, relocation

15 Labor unions spent more than ever before, overwhelmingly on Democratic Party candidates, in the 2016 elections. However, the top five donors to super PACs supporting Democratic candidates were all billionaires. “In total, super PAC donations by rich people giving more than $500,000 topped $757 million by Oct. 19. That’s nearly six times the amount donated by labor,” reported Jamieson and Blumenthal (2016) in HuffPost. Nonetheless, in Nevada in 2016, Democrats swept the elections because “the army on the ground is fueled by labor… the unions know how to knock on doors and have conversations with voters on issues they care about and translate that into action” (Hernandez, 2018).
of factories, financialization, and rollbacks of labor protections, the hallmarks of this current era in late capitalism, have also greatly curtailed the power of unions (Moody, 2017; Windham, 2017; Brenner, Brenner, & Winslow, 2010). In analyzing the unionization attempts of the 1970s, Lane Windham (2017) argues that “it is not enough to blame lousy labor leaders or an individualistic working-class culture for labor’s decline. In fact, employer resistance to organizing was a far more effective culprit” (pg. 8). As employers compete for profits, they cut employee benefits, wages, job security, and the power to collectively bargain. Nonetheless, unions continue to be a source of economic mobility for those who can join them. According to the AFL-CIO, union members make higher wages—$204 more per week—and have better benefits, safer working conditions, and better working conditions without fear of retaliation as compared to their nonunion counterparts (What Unions Do, 2018). In 2017, full-time and salary union members had median weekly earnings of $1,041 compared to median weekly earnings of $829 for nonunion members (BLS, 2018). Unions are complex spaces simultaneously filled with major tensions and tremendous potential.

Organizing the Unorganized

Another critique of the labor movement is that unions have failed to defend the rights of women and black workers and refused to organize the unemployed, immigrants, and young workers. The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), the largest federation of unions in the United States, includes unions that represent police, border control, and immigration officers who have problematic relationships with people of color and immigrants in the United States. Only in 2000 did the AFL-CIO reverse its policy on immigration calling for undocumented immigrants to be granted citizenship and only in 2015 did it create a
Labor Commission on Racial and Economic Justice to address racial issues within the labor movement.

When the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was originally founded in 1881, its first president, Samuel Gompers, stated that the organization would not exclude any workingmen. At the same time he declared, “Blacks did not need to be afforded trade union protection because they had ‘no understanding of the philosophy of human rights’” (Singh, 2004, location 328). With the dominance of Jim Crow unionism in the South and racist discrimination in the North, the AFL chose to organize white workers and to sacrifice black workers. Black-white unity did exist in some unions, such as in the International Longshoremen’s Union, the United Mine Workers, and the Industrial Workers of the World. These were remarkable sites of organizing that openly challenged society’s racial norms. However, it was not until the massive migration of black men and women to the North during World War I and the creation of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) in 1936, which targeted all workers unorganized by the AFL, including black workers, that black unionism began to grow. Nonetheless, much of the labor movement in the North and South excluded black workers through discriminatory membership practices, the creation of separate black locals within unions where black workers could only get inferior jobs, discrimination in hiring and promotion within jobs as well as in union leadership, and union lack of support for integrated neighborhoods and affordable housing (Foner, 1974). In the merger of the AFL and CIO in 1955, AFL-CIO President Walther Reuther insisted on enlisting members regardless of race; however, the AFL-CIO did not play a major role in putting an end to discrimination and segregation. Moreover, the tension between deteriorating job security and seniority for union members and affirmative action for black workers presented challenges to the labor movement that continue today. George Meany, then president of the AFL-CIO, decried President Lyndon
Johnson’s affirmative action plan as an attack on labor (Foner, 1974). In the end, it was the cost of litigation of Title VII cases that forced the AFL-CIO and its unions finally to question seniority rules and support affirmative action (Frymer, 2007). While many unions today organize black workers, the legacy of exclusion continues to play a part in the distrust of the labor movement as a means for racial justice for black communities. In one of my interviews, Aaron, a black educator, explained:

I’m a member of the National Action Network, so I have to align as a person of color, I have to align with Brother Al Sharpton. I don’t believe everything everybody says, but I have to align with him as an ally so that in case I come under attack, I know he has my back. So it’s what side you’re on. The union might not protect me when he can protect me. A few weeks ago, there was a guy that came from the sanitation department . . . There was a noose that was hung on his job. This guy was scared as hell. He came to get help at the National Action Network and that’s the only place he could seek help. His sanitation union could not help him. He did not feel comfortable with them, so he came to the house of justice.16

In addition, the Black Lives Matter movement, which also fights for economic justice, grew outside of the labor movement.

The labor movement has also been slow to organize immigrants who throughout history have been seen as coming to the United States to compete for and take jobs. Until 2000, most of the labor movement favored restrictionist policies and deemed immigrants unorganizable. Ruth Milkman (2006) shows that this was no different in Los Angeles in the 1970s and 1980s where Latinx workers were deemed unorganizable because unions saw them as lazy, uneducated, migrant workers who feared deportation and were content with their low wages. What labor organizers quickly learned as Latinx immigrants organized themselves is that immigrants are highly receptive to unionism. Milkman (2006) highlights at least three reasons why including their strong social

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16 The National Action Network is a civil rights organization founded by the Reverend Al Sharpton in New York City. It has over 100 chapters in cities across the United States and addresses racial justice issues such as police brutality, voting rights, and racial profiling.
networks and tight-knit communities at home and at work, a shared sense of stigmatization that cultivates a sense of unity, and experiences with unions and collective organizations in their home countries that built class consciousness and left-wing political views. The successful Justice for Janitors campaign in Los Angeles in 1990 and 2000 and the victory of the United Farm Workers in the 1965 to 1970 Delano, California grape strike and boycott are a testament to immigrant organizing. These movements build on a strong legacy of immigrant organizing in the United States, which includes the Great Upheaval of 1877 and the movement for the eight-hour day throughout the nineteenth century, both led by recently arrived European immigrants.

Historically, women have also been ignored by the labor movement because of the stereotypes associated with women being in the workforce for only short periods of time before becoming housewives, or being in undervalued and invisible professions, such as domestic housework and caregiving. Women do not appear in labor history literature until the 1970s (Boydston, 1986). Although women historically were perceived as meeker and more morally righteous than men and thus unlikely to break rules and revolt, women led two of the earliest strikes in the United States in factories in Lowell, Massachusetts in the 1840s and in the 1909 Uprising of 20,000 in New York City. “Two in five Black women and one in three white women were in the workforce by 1944” (p.168) Smith (2006) reports, yet in the 1960s and 1970s, women were still organizing and fighting for equal pay, equal treatment, and equal access in the workplace. Today, women continue to challenge stereotypes of being weak and unorganizable as educators and nurses, both majority female professions, are leading today’s labor rebellion. As Windham (2017) argues, “Unions’ slow record on diversity should not obscure workers’ propensity to organize . . . In fact, women and people of color often set the pace for union organizing efforts, encouraging many white men also to sign cards and vote yes, including in the South” (pg. 9). Thus,
unions are among the most diverse institutions in the United States. In 2017, 11.4 percent of men, 10 percent of women, 12.6 percent of black or African American workers, 10.6 percent of white workers, 9.3 percent of Hispanic or Latino workers, and 8.9 percent of Asian workers were union members (BLS, 2018).

*Can Labor and Social Movements Reconcile?*

Even though women and people of color are union advocates, traditional unions disregarded the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and “stood on the wrong side of American political culture” (Lichtenstein, 2002, pg. 178). For example, the AFL-CIO refused to endorse the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. While some unions, like the United Auto Workers with a large black membership, did support the march, Lichtenstein (2002) emphasizes that the increase in rights consciousness of the 1960s and 1970s arose in part due to the lack of mobilization around racial and gender issues by the majority of unions. That emphasis on rights served to undermine class solidarity, replacing collective work rights with individual ones based on race, gender, and other attributes and identities to the detriment of both individual rights and labor. Workers’ rights were won individually in the courts rather than collectively in the workplace. The divide between labor and social movements happened even though, as Lichtenstein (2002) argues, “The civil rights movement and its many heirs replicated the social and political dynamics that had helped the union movement of the 1930s succeed: linking ethnic consciousness and social citizenship, advancing federal power against that of entrenched local elites, and creating a new cadre of ideologically motivated organizers” (pg. 199).

While Lichtenstein (2002) continues to advocate for the power of unions, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (1979) claim that workers are most successful when they are not part of unions. They believe unions may provide job stability and protections, but they limit the
possibility for workers to disrupt power. Unions ultimately led to the demise of worker protests, thus serving the interests of employers, channeling protests into less disruptive forms of political behavior such as through the electoral process, grievance procedures, and the collective bargaining process. Workers fighting for a better workplace are forced to confront not only their employers but also the union itself (Piven & Cloward, 1979). Stephen Lerner (2011) also argues that a social movement against neoliberalism will occur outside of unions because of limitations such as collective bargaining restraints, restrictive legal regulations, and bureaucratic constraints. In focusing this dissertation on social justice caucuses, I disagree with Piven and Cloward (1979) and Lerner (2011). Unions need to be drastically overhauled, but I believe in the power of social justice/movement unionism as allies to social movements, which are also needed.

Historically, there have been moments when rank-and-file activists involved in social movements have pushed the labor movement to directly address certain struggles for social justice creating fragile solidarities between labor and social movements. In 1974 labor feminists formed the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), a national organization of trade union women affiliated with the AFL-CIO. CLUW served as an opposition group within the AFL-CIO pushing local unions and labor federations to support gender equality (Smith, 2014). Activists in CLUW and labor feminists organizing independently of unions worked to “infuse class consciousness into the women’s movement and feminism into the labor movement” (Smith, 2014, pg. 299). Labor feminists organized to create intersectional spaces for working class women because the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s was mostly anti-union, and women faced discrimination in the workplace and within their unions. Similarly to today’s social justice/movement unions, there are
moments when rank-and-file union members create a bridge between labor and social movements.¹⁷

Nonetheless, traditional unions are often excluded from recent social movement literature. Until the social revolts of the late 1960s, sociologists focused on the labor movement and were heavily influenced by Marxist theory. Other social movements were seen as irrational mobs that sociologists had no interest in studying (Goodwin & Jasper, 2009). However, as Milkman (2015) confirms, “Social movements theorists’ attention to labor seemed to evaporate in the 1980s. To some extent this reflected the new attention during that decade to ‘new social movements’ led by Alberto Melucci (1988) and Alain Touraine (1981) . . . [and] even earlier, many sociologists had joined André Gorz (1982) in bidding ‘Farewell to the Working Class’ as an agent of social change” (pg. 170). In a post-industrial and technocratic society, theorists argued that social protest would happen in universities and businesses rather than on the factory floor. However, Keith Mann (2014) argues that the current cycle of labor protests happening in the United States, including the Chicago Teachers strike in 2012, embody enough aspects of social movements to be considered one. The dissertation also seeks to reconcile labor and social movement literature.

**Using Strategic Dilemmas for Labor.**

Social movement scholar Jim Jasper (2004, 2006) writes about strategic dilemmas that extend beyond social movements, since strategic dilemmas are found in “any social interaction, among individuals or organizations or collectivities, in which there is a potential clash of wills” (Jasper, 2004, pg. 12). Strategic dilemmas are part of what Jasper (2006) calls, “A sociology of strategy, looking at the underlying trade-offs that strategists face, trying to explain different

¹⁷ See the section *Fighting for a Union Creates a Bond* for fragile solidarities between labor and movements for civil rights.
choices and patterns, to understand how and why interactions unfold as they do. For it turns out that there are—and can be—no simple prescriptions. Strategic players face a number of dilemmas that cannot be easily resolved” (pg. xiii). As strategic players, labor unions face many strategic dilemmas. Caucuses within unions and individual rank-and-file members also face dilemmas within the union and beyond creating a large amount of strategic choices at any given moment that lead to frequent disagreements, conflicts, and schisms but also have the potential to be sources of creativity and advancement (Maddison & Scalmer, 2006). This dissertation seeks to bridge the divide between social movement and labor literature using aspects of social movement theory to describe union caucuses.

*Using Frames.*

Another aspect of social movement literature that is helpful in analyzing labor movements is the study of frames, which are devices, such as stories, speeches, slogans, performances, and visual images, used to interpret the world. Frames reflect ideologies, helping people make sense of their reality. They give movements the ability to differentiate themselves from others, tools to mobilize supporters, and communal definitions for problems and joint ways of solving them. In order to work, frames must resonate with movement recruits and speak to the life experiences of people. Movements use frame alignment strategies to ensure their frames resonate with potential members (Gupta, 2017; Goodwin & Jasper, 2009; Snow et al., 1986). Robert Benford calls frames “vocabularies of motives” that spur movements into action (as cited in Gupta, 2017, pg. 146). Devashree Gupta (2017) suggests that the most successful frames refer to injustice and inequality. Jeff Goodwin and James Jasper (2009), explain, “Framing is . . . one of the principal activities in which movement activists participate” (pg. 55) and Gupta (2017) adds, “Frames, in other words, can be highly consequential to movements” (pg. 143). It is thus necessary to explore movement
frames to understand a movement’s strategy. Frames are products of discussion, contestation, and adjustments, and thus there are debates in unions, movements, and academia about how to frame the unionism of labor activists pushing their unions to build social movements.

Many labor activists and scholars use the term social justice unionism when describing unions that demand the labor movement look beyond the collective bargaining process with its issues of wages and working conditions and partner with progressive social groups and organizations to engage in social justice struggles beyond the workplace (Peterson, 2014/2015; Rogers & Terriquez, 2014; CTU, 2012; Hagopian & Green, 2012; Rottmann, 2011; Tattersall, 2010; Fletcher & Gapasin, 2008; Peterson & Charney, 1999). Social justice unions are dedicated to broad collective action by the rank-and-file. The role of social justice union leaders is to activate and organize members through participatory decision-making, democratic control, and solidarity actions. The union also forms coalitions with community members, activists, and other unions in order to connect movements to fight for all working people.

Recently, scholars have begun using the term “social movement unionism” when describing social justice teacher unions (Uetricht, 2014; Weiner, 2013, 2014). The actual term was coined in the 1980s by labor analysts describing “Solidarity in Poland, the Workers Party in Brazil, and COSATU in South Africa—where trade unionism had extended its influence beyond the workplace into the community and national political arena” (Compton & Weiner, 2008, pg. 178). Weiner (2012) uses the term social movement unionism instead of social justice unionism because it “addresses the need for unions’ internal transformation, especially the need for union democracy. [It] gets at the relationship between the union’s organization and its vision of social justice. A social movement union not only endorses social justice outside the school, it also exists as a social movement itself” (pg. 37). While business/service-style unions may have discourses and
repertoires related to social justice, they do not mobilize forces to fuse union struggles with community movements to transform school and society. In her article comparing different types of social unionism, Stephanie Ross (2007) argues, “Tactics [are] insufficient to conclude a commitment to the social unionist ethos” (pg. 27). While business/service-style unions may mobilize the rank-and-file, member participation does not imply democratic control. Social movement unions involve the rank-and-file in all aspects of leading and defining union goals, strategies, and tactics (Ross, 2007).

Social movement unionism and social justice unionism remain vague and confusing terms to unionists, activists, and academics, making it difficult to frame the organizing work for potential recruits. Ross (2007) claims the binary between social movement/justice unions and business unions idealizes the former without analyzing the strengths and weaknesses; the interchangeable use of terms such as social justice and social unionism leads to a lack of understanding as to what these concepts actually entail when practiced by unions; and “lived practices of social unionism exist in complicated and contradictory relationship with established habits and institutions of business unionism” (pg. 29). Gindin (2015) not only questions the definition of social justice but also problematizes the definition of a social movement union by arguing that labor and social movements have significant cultural and political differences to overcome in order to form coalitions with joint priorities and that unions will need to recognize social movements as allies often representing parts of the working class that labor tends to ignore. Moreover, echoing Weiner (2012), a move to social movement unions, according to Gindin (2015):

Demands a virtual revolution inside union [sic]—not just adding external functions—because it implies changing so much about unions in terms of relationships to members, the focus of research, the allocation of funds, the role of staff and the kind of training staff and activists get, the weight of more general internal education, new internal structure for relating to the community and other unions, the very nature and place of collective bargaining as the lifeblood of unions, the approach to grievances, the relationship to
Union democracy for social justice/movement unions requires the complete restructuring of the internal structures and practices of traditional unions. Fletcher and Gapasin (2008) argue union democracy includes putting structures in place for internal debate and referenda, dialogue, and genuine membership education that develops leaders and encourages differences in opinions, shifts power in locals so that leadership mirrors the rank-and-file by race and gender, and incorporates and coordinates with social movements of color. The authors maintain that social justice/movement unions must have articulated values of inclusion, militancy, class politics, and internationalism (Fletcher & Gapasin, 2008).

However, Kim Scipes (2014) argues the term social movement unionism should not be used in North America today because there are no labor centers or unions currently enacting this type of trade unionism. Scipes claims that the use of social movement unionism became popular with Western scholars through the works of Kim Moody (1997) and Gay Seidman (1994). The use of social movement unionism in North America became defined as “democratic, rank and file-led unionism that mobilized their members to address not only issues of the union’s (institutionalized) self-interest, but also issues within unions themselves, as well as the interests of all poor and working people in general, but without challenging the existence of the current social order” (Scipes, 2014, pg. 10). Scipes argues this is not the definition of social movement unionism but rather of social justice unionism, which does not challenge “the industrial relations of its particular country . . . [and] engages in political activities within the dominant political system” (Scipes, 2014, pg. 19). Social justice unionism is likely to address racial injustice and other oppressions due to its broad conceptualization of trade unionism, but remains dependent on capital, the state, and political parties. Social movement unionism, on the other hand, “sees workers’ struggles as
merely one of many efforts to qualitatively change society, and not either the only site for political struggle and social change or even the primary site . . . It is autonomous from capital, the state and political parties” (Scipes, 2014, pg. 12). However, if unions are complex reform organizations that exist to play the specific role of mediation within the capitalist system, thus limiting their political role as they seek to represent all workers in broader unions, then it is difficult to imagine any labor union that has won the ability to collectively bargain, such as those in the United States, being a revolutionary social movement union in the way that Scipes describes. This limits his description of social movement unions to labor movements, such as those in the United States before World War II, or worker centers rather than formal labor unions. Scipes seems to be referring to what Gindin (2016) calls “socialist movement unionism” rather than social movement unionism. No matter which way it is described, advocates of social justice/movement unionism, myself included, argue that today’s unions will not survive unless they move beyond business/service-style unionism to become democratic unions that build coalitions and embrace the broader fight for social, economic, and racial justice (Gindin, 2015; Peterson, 2014/2015; Uetricht, 2014; Weiner 2012; Hagopian & Green, 2012; Tattersall, 2010; Fletcher & Gapasin, 2008; Peterson & Charney, 1999). This dissertation will use the concepts of strategic dilemmas and frames from social movement theory to analyze the organizing and mobilizing of social justice caucuses.

Conclusion

The problems facing urban school systems cannot be adequately addressed exclusively within the educational system. That reality makes social justice teacher unionism essential in the fight for progressive school reform. Non-school factors account for two-thirds of the disparities in student achievement (Rothstein, 2004). Research has shown that educational reform can only happen with job, wage, housing, and tax policies that fight poverty rather than restrict opportunities
for the poor (Lipman, 2011; Anyon, 2014). However, very little current research demonstrates teacher union involvement in broader education reform efforts. There are also few studies that focus on educators as workers and union members who lead school activism, especially using a social justice lens. This dissertation places educator voices at the center of the fight for educational, social, and economic justice.

Trade unions can be places of worker consciousness and potential sites for challenging and contesting privatization and public dispossession, just as public schools can be spaces for contestation and liberation. Many labor activists, scholars, and educators see the potential unions can have if they act more like social movements that build coalitions and embrace the broader fight for social, economic, and racial justice beyond the workplace (CTU, 2012; Hagopian & Green, 2012; Weiner, 2012; Tattersall, 2010; Fletcher & Gapasin, 2008; Peterson & Charney, 1999). In education, these critical scholars consider educators to be change agents who in their capacity as workers in schools are ideally placed to collaborate and organize with students, parents, and communities about social issues that manifest themselves in schools and beyond. These educator caucus activists understand the political economy in which they work and in which their students learn; they are committed to their labor work as a means to challenge and potentially overcome the competition, lean production, and oppression in schools. Their vision for public schools and public spaces reaches beyond the classroom and into the radical possibility of using collective power to slay the Hydra of neoliberalism, structural racism, whiteness and white supremacy, racial capitalism, and accumulation by dispossession. This dissertation seeks to highlight and celebrate the work of educator caucus activists attempting to fulfill a broader mission of what it means to be an educator and union member, while also exploring the multiple tensions that exist in social justice caucuses, unions, and schools in order to learn from educator caucus activists and move the
movement forward.
CHAPTER 3: Methodology

This qualitative study of public sector social justice teacher union caucuses in New York City and Philadelphia is based on critical research to understand how activist educator unionists construct meaning and act within a larger social, political, and cultural context. Qualitative research enabled me to be inductive and reflexive valuing the insights of participants to understand the complexities of what it means to organize in social justice caucuses. The study builds on a pilot study that I conducted with four educators from the Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE) during the summer of 2015. I conducted four individual interviews and facilitated a focus group with three of the four educators, which I supplemented by conducting participant observations at MORE events. The individual interviews made me realize that I was naïve to believe that individuals within a group that considers itself a social justice caucus would all have similar politics. I became interested in the ideological, political, and personal tensions experienced by members of MORE. Through my interviews, I found a split in MORE between those who joined MORE because it is a social justice caucus and those who joined because it is one of the only dissident caucuses within the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). The UFT is a business/service-style teacher union representing about 185,000 members in New York City making it the largest local of the national American Federation of Teachers. The pilot study also left me wanting to know more about caucus organizing. The members I interviewed spoke about how difficult it was to enlist people into MORE because it is scary being part of an opposition caucus, how the term social justice unionism is not encompassing enough of caucus organizing, and how tensions arose around strategy and priorities and remain unsolved within the caucus. My dissertation gave me a chance to delve deeper into these unanswered questions.
Guided by Critical Bifocality and Movement-Relevant Theory

Using Lois Weis and Michelle Fine’s (2012) concept of critical bifocality, this study seeks to highlight the daily experiences and actions of unionized educators while also drawing attention to the historical context and political economy that influences and constrains them. Weis and Fine (2012) contend that “structures produce lives at the same time as lives across the social class spectrum produce, reproduce, and, at times, contest these same social/economic structures” (pg. 175). This study thus uses constructivist grounded theory, which “assumes that people create and maintain meaningful worlds through dialectical processes of conferring meaning on their realities and acting within them” (Charmaz, 2010, p.195). The dialectic is an integral part of this study.

In addition, as an educator and activist myself, I believe educators who are workers and activists need to develop insights and theory into how our professional organizations, our schools, and our society address the complicated realities in which we work and live, especially in volatile and divisive political times. Consequently, this study responds to Douglas Bevington and Chris Dixon’s (2005) call for movement-relevant theory having practical implications for activists. Movement-relevant theory is often overlooked but confirms how important it is for scholars to critically engage with “dialogues and questions that concern movements themselves” (pg. 197). My interview questions and use of constructivist grounded theory are located in conversations and debates that educator caucus activists have had. In addition, writing about social movement activists in Australia, Sarah Maddison and Sean Scalmer (2006) argue, “The questions activists ask of themselves are important and productive. Not only that: we also believe that their answers deserve academic consideration. Their meditations produce a legitimate form of knowledge” (pg. 63). Using constructivist grounded theory, the findings for this dissertation arise from the reflections and conversations of activists in MORE and WE and rely heavily on the voices of
activists.

**Reflecting on Positionality**

As someone writing within a feminist tradition, I strove to challenge traditional power relations in fieldwork and confront “the problems of hierarchy, exploitation, appropriation, and empowerment” in fieldwork (Wolf, 1996, pg. 32). In her edited volume, Diane Wolf (1996) highlights dilemmas and contradictions that feminists have encountered in fieldwork and after publication, including “dealing with their guilt concerning their superior privilege compared with that of their research subjects and the ‘predatory nature’ of research” (pg. 24), inequality and power struggles between a researcher and participants, high levels of reciprocity that can be exhausting, and challenges with co-authorship. She writes, “The challenge remains to write a text that does not position the researcher on center stage while marginalizing those being researched” (pg. 35). I understand that feeling of guilt and wanting my research to be as participatory as possible, which entails including participants in the decision-making process, analysis, and writing of the study. As I explain further in this section, due to the needs of participants, I made changes to my original research design moving away from the collaborative project I had initially imagined. Nonetheless, this research sought to form the “politically meaningful coalitions and projects” (pg. 38) and relationships that Wolf (1996) calls for.

I have attempted to be reflective and explicit about my positionality throughout this study. I have immense respect for activist educators who make time in their already busy lives to fight for the betterment of all members of their school communities. It is exhaustive, complicated work that takes patience, love, and dedication and is rarely recognized as criteria for what makes a great educator. Having taught and lived in Philadelphia, I have some insider knowledge of the city and its school system. However, I am no longer teaching or living in Philadelphia, so I am mostly an
outsider to WE. I am currently teaching in New York City in early childhood education and higher education but am not a member of the UFT. I am active in my own union, the Professional Staff Congress of the City University of New York, which is an AFT affiliate like the UFT and PFT, and so have some insider organizational understanding. However, throughout this research, I have felt more like outsider than insider, making it all the more important that I have good relationships with caucus members to ensure that they are willing to speak openly to me and that I am accurately portraying their lived experiences.

Most researchers are simultaneously insiders and outsiders throughout their research, which can be beneficial at times and has costs at others (Wolf, 1996). Being an outsider ended up being helpful because it meant I relied on participants for advice and insights and was thus in a position to respond to Bevington and Dixon’s (2005) call for movement-relevant theory. In addition, I have similar feelings as Steve Early (2009) who writes in the introduction of his book on organized labor, “This insider/outsider perspective has helped me identify in a personal way with the risks workers take when they stand up for their rights on the job. It has also given me an appreciation of the price that some trade unionists have paid for challenging the leadership of their own unions. Without a doubt, my particular background made me a stronger believer in union democracy” (pg. 15). However, being a geographical outsider to Philadelphia—as someone who does not live in the city—made it more difficult to begin my research with WE. Living in New York, I could easily attend MORE events—big and small—and could schedule and reschedule interviews without much difficulty. My interactions with MORE members were frequent and informal, so I had multiple points of entry into the life of the caucus. On the other hand, I irregularly saw WE activists. My main contact in WE moved away as I was beginning my research and my other contact was active in every aspect of caucus work, making it difficult for our timelines to
overlap. Thus, my participant observation and interviews with WE started much later than I had anticipated. In addition, since I had to make plans to travel to and from Philadelphia, I was unable to be present for various events and get to know people as I did in New York City. My research experience highlighted for me the importance of being embedded when doing research—being a present and active participant over time versus parachuting in. Before beginning my study, I made a tacit assumption that I would have similar experiences doing research with MORE and WE since the two cities are geographically proximate to one another. However, the research process was much easier in the city in which I live; being a geographic insider has value. This finding also played a role in adjusting my methodology. Instead of being comparative, one case study expanded on the other.

Research Design

I initially imagined this study to be a comparative study of social justice caucuses in the teacher union locals in Philadelphia and New York City in order to assess the effects of different structural constraints on the possibilities and opportunities of social justice caucuses within business/service-style unions. Limited resources and time constraints required that I narrow the study to two regionally proximate caucuses. While I thought local context would play a major role in this comparison because New York City and Philadelphia have different sociopolitical and historical environments, the interviews I conducted and the meetings in both cities I participated in showed caucus activists raising the same concerns and tensions. These issues also appear in analyses of social justice caucuses in Chicago and Milwaukee (Scipes, 2015; Peterson, 2014/2015). Therefore, the study shifted from comparing two case studies to a discussion and analysis of twenty-five interviews and over 125 hours of participant observation with social justice caucus members in New York City and Philadelphia. There are some particularities in each of the
caucuses but mostly they share similar assaults, dynamics, tensions, and ruptures that will be further explored in this dissertation. For example, since the fiscal crises of the 1970s, both cities have experienced intense neoliberal policies including the financialization of their economies alongside massive deindustrialization and government cutbacks. Both cities are also segregated along racial lines and both social justice teacher union caucuses struggle to attract educators of color and form meaningful relationships with local communities of color. The research design for this study focuses on MORE and WE and uses scholarly articles and books written by and about the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) in the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) as context for social justice unionism. The largest section of this study comes from participant observation and interviews with MORE members. Once I began attending monthly WE meetings and conducting interviews, I found more similarities than differences between the two caucuses. For example, educators in both caucuses mentioned actions in support of the Black Lives Matter movement as fracture points within their caucuses, tensions balancing wanting to grow the caucus and keeping common values, and friction between educators organizing for social justice and those with a greater focus on trade unionism. The research with WE built on and expanded the research with MORE. Therefore, the interviews and participant observation with MORE were theory generating, the interviews and participant observation with WE produced similar themes, and the literature on CORE confirmed the analysis.

Centering Educator Caucus Activists

My study began with key educator activists in New York City’s MORE and Philadelphia’s WE. I am an ideological and financial supporter of both MORE and WE, and in attending the two caucuses’ events and meetings, I built relationships with caucus members before this study was conceived. These relationships are important to me beyond the research and so, throughout the
study, I have shared dilemmas in my fieldwork along the way with participants, my dissertation committee, and my writing group in order to work through those dilemmas to, first and foremost, respect those participating in my study. For example, as an ally of both social justice caucuses and advocate of their work, I felt uncomfortable making this a comparative case study that would turn the focus and potential critique from readers onto individual members of the caucuses rather than highlighting the organizational tensions and dilemmas that exist across social justice caucuses and may be generalized to similar activist organizations. I use research about the work of the Chicago Teachers Union to show that the issues facing MORE and WE are also found in CORE, which is often used as a model for other social justice caucuses. To be more specific, while both MORE and WE struggle with caucus members who demonstrate racist tendencies, racism is a problem inherent in our society that reaches far beyond individual members of the caucuses.

This study focuses on educators because of their unique ideological role in society. As Weiner (2012) argues,

Teachers are idea workers . . . It’s a major reason the banks and corporations aim to control teaching and teachers. A key aim of the neoliberal project, that is, the goal of the educational policy being pushed by the 1 percent and their political allies, is to destroy teachers’ autonomy and the space this creates in schools for critical thought and for ideas of freedom and social justice (pg. 21).

Educators have the potential to provide students and school communities with alternative discourses and critical social practices that challenge the status quo. Educators have an important role to play in raising consciousness and providing tools for liberation (Freire, 1970/1990). Weiner (2012) adds, “A union of teachers has a particular responsibility to safeguard teachers’ rights to help students think critically” (pg. 22). Thus, this study focuses on educators who are active members of their teacher union through social justice caucuses and who believe and act upon their role in schools and in society as agents of change.
The selection of participants was guided by purposeful sampling with maximum variation using the snowball method to identify more participants. I worked with educators across a spectrum of subject areas, teaching experience, and grade levels, most of whom were active within the caucuses while some were not. I interviewed nineteen educators in New York City and six in Philadelphia. Interviewing a diverse group of educators gave me a broader picture of the environment the caucuses inhabit. Due to the loss of educators of color in school districts across the country, I prioritized the participation of educators of color in the study and the voices of people of color in the dissertation itself.¹⁸ MORE and WE include counselors, nurses, teachers, paraprofessionals, secretaries, psychologists, librarians, and other staff who work with students every day. This study oversampled teachers who make up the majority of the caucuses.

¹⁸ Brian Jones (2015) reports, “Although African American teachers are only 7% of the national K-12 public school teaching force . . . Black teachers are 19% of the K-12 staff in New York City, for example, 21% of public school teachers in Boston, and 26% in Chicago” (pg. 89). Black teachers are thus disproportionately affected by school closures in large urban districts with high concentrations of students of color. For example, 65 percent of teachers in schools targeted for closure in 2011 in Chicago were black, and since the privatization of schools in New Orleans, the number of black teachers has dropped from 73 percent to 49 percent (Jones, 2015). In addition, teachers of color leave the teaching profession at higher rates than white teachers, since teachers of color are more likely to be employed by schools that are the most difficult to staff (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014).
While I interviewed twenty-five educators, this dissertation highlights the voices of fourteen of them:

 Claire is a white middle school Special Education educator who has been teaching for 8 years (as of 2017). She came to teaching through Teach for America, became a union activist later in her teaching career, and is also actively involved in restorative justice campaigns in schools.

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19 Occupational Therapist; both parents taught in public schools earlier in their careers
Aaron is a male educator of color who has been teaching for 11 years and currently teaches middle school Social Studies. He is an immigrant from the Caribbean and an active member of the National Action Network.

Steve is a white male high school History educator who has been teaching for 5 years. He was a union organizer before becoming an educator.

Rachel is a white female 6th grade Science and Math educator with 7 years of teaching experience. She was a founding educator at a new charter school before becoming a school district educator.

Derek is a white male 8th grade English educator who has been in the classroom for 8 years. He is an extremely active and successful shop steward at his school.

Eric is a white male alternative high school Social Studies educator who has been teaching for 16 years. He was involved in other organizing and thought organizing as an educator was a waste of time until he joined the social justice caucus.

Sonia is a female educator of color who has been teaching 10th and 11th grade English for 10 years. She was active in a social justice educator group before being a founder of her social justice caucus.

Noah is a male, parent of color who taught elementary school for 9 years. He is a longtime Socialist and has been active in the educational justice movement for many years.

Janelle is a white female educator who teaches 11th and 12th grade English and has been teaching for 12 years. She was a union organizer before becoming an educator and has been active in multiple social justice educator groups throughout her teaching career.

Malcolm is an educator of color who has been teaching 10th and 11th grade African American history for 9 years. Malcolm got involved with the social justice caucus through book groups and is extremely dedicated to movements for racial justice within the educational justice movement.

Ciara is a female Special Education educator of color who is currently teaching elementary school but has taught everywhere from kindergarten to 12th grade for the past 16 years. She is a leader of the Opt-Out movement in her school and across the city and is extremely dedicated to the educational justice movement.  

Rod is a male Special Education educator of color who teaches English and Social Studies in an alternative high school. He has been teaching for 7 years. Rod was interested in racial and economic justice but did not see the union as something he wanted to get involved in until he joined his social justice caucus.

Karen is a female educator of color who teaches high school English and has been teaching for 13 years. Before teaching for the school district, she taught at a charter school, where she was a lead organizer for a successful unionization campaign.

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20 “Opting-Out” means refusing to take government-mandated standardized tests to protest the overuse of testing in public schools. The Opt-Out movement argues that schools are forced to partake in excessive standardized test preparation that is often not aligned with the curriculum that students are learning. In addition, due to their middle-class, white, English speaking focus, the tests do not reflect the knowledge of students of color, English language learners, students with disabilities, and low-income students. Standardized tests are also used to unfairly evaluate educators and shut down and privatize public schools. Tens of thousands of students over the years have participated nationally. The movement has forced states, such as New York and Pennsylvania, to reduce the tests’ roles in teacher evaluations and to reduce the length and number of tests students must take each year. For more information see the National Center for Fair and Open Testing.
Howard is a white educator who teaches high school African American and World History. He has been teaching for 4 years and joined his caucus after participating in a book group about social justice unionism.

These educators come to organizing in a social justice caucus from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and passions. They are intellectuals and reflective practitioners whose knowledge I believe can be helpful to activists beyond the movement for social justice/movement unionism. While the voices highlighted in this dissertation are of fourteen educators, the findings come from the reflections, dilemmas, and radical possibilities raised by all twenty-five educators interviewed.

A major component of my research is the twenty-five open-ended interviews. My original research design included focus groups that would meet on a regular basis throughout the study. However, when I presented the study to participants, most mentioned having overwhelmingly busy schedules and preferring interviews. As educator activists, participants work all day in schools, are active in their caucuses often taking care of grievances for their coworkers, fight for social justice causes, commit time to their students afterschool, have multiple organizing meetings, and have families at home. Being an educator and a social justice caucus activist demands a great deal of time and much unrecognized labor. I interviewed MORE members from the end of April 2017 through the beginning of July 2017 and WE members between October and December 2017. The interviews built on one another; the first informed the second and so on. I audio recorded all of the interviews with permission from participants; I transcribed all of the interviews. Every interview started with the consent of respondents, my motives and intentions, and contextual information. I began with the idea of interviewing caucus members in small groups of two or three. Only one interview occurred this way; the rest were one-on-one because of participant preference and scheduling issues. I also conducted four interviews over the phone due to in-person scheduling difficulties. In addition, over the eight months that it took to speak to all twenty-five participants,
the changes in the national political climate led me to add questions about the effects of the Sanders campaign and the Trump election on caucus organizing. The caucuses’ relationships with external forces influence the complex interactions within the caucus and vice versa.

Over the course of four years as a participant observer in New York City and one year in Philadelphia, I joined approximately 125 hours of meetings, conventions, trainings, and rallies. I started attending MORE’s monthly meetings during the 2014-2015 school year and continue to attend them today, though more sparsely. While I was only able to participate in WE’s monthly organizing meetings during the 2017-2018 school year, I attended WE’s annual conventions in 2015 and 2016. I compared what I observed to what educator activists told me in their interviews. I also collected many documents during this time at meetings and events, including: newspaper accounts about the caucuses or written by caucus members; caucus and union websites and social media; and caucus and union distributed documents. Research-generated documents include written feedback from participants described in the next sections.

Using Constructivist Grounded Theory and Intersectionality for Analysis

I analyzed my data on a continual basis through constructivist grounded theory to generate theory “as constructions instead of as objectified products” (Charmaz, 2010, pg. 203) because “causality is suggestive, incomplete, and indeterminate in a constructivist grounded theory. Therefore, a grounded theory remains open to refinement” (pg. 197). This methodology diverges from positivistic methods that consider knowledge to be valid only if it can be explained in terms of scientific evidence, thus excluding inner thoughts and feelings. Charmaz (2010) argues, “Constructing constructivism means seeking meanings—both respondents’ meanings and researchers’ meanings” (pg. 199). Charmaz (2010) encourages researchers to value their own reflexivity and to return to respondents during data analysis to better understand respondents’
meaning-making. Constructivist grounded theory recognizes that theory is co-constructed in an active engagement between the researcher and participants throughout the research process and prioritizes the views and concerns of participants over that of the researcher’s meanings (Charmaz, 2010). My analysis was ongoing throughout the interview process and inductive in order to identify emergent themes, patterns, and questions. I used coding and matrices for comparison across data to find similar themes. The themes that appeared most frequently (more than 50 times throughout the 25 interviews) included dilemmas/tensions, inclusivity within the caucus, racism/oppression, organizing at the school site, intersection of social justice and union democracy, common values, broader political analysis, union leadership does nothing, and organizing successes. I also analyzed the co-occurrence of themes using matrices and focused my findings on the most frequent overlaps including (highest levels of co-occurrences first): dilemmas/tensions and inclusivity within the caucus; dilemmas/tensions and intersection of social justice and union democracy; dilemmas/tensions and racism/oppression; dilemmas/tensions and organizing at the school site; inclusivity within the caucus and racism/oppression; inclusivity within the caucus and common values; intersection of social justice and union democracy and organizing at the school site; intersection of social justice and union democracy and organizing successes; racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic educators and hard conversations; and dilemmas/tensions and elections.

In writing up the findings, I relied extensively on the voices of educators highlighting the knowledge of activists as being as valuable as that of academic scholars (Maddison & Scalmer, 2006). I name the educators without referring to the caucus that they belong to in order to focus the reader’s attention on the organizational tensions and dilemmas that exist across social justice caucuses and may be generalized to similar activist organizations rather than focus on individual members of the caucuses. This decision is explained further in this chapter in the section on
validity, limitations, and reflections on treacherous data. In addition, I use research about the work of the Chicago Teachers Union to show that the issues facing MORE and WE are also found in CORE, which is often used as a model for other social justice caucuses. The aim of this dissertation is to more broadly highlight the practical knowledge and shared experiences of activist educators in social justice caucuses rather than offer an internal critique of MORE and/or WE.

While my findings did emerge from the data, I was guided by critical feminist theories that reveal the need for intersectionality. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and Patricia Hill-Collins (1986) theorize against the use of binaries and expose the ways single-axis analyses that focus on the experiences of the most privileged group members distort the multidimensionality of black women’s experiences. These scholars embrace the interlocking nature of oppression. When I began data analysis, I found myself engaging in binaries in my findings and flattening the experiences of educator caucus activists, as is often done in education. For example, I assumed a caucus member was either dedicated to racial justice or not OR committed to either social justice unionism or contract unionism without exploring the spaces in between in which interlocking identities meet; a caucus member’s age or membership to a left-wing group can complicate the picture. I had to stop and reengage with the data keeping intersectionality at the forefront, especially since one of my interview questions included, “how do educator caucus members relate to fellow educators who express racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist or xenophobic views?” The answers to this question pushed beyond the binaries I had assumed existed.

21 Bipartisan education policy focuses on flat, “one size fits all” solutions to complex problems. For example, education “reformers” argue standardized testing equals the playing field by measuring success on an objective, merit-based test. However, Wayne Au (2015) argues it is a tool for maintaining white supremacy with clearly racist and classist outcomes, since a test cannot be unbiased in a biased society. Au contends high stakes testing creates a colorblind norm that supports white, Eurocentric, middle-class views and pushes aside multicultural, anti-racist curriculum. The biased tests are then used as the justification to discipline and close schools that serve low income students of color.
Since intersectionality is important in describing experiences, but is not able to explain why oppressions exist, I also analyzed the data with my critical bifocals (Weis & Fine, 2012) to understand the lived realities within a larger historical context and political economy. I am inspired by the radical, queer, Marxist, black feminists of the Combahee River Collective (1977) who wrote an anti-capitalist, anti-racist statement rooted in self-determination that re-centered the margins and exposed oppressive systems. They wrote, “We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977). When I began writing about my findings, I focused on specific happenings within the caucuses, such as their response to the Black Lives Matter movement. However, in fixating on responses from caucus members without highlighting the larger political economy in which the caucuses exist, I was missing the different oppressions interlocking in the moment. For example, the effects of capitalism’s constant, intense competition including an increase in income inequality, decline in living standards, deskilling and degradation of work, and economic precariousness has made workers feel alienated and degraded with no avenue for change exaggerating racial and gendered divisions amongst workers (Moody, 2017; Botwinick, 1993). Discussing racial prejudices without an analysis of capitalism ignores how racial and class oppressions interlock and affect the lived realities of workers.

Journalistic writing also supported my analysis. Since social justice/movement teacher unions and the wave of teacher strikes in the United States are recent phenomena, reporting on these struggles is timely and analyzes novel subject matter as opposed to academia that often uses older data and takes a good deal more time to generate new concepts (Remler et al., 2014). Philip Graham and others have described the news as “the first rough draft of history.” While journalism
may not be able to accommodate in-depth context or complexity, it can provide a beginning for more rigorous academic research. Journalistic pieces enabled me to analyze my findings as the wave of teacher strikes were happening, thus providing a more relevant and current context for analysis.

Valuing Feedback

After data analysis, I had planned to conduct an interpretive focus group with a small number of caucus activists from each caucus. Interpretive focus groups are used for member checking so that participants can confirm or challenge the validity of the data gathered and are usually composed of members who have not been part of data gathering (Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2010). Due to the overwhelmingly busy schedules of participants, I ended up sharing by email my data chapters—Chapters 6 and 7 of this dissertation—with four participants from MORE and two from WE rather than conducting a focus group. The participants with whom I shared the data are educators that I interviewed for this dissertation. Since I am relying heavily on quotes from participants, I preferred asking educators to confirm or challenge the ways I use their own words rather than having other educators whom I did not interview speak on their behalf. Lisa Dodson and Leah Schmalzbauer (2010) state that interpretive focus groups are “a constructivist or evolving approach, not a precise replication of steps or a rigid rendition of questions” (pg. 322). Thus, inspired by questions for interpretive focus groups, I asked individual educator caucus activists: Am I portraying what is really going on, are there things I have not fully represented or are missing, and does anything need further clarification? I made changes to my findings in response to this feedback that I received from caucus members in order to better reflect the views of the educators. Their feedback also informed my overall analysis and conclusions. I encouraged participants to
respond in writing directly to my analysis. I include the feedback of the participants who responded in the concluding chapter of this dissertation.

Validity, Limitations, and Reflections on Treacherous Data

Thinking of validity as an aim and a process not a product to be accomplished, I strove to be attentive to the interpretive and explanatory validity of my study. Listening, learning, describing, recording, transcribing, checking, and confirming were crucial parts of my data collection. Writing memos, asking open-ended questions, receiving feedback from participants and my peers, and paying attention to discrepant data and alternative explanations provided diverse points of view. In addition, collecting “rich” data and triangulating data sources helped produce a more comprehensive and deeper understanding of social justice caucuses.

I also come to this research with assumptions. I believe:

- social justice unionism can improve schools and society;
- neoliberal attacks are destroying public institutions and spaces for democracy;
- racial justice must be at the center of movements for justice; and
- movements and organizations rooted in social justice, democracy, and self-determination have radical possibilities to create a more just, equal, and fair society.

Some of the limitations of my study include only interviewing educators in two caucuses located in cities on the East Coast because it can be difficult to generalize from a limited number of localized experiences and because I am an outsider who no longer lives or works in Philadelphia nor has ever taught in the New York City public school system. Some of the strengths of this study are that Philadelphia and New York City are experiencing similar neoliberal education “reform” as most cities across the United States and the study heavily relies on the advice and insights of the participants.

In writing about educators who work in schools that overwhelmingly enroll low-income students of color, I am mindful of how I present data. I am also writing about public sector workers
at a time when their jobs and their unions are under attack. Fine and Weis (2010) write about the importance of acknowledging and working through dilemmas of fieldwork. They explore issues such as how to represent “treacherous data”—data that may do more damage than good, depending on who consumes, exploits them” (pg. 454); “coming clean ‘at the hyphen’” (pg. 458) that involves self-reflexivity and making explicit my political agenda; and the duty of social scientists to help resurrect the public sphere and imagine what could be. My goal throughout data analysis was to highlight the dilemmas in my research and make sure to confront them. I want this study to join the work of transforming existing social inequalities and injustices and not be used against the activists I wholeheartedly support. Some of the “treacherous data” include discussing tensions and divisions in unions at a time when unions are losing members because of right-wing propaganda and laws to weaken unions, for example through the loss of agency fee payers within public employee unions due to the Janus vs. AFSCME Supreme Court case; and sharing caucus members’ responses to questions of racism and anti-racism that could lead to more tensions rather than unification of caucuses. However, it is necessary to understand tensions that exist amongst groups of people engaged in the struggle for a better world in order to push the movement forward. For example, in her ethnography of the response to the AIDS epidemic in the black community, Cathy Cohen (1999) writes:

The complaint I found most troubling came from those in and out of black communities who condemned the project as just another book by a black academic trashing black communities. While I do not hold strictly to the rule about not airing our dirty laundry in public, I do not see this book as a “trashing” of black communities. It would be a mistake, in fact, to read this book as an indictment of African-American communities. Far from dismissing the importance of black Americans and of our political leaders and organizations, I offer this project as one more catalyst for generating more thinking about and discussion of the nature of black politics (pg. x).

Similarly, I do not write this dissertation to air out caucus members’ dirty laundry in public but rather to generate theory and discussion around what it means to organize in a social justice caucus
in a public sector union at a time of vicious attacks on public institutions and civil rights. Many caucus members needed confirmation of anonymity and for me to make my politics clear before they felt comfortable sharing certain information with me. They did not want me to use their experiences to defame the caucus, but at the same time, they did share their struggles with me because they recognized that it is important to discuss tensions in order to overcome them. Since little theory exists about union caucuses and especially about social justice caucuses, the educator caucus activists find it important to learn from each other. In addition, many of the tensions and dilemmas experienced in the caucuses arise in other groups organizing for social justice; the insights of educator caucus activists in this study are helpful for a broad layer of activists.

Additionally, critical ethnography is necessary even in times of assault on the public good. Public scholarship, which involves creating collaborative partnerships and reciprocity between academics and practitioners in communities, helping to illuminate and solve critical social problems relevant to communities, and contributing to public debates and public understanding of social and political issues, must be prioritized in revolting times. It has the potential to challenge oppressive current systems and hold public institutions accountable. While I am an avid supporter of public schools and public unions, we must take an honest look at their shortcomings so that they may serve all members of the public. At the same time, public scholarship itself must be held accountable to the public and the needs of the communities we research and write about. Like many things that are meant for the public good, public scholarship can be coopted and used to benefit privatizers. One obvious example is the civil rights language that has been used to defend charter schools, or provide neutral, flattened stances; another is the literature in the bipartisan world of education, which fails to illuminate the problems—no matter how difficult—that need to be
solved. This dissertation seeks to hold all of these methodological considerations in balance while delving into the potential of social justice caucuses.
CHAPTER 4: Urban Contexts

In 2019, both New York City and Philadelphia have Democratic mayors and governors. While both cities are touted as liberal, at times progressive, East Coast urban areas, New York City has the highest income inequality and is home to largest group of precarious workers in the United States (Brogan, 2016), while Philadelphia has the highest poverty rates of the nation’s ten largest cities (Philadelphia Research Initiative, 2017). Both cities are segregated along racial lines and since the fiscal crises of the 1970s have experienced intense neoliberal policies including the financialization of their economies alongside massive deindustrialization and government cutbacks. Jon Shelton (2017) explains the consequence of these fiscal crises for education: “In a development to be replayed in more dramatic fashion in New York City three years later, [in 1972] Philadelphia banks refused to continue lending the schools money unless the board formulated a plan to balance the budget” (pg. 84). This plan for schools included privatization through vouchers and charters, staff layoffs, and a greater emphasis on accountability and efficiency. It was part of a larger shift throughout U.S. society in the 1970s, and especially in education, from liberalism, social democracy, and the Great Society programs to individual competition in the marketplace (Bocking, 2017; Shelton, 2017; Freeman, 2000). Today, both cities are exemplars of portfolio districts that promote school choice, school closures, franchised charter schools, accountability through standardized testing, and philanthrocapitalism in the name of reducing the achievement gap. These neoliberal education “reforms” are occurring even with New York City’s and Philadelphia’s legacy of strong teacher unionism; major strikes occurred in each city throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s as educators fought budget cuts that involved layoffs and school closures and for more control over their workplaces. Both New York City and Philadelphia educators are part of local chapters of the American Federation of Teachers —the United
Federation of Teachers in New York City and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers in Philadelphia. While these cities have many similarities, a close look at their specific urban contexts helps illuminate differing current realities.

Table 2: Urban Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>New York City</th>
<th>Philadelphia</th>
<th>Chicago(^{22})</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>including charter schools</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nearly 10% of public school children attend a charter school</td>
<td>Over 35% of public school children attend a charter school</td>
<td>Over 15% of public school children attend a charter school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15.0% white</td>
<td>14% white</td>
<td>10.5% white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26.0% black</td>
<td>53% Black African American</td>
<td>36.6% African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40.5% Hispanic</td>
<td>20% Hispanic/Latino;</td>
<td>46.7% Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15.0% Asian</td>
<td>7% Asian</td>
<td>4.1% Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13.5% English Language Learners</td>
<td>6% Multi Racial/Other</td>
<td>1.2% Multi-Racial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19.7% Students with Disabilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>74.0% Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{22}\) Throughout this table, I use the terminology provided by each school district. In addition, I provide information about Chicago in this table for comparison with New York City and Philadelphia, since it provides the context for my research design. However, I do not delve into a longer analysis of Chicago’s educational policies in this chapter as CORE was solely used to help validate my findings generated from my interviews and participant observation conducted in Philadelphia and New York City. MORE and WE are my main case studies. For background on Chicago, see the introductory section to Chapter 1 of this dissertation. Chicago’s educational “reform” policies are similar to those in Philadelphia and New York City, including increased privatization, limited public control, and franchised charter schools.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>New York City</th>
<th>Philadelphia</th>
<th>Chicago</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of teachers</strong></td>
<td>~75,000 (2017-2018)</td>
<td>~9,000 (2017-2018)</td>
<td>20,898 (2018-2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teaching Staff demographics</strong></td>
<td>Teaching staff (2017-2018): 58% white 18% Black 15% Hispanic 6% Asian</td>
<td>Teaching staff (2016-2017): ~71% White ~24% Black ~3% Latino ~2% Asian</td>
<td>Teaching staff (2018-2019): 50.3% White 21.1% African-American 21% Hispanic 3.7% Asian 1.5% Multi-Racial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Union Leadership demographics</strong></td>
<td>~58% people of color ~50% women</td>
<td>~52% people of color ~58% women</td>
<td>~65% people of color ~70% women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See footnote for sources

23 The data for this table comes from multiple sources:

**New York City**
- Data about New York City students and schools comes from the NYC Department of Education Data at a Glance retrieved from https://www.schools.nyc.gov/about-us/reports/doe-data-at-a-glance
- Data about New York City teaching staff demographics comes from a January 8, 2018 article by Monica Disare for Chalkbeat called How diverse is the teaching force in your district? A new analysis highlights the gap between students and teachers of color retrieved from https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2018/01/08/how-diverse-is-the-teaching-force-in-your-district-a-new-analysis-highlights-the-gap-between-students-and-teachers-of-color/
- Data about the number of teachers and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) comes from the UFT Union Basics retrieved from http://www.uft.org/who-we-are/union-basics

**Philadelphia**
- Data about Philadelphia students and schools comes from the School District of Philadelphia District View retrieved from https://dashboards.philasd.org/extensions/philadelphia/index.html#/!
- Data about Philadelphia teaching staff demographics comes from a March 15, 2017 article by Dale Mezzacappa in Philadelphia Public School Notebook called District Announces Teacher Hiring Push retrieved from https://thenotebook.org/articles/2017/03/15/district-announces-teacher-hiring-push/
- Data about the number of teachers and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) comes from About the PFT retrieved from https://www.pft.org/about-the-pft/

**Chicago**
- Data about Chicago students, schools, and teachers comes from CPS Stats and Facts retrieved from https://cps.edu/About_CPS/At-a-glance/Pages/Stats_and_facts.aspx
- Data about the percentage of Chicago public school children attending a charter school comes from Illinois Network of Charter Schools retrieved from https://www.incschools.org/get-the-facts/
- Data about the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) comes from https://www.ctulocal1.org/about/
New York City is the largest public school district in the United States with more than 1.1 million students. Due to its size and influence, New York City’s education policies are often emulated across the country. However, many argue that the current neoliberal policies and practices are detrimental to both decent working and learning conditions in New York City schools (Bocking, 2017; Brogan, 2016; Ravitch et al., 2009).

The major changes to New York City’s political economy followed the city’s 1975-76 fiscal crisis, which included substantial cuts to public services that resulted in a shift in power to the corporate elites. Post-World War II New York City had a large, militant working class that fought for a socially democratic city that “committed to an expansive welfare state, racial equality, and popular access to culture and education” (Freeman, 2000, pg. 55). Labor and civil rights efforts used the power of the state and local government to create public housing, rent control, municipal hospitals, unionized jobs, mass public transit, public art, and a city university system. Though filled with inner tensions, conflicts, and discrimination, New York’s social democracy put in place a far more extensive system of social benefits than anywhere else in the country (Freeman, 2000).

While Cold War politics did play a role, it was the fiscal crisis that began with the worldwide recession in 1973 that severely undermined New York City’s social democracy. Financial leaders forced New York City to lay off many city employees, limit rent control, increase public transit fares, and institute tuition at its public university. As a result of the draconian budget cuts and deprived of resources, the city’s public schools, public hospitals, and public university became second-rate entities when public institutions had once been attractive to all types of New Yorkers (Freeman, 2000). Mark Maier (1987) reports that “New York City schools suffered the greatest number of layoffs of any single city service: 15,000 teachers and paraprofessionals lost their jobs in 1975” (pg. 175). Those laid off were disproportionately women and educators of color,
and the decrease in teachers led to a drastic increase in class size (Bocking, 2017). The fiscal crisis set the stage for neoliberal policies in education (Bocking, 2017; Shelton, 2017).

In the 1990s, New York City’s public school system was still severely underfunded and struggling to meet the needs of all students who continued to have low test scores and high dropout rates. Fiscal equity lawsuits for fair school funding have been constant in New York State courts since the 1990s (Lewis, 2013). However, it was not until the election of Mayor Michael Bloomberg in 2001 that the educational system was drastically overhauled into a system of mayoral control. Since 1969, New York City had a system of political decentralization with elementary and middle schools administrated by thirty-two community school districts, each with a locally elected school board and superintendent. The New York City Board of Education controlled the city’s high schools. The decentralization law was a continuation of the fight for community control and in certain districts, such as District 4 in East Harlem and District 13 in Bedford-Stuyvesant, superintendents, educator activists, communities, and local school boards fought to realize some of the goals of the community control movement and did improve educational outcomes in those districts (Lewis, 2013). However, not every local school board and superintendent was committed to the ideals of community control and the community school districts were considered to be either well run, struggling, or characterized by patronage and corruption for personal profit (Lewis, 2013; Fullan & Boyle, 2014). In addition, the fiscal crisis and a weak education justice movement in the 1970s limited the resources going to the decentralization project. When Bloomberg was elected mayor, one of his first campaigns was to take mayoral control over the New York City school system by “popularizing decentralization as a completely ineffective, corrupt, and broken system” (Lewis, 2013, pg. 9).24 Mayoral control means the mayor appoints the Chancellor of Education

24 In her history of the decentralization era, Heather Lewis (2013) challenges the notion that decentralization was a “completely ineffective, corrupt, and broken system” (pg. 9). She highlights the educational improvements in Districts
and a Panel for Education Policy, which replaced elected community school boards and the New York City Board of Education, thus centralizing control in the mayor and the chancellor. The chancellor then hires superintendents who hire principals who hire educators. Mayoral control leaves few spaces for anyone—students, educators, parents, and community members—to voice discontent within the New York City school system. As Bloomberg himself said, “Mayoral control means mayoral control, thank you very much. These are my representatives and they are going to vote for things that I believe in” (Fullan & Boyle, 2014, pg. 29). Within Bloomberg’s educational model based on a top-down marketplace ideology, parents and students express their concerns not as citizens but as consumers “free” to choose another school when dissatisfied with the school’s service (Bocking, 2017).

After replacing the Board of Education with an appointed 13-member Panel for Educational Policy, Bloomberg appointed Joel Klein as chancellor. Klein was a former U.S Justice Department lawyer who had little experience in education. Bloomberg and Klein put in place a system of policies called “Children First,” which was supported by grants from major foundations, including the Broad, Gates, and Robertson Foundations. When members of his appointed Panel for Educational Policy objected to certain aspects of the “Children First” reforms, Bloomberg dismissed them so that his policies would be approved. Critical parents described the policies as “Politics first, children last” (Fullan & Boyle, 2014, pg. 29). “Children First” began with a

4 and 13, two of the cities lowest performing districts, to prove that “the problems with the decentralized school system were not necessarily caused by the political inadequacies of poor communities and their failures to govern appropriately. The community control movement was not responsible for the failed policies . . . Instead . . . the politically compromised 1969 decentralization law, and its flawed implementation by the interim Board of Education, laid the groundwork for the school system’s administrative and political failures” (pg. 139). When Bloomberg eliminated the 32 community school districts, he erased all of their histories, including the improvement efforts in Districts 4, 13, and 2, by literally throwing into the garbage the local district records (Lewis, 2013). In critiquing mayoral control and corrupt local school boards, Lewis’ book suggests that though fraught with tension, there must be a better balance between administrator’s accountability for improving schools and local engagement in school and community revitalization.
standardized curriculum for elementary schools forcing teachers into a centralized and highly scrutinized approach to instruction (Haimson, 2009). In the name of school autonomy and creating a culture of results, Chancellor Klein also restructured the Department of Education and formed the Office of Accountability which oversaw a Progress Report with an A, B, C, D, or F grade based on quantitative data and a Quality Review with well developed, proficient, or underdeveloped ratings based on qualitative assessments. The administration rewarded schools with high standardized test scores with merit pay and threatened those with low test scores with staff changes and closures. Bloomberg and Klein oversaw the closing of over 100 public schools and the proliferation of charter schools in New York City (Brogan, 2016; Fullan & Boyle, 2014; Ravitch et al., 2009). Bloomberg and Klein were strong advocates of charter schools and lobbied to get the state legislature to allow the city to double the number of its charter schools (Ravitch et al., 2009).

Another aspect of their policies included the small schools movement and the making of high school choice mandatory in 2004. With large high schools being broken up into smaller schools, teachers’ work was negatively affected as high school educators were forced to focus solely on the Regents exam as they could no longer offer a broad curriculum due to the limited capacities of a small workforce in a small school and the demands of standardized testing (Bocking, 2017). Reports show that student learning conditions were also affected as “small schools had negative impacts on desegregation, equitable resource allocation, and achievement” (Bloomfield, 2009, pg. 52). Mandatory high school choice segregated schools by academic

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25 The small schools movement began as a progressive movement to reinvigorate public education, especially for poor and working-class youth. It was a movement for educational justice to create anti-racist, socially responsible schools in which each student was known creating an intimate sense of community that enabled deep critical inquiry, alternative systems of assessment, and democratic participation by everyone in the school community. Small schools were first created by collectives of educators and community members (Fine, 2005). However, neoliberal “reformers” coopted the small schools movement and implemented a “rapid proliferation of mass produced small schools initiated from the top with private funds, and usually placed on urban communities and educators” to justify an inequitable distribution of resources (Fine, 2005).
achievement pushing the lowest performing students with the highest needs into a concentrated number of large schools. Without additional financial supports, these schools received low scores on their Progress Reports and Quality Reviews and were reconstituted into small schools (Fullan & Boyle, 2014). Fullan and Boyle (2014) argue:

Klein’s response was pure market-based ideology: ‘Some of those schools managed the challenges and some are not managing the challenges. And those that aren’t, we will have to reconstitute.’ In our dynamic framework, the system’s courage to intervene and close schools far outweighed its efforts to build sustainable improvements in low-performing schools . . . Push actions like closure are easy compared to pulling actions that would improve instruction. Too much push and too little pull creates an illusion of success by moving the underlying problems somewhere else (pg. 37).

Bloomberg and Klein’s policies deepened the inequality, segregation, and injustice within public schools rather than reversing those trends (Ravitch et al. 2009).

The Bloomberg and Klein era also affected working conditions for educators in schools. The 2008 UFT contract—the only one signed under Bloomberg—increased educator salaries. However, it eliminated the seniority placement of educators who lost their position in a school often due to school closures or low student enrollment. These educators become part of the Absent Teacher Reserves (ATRs) and acted as substitute teachers in schools (Bocking, 2017). While ATRs could be hired by a principal at another school, Bloomberg and Klein implemented a Fair Student Funding policy in 2007 in which the Department of Education allocated per student funding based on the average teacher salary thus incentivizing principals to push out experienced, tenured educators with high salaries in order to hire a greater number of new, untenured, and lower paid educators to staff schools. At the same time, Bloomberg and Klein made it more difficult for new educators to gain tenure by basing tenure on an evaluation of a teacher portfolio by a superintendent rather than successful classroom observations by principals (Bocking, 2017).

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26 Bocking (2017) interviewed educators applying for tenure who described it as a subjective, arbitrary process with little to no feedback from superintendents, who never observed educators in the classroom, if an educator was denied
Without tenure, educators are cheaper, can easily be fired, and are submissive to principals for fear of retribution. While the UFT may have attempted to protect educators by increasing educator salaries during the Bloomberg-Klein era, the union also agreed to eliminate the seniority provision and signed on to merit pay and a teacher evaluation process tied to valued added metrics on standardized test scores. Under Bloomberg and Klein, teaching became increasingly precarious leading to higher educator turnover as educators were easier to excess, tenure became harder to obtain, and deteriorating working conditions in schools became harder to tolerate long-term (Bocking, 2017).

A progressive mayor, Bill de Blasio, was elected in 2013 after twelve years of Bloomberg’s mayoralty. However, de Blasio kept mayoral control in place, although he had promised to “‘revamp mayoral control’ to allow more community input when he was running for mayor in 2013” (Editorial Board, 2013). While de Blasio slowed down punitive school closures and the proliferation of charter schools, neoliberal education reform, led by Governor Andrew Cuomo and his charter school allies, scaled up after de Blasio’s election. Cuomo and the New York State legislature overruled de Blasio’s attempt to limit charter schools and forced the city to pay for space allowing the expansion of charter schools through co-locations with public schools (Brogan, 2016). Cuomo also kept in place New York State’s teacher evaluation process tied to valued added metrics on standardized test scores even when pushed by New York City’s then Chancellor of Education, Carmen Fariña, and New York City’s United Federation of Teachers to make it less onerous (Bocking, 2017). In addition, Cuomo has continued to underfund New York City schools in his budget so that a decade later most schools have yet to receive the “fair student funding” that Bloomberg had promised in 2007. In concluding his dissertation, Bocking (2017) argues that the

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tenure. One educator explained that Klein, as chancellor, told his superintendents to allow fewer numbers of educators to get tenure each year.

102
many neoliberal policies in New York City—including mayoral control, the weakening of official forums for public discontent, the proliferation of small schools and school choice, and the increasing precariousness of teaching—have most transformed teachers work, in terms of the subordination of teacher autonomy, as compared to the effects of neoliberal education policies in Toronto and Mexico City. In addition, neoliberal austerity funding for public education and state funding to the private sector through charter schools have not led to better working and learning conditions in New York City (Ravitch et al. 2009).

**The United Federation of Teachers**

New York City is the most highly unionized city in the United States and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) is one of its largest unions (Milkman & Luce, 2018). The UFT is also the largest local of the national American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and a staging ground that educates prospective AFT and New York State United Teachers staff and officers to pursue policies of business/service-style unionism. The UFT represents about 185,000 members, including “75,000 teachers and 19,000 classroom paraprofessionals, along with school secretaries, attendance teachers, guidance counselors, psychologists, social workers, adult education teachers, administrative law judges, nurses, laboratory technicians, speech therapists, and 64,000 retired members” (Union Basics, 2018). The UFT supported many of Bloomberg’s neoliberal “reform” initiatives, including mayoral control, standardized testing, and merit pay. It also failed to stop

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27 In Mexico City, the passage of the Professional Teaching Service Law (Ley de Servicio Profesional Docente) throughout Mexico curtailed teachers’ professional autonomy through the elimination of the university degree to teach in K-12 schools, the addition of a national standardized exam every three years for teachers to keep their jobs, and a centralization of power nationally to prevent local states from exempting themselves from national education policies, under pressure from the teachers union, such as a national ranking of schools that evaluates teachers based on student test scores (Bocking, 2017). In Toronto, teachers’ professional autonomy has been eroded using the standardized testing of students with pressure on teachers to improve test scores, school choice through magnet programs, and a shift of power from the local to the provincial government in taxation and collective bargaining. Both cities have also decreased funding for public education as “pro-privatization reformers . . . seek to degrade the basis of professionalism in order to take control of teachers’ work” (Bocking, 2017, pg. 16).
school closures or the proliferation of charters. While the UFT is today a traditional business/service-style union, educators in New York City and the UFT have a long history of militancy.

While New York City educators were not officially recognized as a bargaining unit until 1962, educators led work stoppages and strikes forcing the city to recognize them as a force in schools. In the 1930s and 1940s, the Communist-led Teachers Union (TU) fought for salary increases and pension programs, organized against budget cuts, defended academic freedom, and supported anti-sex discrimination bills (Taylor, 2010). The TU also gained significant victories in the state legislature, securing substitute teachers tenure rights and limiting their numbers in the school system (Murphy, 1990). The Teachers Union was one of one hundred fragmented and competing groups representing the city’s 44,000 educators in the mid-twentieth century. In 1956, the New York Teachers Guild, a more mainstream educator group in New York City, boycotted Mayor Robert F. Wagner’s salary proposals demanding a higher wage scale and recommended a work stoppage by city educators to demand an increase in salaries in 1959. Relying on the anticommunist fervor of the times, the Teachers Guild helped drive the TU completely out of existence in 1964 and had joined with the High School Teachers Association to establish the United Federation of Teachers in 1961 as the only collective bargaining unit for New York City teachers (Taylor, 2010). As Martha Biondi (2003) accurately states, “The New York City public schools system had become an epicenter of local McCarthyism. Sol [sic] Moskoff, an assistant corporation counsel for New York City, was assigned full-time for almost a decade to ferret out alleged Communists and unrepentant former Communists. Fifty teachers were dismissed and nearly four hundred resigned” (pg. 173).
Until the UFT strikes in 1960 and 1962 and then again in 1967, educator groups had no protection against workplace abuses and no formal avenue to demand workplace rights. The private sector in the United States had garnered such protection in 1935 under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which allows private employees to organize trade unions, engage in collective bargaining, and strike if necessary. The NLRA passed in Congress in response to militant organizing and striking from workers in the early 1930s, especially in 1934, as bitter labor-management battles erupted during the Great Depression. On the other hand, labor laws governing the public sector came almost exclusively from state governments, mostly from Democratic politicians, who needed union support to get elected. New York State recognized the public sector’s right to bargain collectively in 1967 under the Public Employees’ Fair Employment Act, known as the Taylor Law, after a series of public sector strikes including the twelve-day costly transit strike in New York City in 1966. The Taylor Law replaced the Condon-Wadlin Act that fired striking public employees. The Taylor Law retained the Condon-Wadlin Act’s strike ban but changed the penalties for striking to encourage local authorities to actually punish public employees who go out on strike (Shelton, 2017). When large numbers of public employees went on strike, the Condon-Wadlin Act’s penalties were rarely implemented as it was not in the city’s interest to fire all of the public employees in a certain sector.

New York City educators in 1960, much like their predecessors over the previous century, had low salaries, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate resources, lunchroom duties, and endless clerical work and bookkeeping. Educators had very little say in their salaries or working conditions and were constantly ignored when administrators and politicians made changes in schools (Tyack, 1974). The UFT-led strike in 1960 began to change those conditions and the one in 1962 led to the first collectively bargained contract for educators in the United States after the UFT had won the
exclusive right to represent the New York City teaching staff in December 1961 (Maier, 1987). In 1967, educators struck again as their contract expired and “demanded wage increases, an expansion of funding for [More Effective Schools] programs, and, most controversially, a ‘disruptive child’ provision permitting teachers to unilaterally remove seriously misbehaving pupils from their classrooms and schools” (Podair, 2002, pg. 91).\(^{28}\) Educators negotiated a two-year contract with massive increases in salaries and benefits but did not win the expansion of More Effective Schools or the disruptive child provisions as communities and educators of color aligned with Mayor John Lindsay against the UFT. Several members of the African-American Teachers Association left the UFT after the 1967 strike as they opposed the disruptive child provision (Podair, 2002). Since the strike was illegal under the Taylor Law, the union was fined $150,000 and UFT president Albert Shanker spent fifteen days in jail (Shelton, 2017). While the UFT’s 1960 and 1962 strikes were also illegal, the Condon-Wadlin Act’s penalties had not been imposed on the union.

While New York City’s educators led the educator strike wave in the United States of the 1960s, it was the 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville United Federation of Teachers strike that left an enduring legacy. The UFT’s fight for the disruptive child clause in the 1967 strike set the stage for the explosive 1968 strike as the local school board in Ocean Hill-Brownsville saw the disruptive child clause that affected the entire city as a racial attack giving educators police powers, denying black children a good education, and assaulting black culture (Podair, 2002). Jerald Podair (2002) writes about Ocean Hill-Brownsville as “a local manifestation of a national cultural debate...

\(^{28}\) More Effective Schools (MES) was the UFT’s multimillion-dollar program, which targeted certain schools in low-income communities of color with smaller class sizes, more staff, and extended class hours. Teachers supported MES as it increased hiring levels and was supposed to raise the academic levels of struggling students (Podair, 2002). Podair (2002) argues, “The single-mindedness with which the UFT supported MES testified to the hold of the culture of poverty idea on its members. For them, the culture of poverty theory both explained low black achievement and offered a solution: change black children by improving their culture” (pg. 56).
between black and white Americans during the late 1960s over the nature of ‘equality’ in their society” (pg. 210).

Podair (2002) and Daniel Perlstein (2004) explain the 1968 strike in terms of the opposing perceptions of New York City’s black and white communities and the misconceptions, misunderstandings, and missed opportunities these caused. Perlstein (2004) argues that “while the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) saw this ‘community control’ of ghetto schools as a threat to due process, job security, and unbiased, quality education, black activists saw it as a prerequisite to democratizing school governance, to eliminating racism in education, and to opening school jobs to African Americans” (pg. 1). The clashing worldviews intensified racial divisions among New York City’s black and white communities (Perlstein, 2004; Podair, 2002). Refusing to accept the political and ideological importance placed on the black-white binary, Steve Brier (2014) instead argues that three core principles—the UFT’s identification with craft unionism, its rigid anti-communist ideology, and its embrace of teacher professionalism—explain the UFT’s reactionary response during the strike. According to Brier, the UFT’s commitment to these principles “poisoned for several decades the possibilities of building alliances between teachers and working-class and poor communities of colour” (pg. 192). The consequences of the 1968 strike have been detrimental, Brier concludes, because “coalitions of these constituencies were and remain essential to successful political and institutional struggles to transform New York City’s public schools” (pg. 192). Joshua Freeman (2000) adds that the 1968 UFT strike “generated poisonous fumes” and a type of “loud, unyielding style of political action and social relations among working-class New Yorkers,” led by UFT President Albert Shanker, that “signaled the changing composition of the union movement” (pg. 227).

The 1968 strike solidified the UFT’s business/service-style unionism that alienated it from
New York City’s black and brown communities. The UFT had shunned a black caucus of teachers during the strike. The UFT’s Black Caucus formed in September 1968 and pledged its support to the community control of public schools, opposing the UFT’s strike (Almonte, 2018/2019). While there is debate about the central role of black-white antagonism as the cause of the strike, all of the scholars agree that the 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville teachers strike exacerbated racial tensions that continue to exist in U.S. society. It also encompasses many of the contradictions and obstacles to racial justice that have historically plagued the labor movement and endure today.

The legacy of Ocean Hill-Brownsville also meant that when the UFT went on strike in 1975 to challenge the austerity measures, including layoffs and larger class sizes, imposed on public schools in response to the fiscal crisis, few black and brown community members were sympathetic to striking educators, even though their interests overlap in schools. By the end of the fiscal crisis, Shelton (2017) argues, “The explanation of the city’s crisis revolved around the intransigence of the city’s ‘nonproducers’: its unionized workforce and the welfare recipients who many argued were unwilling to work” (pg. 13). Maier (1987) contends that alliances between service providers and recipients and thus community support for public services and public jobs could have led to a different end to the fiscal crisis. However, educators and their union remained disconnected from the black and brown communities they serve and with whom they could have allied to potentially changed the outcome of the crisis.

**Underfunding and Privatization in Philadelphia**

Like New York City, Philadelphia had been a major manufacturing center throughout the nineteenth century. However, Jeff Maskovsky (2003) argues, the city never achieved “world-class status, as industrial development was accompanied by such extreme political cronyism that the city’s image remained notoriously backward, provincial, and ‘privatist’” (pg. 153). As in many
industrial cities, in the first decades of the twentieth century the industries shifted production to
the suburbs or to the South and West of the United States. Deindustrialization and the shift to a
service economy only exacerbated Philadelphia’s “backwardness” (Maskovsky, 2003). At the
same time, tens of thousands of African-Americans migrated to the city making it the nation’s
third largest city by 1945 (Levenstein, 2009). However, as factories and warehouses closed and
moved out of the city, Philadelphia’s population dropped from 2.1 million to 1.4 million between
the 1960s and 1980s and the number of jobs dropped from 800,000 to 250,000 (Maranto, 2005).
Within Philadelphia proper, where most African Americans lived, Philadelphia lost 90,000 jobs
from 1952 to 1962 (Levenstein, 2009). By the 1960s, African Americans were 26 percent of
Philadelphia’s total population, 39 percent of its municipal labor force, and well over half of the
public school population (Levenstein, 2009). While there are many diverse cultural, ethnic, and
racial groups in Philadelphia, it remains a majority black and white city. In the early 1970s, as the
global recession hit Philadelphia, politicians actively considered changes in the tax
structure to
offset the fiscal crisis, and white citizens living on the urban periphery refused to financially
support public services used by overwhelmingly black citizens, such as the public schools
(Shelton, 2017). Since “racist government initiatives, banking practices, and real estate policies
facilitated white home ownership and suburbanization while confining African Americans to old
housing in segregated or ‘transitional’ neighborhoods” (Levenstein, 2009, location 231), the
refusal of white, wealthy Philadelphians to pay higher taxes meant an underfunding of the poorer
parts of the city unable to create wealth due to racist policies. Former Philadelphia Mayor
Richardson Dilworth in the 1950s even “bluntly described Philadelphia as choked by the ‘white
noose’ of the suburbs” (Denvir, 2014). In addition, Maskovsky (2003) adds that the white flight
and withdrawal of federal funding led to political regimes in Philadelphia that “made dramatic cuts
in city services and employment while paradoxically trying to maintain racial and ethnic patronage arrangements” (pg. 154). Due to racism and corrupt city politics, Philadelphia has a long history of underfunded public institutions, especially public education.

Philadelphia today is facing massive neoliberal education “reform,” including state defunding of public schools, market-based solutions in education over the past twenty-plus years, public school closures, and the proliferation of charter schools. In 1993, due to another fiscal crisis, the state froze its level of funding to Philadelphia schools so that the state share of education funding in Philadelphia was well below the national average (Bulkley, 2007). In addition, city workers faced a wage freeze and a reduction in employee benefits and city residents had reduced public services (Inman, 1995). Inequitable funding has a long history in Philadelphia and the city sued the state twice in 1997 and 1998 for more financial support for public schools (Travers, 2003). The Philadelphia schools superintendent at the time, David Hornbeck, filed the suit as a civil-rights lawsuit since the unequal state funding discriminated against students of color (Denvir, 2014). Rather than support the city financially, Republican Governor Tom Ridge and a Republican-controlled legislature in 1998 passed Act 46 permitting the state to take over school districts facing fiscal and academic problems (Byrnes, 2009). The act did not require “distressed” districts to negotiate any longer with educators over working conditions, made it easier for educators to be fired, and stripped educators of their right to strike (Caucus of Working Educators, 2014). Ridge and the legislature also passed public charter school legislation in 1997 and supported school vouchers, using public funds to send children to private schools (Travers, 2003). As journalist Daniel Denvir (2014) wrote in The Nation, “The message was clear: public management, not underfunding and segregation, was the problem.”

The city’s dependence on the state for school funding and its inability to meet the needs of
all of its students with low test scores and high dropout rates led the state to take over the publicly elected Philadelphia School Board in 2002. The state chose a School Reform Commission (SRC) to put in place a new “reform” model based on neoliberal ideology. This portfolio management model planned to close one-fourth of the city’s public schools and withhold millions of dollars in funding each year from the school district in the name of fiscal oversight. The SRC turned over forty-five of the district’s lowest-achieving schools to private education management organizations (EMOs) making it one of the largest privatization efforts of public schools in the United States. The diverse provider model gave EMOs control over hiring, curriculum, and pedagogy in their schools (Byrnes, 2009; Bulkley, 2007). Large protests by school communities erupted in Philadelphia against the EMOs, privatization, and the state takeover. While some of the policies were softened—EMOs were given fewer public schools to run than originally planned—privatization still occurred as some of Philadelphia’s most prominent legislators wanted radical change in school management (Bulkley, 2007).

Paul Vallas, the ex-CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, was also hired in 2002 as Philadelphia’s new superintendent. Vallas implemented many neoliberal “reforms” including a core curriculum, standardized testing, school closings, school quality review processes, and a zero-tolerance disciplinary policy in addition to the SRC’s privatization project (Byrnes, 2009). As with New York City, these neoliberal policies were happening within the national context of President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind and later President Barack Obama’s Race to the Top, which gave city governments strong backing for their neoliberal “reform” decisions (Bulkley, 2007). Neoliberal policies have long been a bipartisan approach to educational “reform.”

In addition to the neoliberal “reforms,” in 2011 Republican Governor Tom Corbett cut funding to school districts, hitting Philadelphia especially hard. With a quarter of the state’s total
reductions in funding targeted on Philadelphia, the city’s schools faced massive layoffs and school closures (Mezzacapa, 2017). Denvir (2014) reports, “In 2013–14, the School District of Philadelphia had 6,321 fewer staff than it did at the end of 2011, according to district figures—a decrease of nearly 27 percent. The reduction included 2,723 fewer teachers, fifty-eight nurses, 406 counselors, 286 secretaries and 411 noon-time aides. The year began with a single counselor assigned to nearly 3,000 students (some counselors were rehired mid-year).” Black educators have been disproportionately affected by school closings that are often concentrated in historically black communities; Philadelphia has lost 20 percent of its black educators since 2001 (Rizga, 2016). One key aspect of education “reform” in Philadelphia has also been a vicious attack on the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT). The union dropped from 20,000 members in 1993 to 11,000 today (Maton, 2016). In addition, in 2014, the SRC canceled the PFT contract in order to eliminate more jobs and restructure educators’ health benefits. In summer 2016, the state Supreme Court ruled the SRC’s action unconstitutional and also ruled that the SRC repeatedly exceeded its legal authority.

Following years of grassroots protests pushing for local control of city schools, the SRC, after governing the Philadelphia School District for sixteen years, dissolved itself in Fall 2017 after Democratic Governor Tom Wolf, running for reelection, removed Philadelphia’s designation as “distressed.” A nine-member local board appointed by the mayor and approved by City Council replaced the SRC in July 2018. However, the District still faces a $700 million deficit. Councilwomen Helen Gym, an advocate of public education said, “The takeover was a massive educational experiment on black and brown and immigrant children—from reckless charter expansion to mass school closings . . . These were strategies not backed by any educational research, they didn’t solve the existing and terrible problems within the district, and they hurt far
too many children. Today, we recognize that we need to chart a new path” (Graham & Hanna, 2017). The future of Philadelphia schools remains uncertain, but control is back in local hands.

The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers

While the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers has stood against school closures, EMOs, and the control of the school district by the SRC, its business/service-style unionism, including conciliatory bargaining and refusal to strike since the 1980s, has been unable to stop any of the neoliberal “reforms” imposed upon the city’s schools. While in office, CEO Vallas often celebrated his relationship with the PFT, which he considered “indispensable partners in the reform effort” (Bulkley, 2007, pg. 167). Katrina Bulkley (2007) argues that the “improved” relations between Vallas and the PFT as compared to previous superintendents is partly due to the union being severely weakened under the state takeover and that the increasing number of charter schools further diminished the number of unionized educators in Philadelphia. The end of the SRC is thus attributed in large part to grassroots organizing rather than PFT organizing in the same way that the decreasing emphasis on standardized testing in New York City is due to the grassroots Opt-Out movement rather than the United Federation of Teachers. While it has not used its strike power in recent years—even after the SRC unconstitutionally cancelled the PFT’s contract—the PFT has a history of educators shutting down schools for lengthy periods of time in labor disputes.

Philadelphia educators signed their first collectively bargained contract in 1965, just three years after the UFT’s first contract in NYC, leading to higher salaries and smaller class sizes. The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers represents “teachers, librarians, school nurses, counselors, psychologists and social workers, secretaries, paraprofessionals, classroom assistants, non-teaching assistants, support services assistants, Head Start/Comprehensive Early Learning Center and Bright Futures teachers and staff, food service managers and professional and technical
employees” (About the PFT, 2018). In 1970, fearing another teacher strike in Pittsburgh and with the upcoming contract negotiations with the PFT in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania passed the Public Employee Relations Act (PA 195) and “became the first industrial state in the United States to formally permit public-employee strikes in any circumstances” (Shelton, 2017, pg. 45). Every other state prevented public employees from striking, but the act was enacted in Pennsylvania because politicians believed there could be more labor peace by giving public sector workers similar labor rights as those in the private sector (Shelton, 2017). At the same time, as Philadelphia educators began to negotiate their contract in 1970, the city of Philadelphia faced a massive budget deficit and a fiscal crisis caused by the worldwide recession. In response, the Board of Education froze salaries, extended the school day, and eliminated over 500 jobs. Educators went out on two separate strikes during the 1972-73 school year shutting down schools for a total of three months and even convinced the Philadelphia AFL-CIO to threaten a one-day general strike. Educators did get a small raise, but similarly to the United Federation of Teachers in New York City, the lack of community support hurt teachers (Shelton, 2017).

The divide between educators and communities in Philadelphia had already widened in 1967 and 1968, as it did in New York City, as students and community activists demanded more black teachers and principals and for the teaching of African and African American history in schools.29 As in New York City, Philadelphia schools with majority black students were plagued with overcrowding, high dropout rates, and wretched buildings. Though the confrontation between the majority white teacher union and Black Power advocates was larger in New York City in 1968, small conflicts between the PFT and black activists separated educators and the black communities

29 In 2005, Philadelphia became the first city in the country to establish a mandatory African American history graduation requirement.
in which they taught (Shelton, 2017). Moreover, both Shelton (2017) and Lisa Levenstein (2009) show that the media, the police, law-and-order mayor Frank Rizzo, and Democratic politicians reinforced white neighborhood fears by focusing on black crime leading white Philadelphians to question the use of state and city resources to fund public schools with mostly black students and to a narrative around public sector unionized workers serving the black population becoming the problem. Therefore, due to the conditions in black schools, the PFT conflicts with black power activists, and the high unemployment and poverty in the city, black neighborhoods were not convinced that increasing educator salaries would improve schools or the city (Shelton, 2017).

When Philadelphia educators walked out again in 1980 and in 1981 to protest further layoffs, school closures, and no raises, they did so with little support in Philadelphia (Shelton, 2017). While the city did rehire laid-off employees, educators accepted a contract that included a provision about future layoffs. In addition, as Shelton (2017) argues, “The emergence of arguments favoring market-based privatization—from everything to just allowing the public school system to die outright to school voucher programs—symbolized the new degree of pessimism toward the efficacy of the liberal state that increasingly marked American political culture by the early 1980s” (pg. 161). A revision of PA 195 in 1992 called Act 88 made it more difficult for educators to walk out and striking then became illegal during the state takeover in 2002 (Labor Rights, 2014). Business/service-style unionism and a disconnect from communities has left the PFT unable to resist neoliberal “reforms.”

**A Call for an Alternative Labor Organizing Model**

As the largest public school district in the country with the largest AFT local, New York City education and teacher union politics is key to understanding the future of public education and public sector unions in the United States. However, without any drastic changes, the future
looks bleak for working people. The median household income in New York City is below the national median and the city has replaced middle and high-income jobs with jobs in low-wage industries (Freeman, 2013). In addition, underfunded and overcrowded schools, schools closures, and public funding for charter schools continue to plague the New York City school system. Yet, as Freeman (2013) argues, “The big unions that dominate New York labor, like the . . . United Federation of Teachers . . . have an unstated confidence that they can rely on their own power to defend themselves. The very success of organized labor in New York makes it act less like a movement than it does elsewhere.” Brogan (2016) adds, “The UFT is the most strategically vital teachers’ union local in the United States, rendering it the most in need of transformation. Yet, as a result of its size, strength, and the urban geography of global New York, which it is both embedded within and responsible for making, the UFT has proven incredibly resistant to rank-and-file efforts aimed at democratization and revitalization” (pg. 382). In order to restore the public services that generations of New Yorkers fought for, New York City needs a revitalization of its labor movement and a growth in union power (Freeman, 2013). It needs an alternative labor organizing model that can challenge the attacks on the public.

Similarly, Philadelphia also needs a revitalized labor movement. As Maskovsky (2003) observes:

Growth’ politics has come to dominate cities like Philadelphia. In the context of declining federal and state revenue, an eroding tax base and capital flights . . . cities compete with each other to transform themselves into productive sites in the post-industrial landscape (pgs. 149-150) . . . growing ‘the right way’ requires . . . reducing the city wage tax to attract residents and businesses back to the urban center . . . and downplaying the role of the city’s residents, nearly a third of whom are living close to or below the poverty line, in the reworking of the city’s identity (pg. 154).

Market-based, neoliberal strategies dominate Philadelphia’s governmental policies, including in public education. Part of this governance in Philadelphia includes using neoliberal constructs such
as the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor and the “productive” and “unproductive” poor to pit citizens against one another rather than against the market-based strategies negatively affecting their daily lives. Nonetheless, the large public sector unions in the city depend on “growth politics” for jobs for members and thus are willing to sign no-strike pledges even during contract negotiations (Maskovsky, 2003). Philadelphia, like New York City, also needs an alternative labor organizing model that can challenge market-based, neoliberal governance that prioritize the wealthy over the poor and privatization over investing in public services.
CHAPTER 5: The Caucus

The Movement of Rank-and-File Educators and the Caucus of Working Educators are both social justice caucuses within their respective business/service-style teacher unions. These caucuses formed as a result of a small group of like-minded union members who come together because of dissatisfaction with the actions of union leadership and/or with the existing structures and policies within their unions. They take on responsibilities that they believe union leadership should be carrying out to strengthen the union as well as to push the union to do a better job representing its members. As Weiner (2012) suggests, “If you have an unmoving union leadership that’s fighting change, it’s probably wise to form a caucus with other members who share your concerns” (pg. 77). The caucus is the counter-narrative or oppositional space within a union in the post-National Labor Relations Board structure and acts as a political party within the union. It is not a dual union movement, within the most used definition of that term, as caucus members are working to strengthen the existing union rather than to compete for alternative representation of members. Union leadership is often constrained as it speaks for all members within the union and usually follows the letter of the labor law. Caucuses, on the other hand, can insist that conversations and imprudent or even illegal actions occur; they create spaces for debate within the union.

30 The National Labor Relations Act, also known as the Wagner Act, was sponsored by New York’s Senator Robert Wagner and enacted by Congress in 1935. The Wagner Act was meant to protect the rights of both employers and employees and encourage collective bargaining to create labor peace and stabilize the U.S. economy. The Wagner Act regularized labor relations by guaranteeing workers the right to form unions and to negotiate with employers over wages, hours, and working conditions. The legalization of collective bargaining and the rise of industrial unions created the structure for caucuses within unions. The Wagner Act made striking, boycotting, and picketing legal. Employers could also no longer interfere or play any role in union elections. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) was created to enforce the Wagner Act and protect collective bargaining and remedy unfair labor practices. The NLRB hears worker complaints, determines union jurisdictions, and oversees union elections. It was meant to take conflict out of the streets and workplaces and into the negotiating table and courtroom. The Wagner Act and NLRB were greatly undermined by the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act which gave employers a greater ability to resist union-organizing drives (American Social History Project, 2008).
Caucuses have the potential to create and expand union democratization as they work to organize and mobilize the rank-and-file, though this is not predetermined.

Caucuses form for many different reasons, which include the intention to elect new union leadership, to shift union priorities, and/or to reorganize the internal structures of the union. Major questions for any caucus—questions that are often debated in MORE and WE—are: “Should you run for office or focus on organizing at the workplace? What role will members play?” (Association for Union Democracy, 2018). Union members with similar goals and strategies can and sometimes do form caucuses; most caucuses are independent of the union leadership and thus not subject to its control. This allows caucuses to bring different and often dissident ideas and strategies into the union.

There can be multiple caucuses within a union, including one controlled and organized by union leadership. In the United Federation of Teachers, the Unity Caucus has controlled the union since its creation in 1961. In the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, the Collective Bargaining Caucus has run the union since the 1980s. Members of caucuses in power have the unique potential to hold union leadership accountable to the original goals and strategies of the caucus that assumed control of the organization. For example, Barbara Madeloni (2018), former president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association and member of a social justice caucus, explained that she needed the caucus as a left flank to yank her away from the incredible pull of business/service-style unionism. In addition, after being elected to the leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union, the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) in Chicago remained active because “CORE can raise red flags and alarms, have the pulse of the members . . . be a critical conscience to raise concerns when the union is making bad choices” (Bradbury et al., 2014, pg. 69). However, the caucus in power also has the ability to use its position to stifle dissent through internal union
structures or through red baiting and expulsion of radicals as has happened throughout the history of the labor movement, which will be discussed in this chapter.

In a caucus, membership is often limited to union members. However, some social justice caucuses are challenging this and including members outside of the union. For example, WE includes parents, community members, and allies among its members. Caucuses can form their own structures and bylaws. Independent caucuses are different from union-sponsored caucuses, such as a women’s caucus that is integrated into the union bylaws and is controlled by union leadership (Association for Union Democracy, 2018). While the union may have integrated caucuses, minority workers have organized independent minority caucuses to fight discrimination; many unions had active black caucuses fighting against racial discrimination throughout the civil rights movement. While this dissertation focuses on social justice teacher caucuses, caucuses can form around progressive, mainstream, conservative, or reactionary views. My interest in social justice caucuses is driven by their potential for democratization, social justice, and rank-and-file organization and mobilization within often conservatized, hierarchical, and demobilized teacher unions.

**Defining Union Democracy**

Union democracy is rare in traditional labor unions and some argue is impossible to achieve (Fraser, 1998). In its mission statement, MORE states, “We insist on a strong, democratic union emerging from an educated and active rank and file. We oppose the lack of democracy and one-party state that has governed our union for half a century” (Mission Statement, 2018). In its platform WE asserts, “WE believe in democracy. We believe that we, the members, are the union. Our active participation is what makes our union strong. We believe that union leadership must listen and respond to members’ concerns and priorities. We believe in transparency” (Our
platform, 2018). For MORE and WE, union democracy involves collective, rank-and-file participation in the decision-making and activities of the union, leadership accountability to members, and transparency. Labor scholar Dan La Botz (1991) defines union democracy as “the union’s formal constitution and by-laws; the union’s informal traditions and customs [the political environment]; the involvement of the members; the members’ access to information and right to question that information; and finally the members’ control over the number of full-time officials and their salaries” (pg. 197). There are many components to enacting democratic practices within a union. Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin Trow, and James Coleman (1956) maintain that the majority of unions are internally a one-party oligarchy; leaders maintain power through undemocratic procedures and rarely face any opposition due to the power of incumbents in large organizations, the desire of leaders to stay in power, and the passivity of members. The three authors contend that in the rare democratic unions “members form organized or structured subgroups which while maintaining basic loyalty to the larger organization constitute relatively independent and autonomous centers of power within the organization” (pg. 15). In a different union context, Judith Stepan-Norris and Maurice Zeitlin (2003) argue that when class struggle and oppositional radical factions exist in unions or prevail in leadership, a union tends to be more democratic. On the other hand, if unions have restricted political activity and uncontested executive power, then entrenched oligarchy prevails. Independent rank-and-file caucuses as organized opposition are necessary to debate policy and contend for power, and, ultimately, for the very existence of a more democratic union.

However, democratization of a union and its caucuses is difficult to achieve. Union democracy involves educating and training workers so that they can deliberate and understand the union’s strategies and tactics. It is also about giving every worker the opportunity to be empowered
and become a leader (Sharpe, 2004). Teresa Sharpe (2004) argues that “extremely hierarchical and rule-bound organizations are unlikely to garner much member participation. However, organizations that tend to get bogged down in dilemmas of process and democracy may not generate many concrete victories, which also discourages participation” (pg. 87). Union democratization will always involve tensions and contradictions that leaders, caucus members, and the rank-and-file contend with.

In 1998, *Dissent* published an article by Steve Fraser challenging the possibility of achieving union democracy in the United States. While Fraser (1998) acknowledges that within a drastically different labor movement that is “inclusive, tactically daring, and politically independent,” there could be a chance for union democracy, he argues that union democracy is unrealistic in the labor movement in the United States. Fraser contends that ideally, union democracy would organize and mobilize the rank-and-file, contest hierarchies of power and wealth, overturn divisions by race and gender, build social movements, and have independent political power. He believes in the power of unions in society and states, “[Unions are] one of a precious few actually capable of challenging the power and privilege of the country’s business and political elites. If there is no democracy within unions, there is no democracy without them.” However, in today’s climate in which unions are fighting to survive, facing “the intractable reality of contesting for power in the marketplace and in the political arena,” union democracy is impossible. Fraser argues that in the absence of a labor party, labor bureaucrats negotiate like politicians, who rarely reach deals by democratic means. In addition, unions reproduce current national electoral politics which involve large financial commitments, backroom deals, and undisclosed quid pro quos. Furthermore, Fraser believes unions act like monopolies in the labor market, excluding racial and ethnic minorities and women. Moreover, Fraser shows how even in
unions with internal lives that seem democratic, democratic procedures are often ignored as smaller groups of active union members make the key decisions and are not afraid to go against the majority of members in order to thwart opponents. As for the rank-and-file, who are often the source of union democratization, Fraser argues that they are complicit in the creation of unions in the United States and thus most likely to reproduce undemocratic practices. He also cautions against the conflation of union democracy with rank-and-file militancy.

Stanley Aronowitz (1999), responding directly to Fraser, argues that while there are significant challenges to true union democracy in the United States, it is not unachievable. Unlike European workers, who can choose between competing federations, American unions cannot compete, and so dissent, contention, and thus the possibility of true democracy within unions is limited. Nonetheless, Aronowitz argues that “union democracy is not a leftist pipe dream; in the face of autocracy, it is the only recourse for dissenting unionists.” Aronowitz proposes that there are two models of union democracy. Democracy by consent that is highly centralized, run by union staff, has no term limits for elected officials, and rarely involves membership in decision making. Or, in contrast, participatory democracy that is decentralized with elected officials having term limits, debates occur frequently, and decisions are made after the rank-and-file has been consulted. Aronowitz believes that an organized and mobilized rank-and-file can create participatory democracy within unions.

In the United States today—with its unregulated capitalism, extreme wealth and access inequalities, and a polarized political landscape—union democracy is most likely an interminable project, similarly to the quest for democracy in politics and social justice in society. However, while acknowledging some of the limitations that Fraser presents, I agree with Aronowitz that there are democratic practices within unions that can lead to more participation and control by the
rank-and-file. While it may always have flaws, I believe in the possibility of union democratization in smaller, decentralized groups within unions, much like social justice caucuses. There are escalating ways to engage members, such as voting in union elections, participating in contract campaigns, and joining direct actions, that encourage the rank-and-file to partake in the decision-making of their unions. A goal of this study is to illuminate how two social justice caucuses struggle to enact a more democratic project within their teacher unions. The road ahead may be long, but in so doing, these social justice caucuses provide possible alternatives with the potential to challenge the limitations of traditional ‘undemocratic’ unionism in the United States.

In writing about opposition groups within the Transport Workers Union of America (TWU) around the 1980 New York City TWU-led transit strike, Marc Kagan (2017) exposes the drawbacks of organizing without union democracy. Kagan shows the limits of customary opposition, which he calls “‘bottom-up change from the top’—a sort of bureaucratic radicalism” (pg. 49), in which opposition groups within the union in the late 1970s chose leader-driven electoralism as a strategy to change the union. “So committed is even (American) worker culture to top-down and hierarchical ways of thinking and acting,” Kagan writes, “that when ‘the bottom’ is stirred to upheaval, it often still intuitively defers to leaders, albeit perhaps new ones” (pg. 7). While the opposition was able to push leadership to strike, attempting to change the union without any ideological coherence other than a “just win” mentality failed as opposition groups split apart after the election. In addition, although the union won long-lasting wage gains for workers by striking, the onerous Taylor Law fines that immediately followed the strike and the feeling that the strike could have been far more successful led many MTA workers, the media, and other unions to assert that the strike was lost. Opposition groups did not have member-driven strategies, a plan to change the union, or a cohesive agenda other than fighting for a different union leadership
It is not predetermined that caucuses will drastically reorganize unions to work towards union democratization. For example, the Miners for Democracy (MFD) of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) challenged union leadership and won control of the UMWA but were unable to overcome the union’s long history of business unionism. They replaced traditional union leaders and served the membership in a reform way by allowing working miners to dominate convention business, restoring autonomy to every union district, giving miners the right to vote on their contracts, and forming alliances with other progressive unions (Nyden, 2010). However, Paul J. Nyden (2010) argues that the MFD did not fundamentally reorganize the union or subject themselves to rank-and-file control, “but serve[d] the membership as personal vehicles of reform. The union officials that led the MFD were, at bottom, traditional union reformers” (pg. 185).

What makes social justice caucuses particularly powerful in their potential to change the labor movement is that they are committed to being member-driven as a necessity for organizing and in reorganizing internal union structures. They also organize members outside of elections. Social justice caucuses are attempting to do difficult work that comes with many tensions, so learning from past caucus attempts to change unions can educate activists and help move the labor movement beyond its typical “business as usual” stance. I focus on caucuses of the United Auto Workers (UAW)—the Reuther Caucus and the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM)—as they show different ways caucuses can operate within a single union. In addition, I believe that Walter Reuther’s power in the U.S. labor movement and the structure of his caucus helped shape the Unity Caucus within the United Federation of Teachers with Albert Shanker at its leadership. I also analyze the relationship of caucuses to left-wing parties as a recurrent charge against dissident caucuses is that they serve the interests of outside political parties and not that of
the union.

The Reuther Caucus and One-Party Control

Business/service-style unionism, as we know it today, with its restrictive collective bargaining and grievance arbitration and lack of member mobilization and shop floor militancy, was solidified by Walter Reuther after World War II in the United Auto Workers (UAW). During the early organizing drives in auto in the 1930s, Reuther used the Unity Caucus as a contestant for power. But once he entered union leadership later in the decade, he used the Administration Caucus, also known as “the Reuther Caucus,” to maintain control of the union as a mechanism to impose one-party control. Reuther began his career in the UAW as an active dissident in alliance with Socialist and Communist unionists. In 1937, as the UAW fought General Motors (GM) for power within the plants, the union itself was divided into two factions: the anti-Communist, pro-GM collaborationist Progressive Caucus and the Left’s—which included Reuther—Unity Caucus that defended militant union power on the shop floor (Lichtenstein, 1995). Due to intense factionalism, Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) president John L. Lewis was forced to intervene in the creation of the 1937 UAW Executive Board. He ensured it was composed of a fragile coalition of sixteen members from the Progressive Caucus and eight from the Unity Caucus. As corporations slowly regained power as the Depression continued, Lewis wanted greater stability in the UAW and a solid contract with GM to use as an example in organizing CIO unions in the steel, meat packing, and textile industries, and across the South (Lichtenstein, 1995). However, infighting continued within the UAW between and within the two caucuses. After being called an opportunist by his Socialist comrades and feeling betrayed by the UAW Communists, Reuther resigned from the Socialist Party, cut ties with the Communist Party, and endorsed Democrat Frank Murphy for Governor of Michigan as well as other Michigan Democrats running
for office. In addition, the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 led many on the Left, including Socialists, to flee the Communist Party, and the House Un-American Activities Committee investigations complicated ties to the Communist Party. As a coalition of left-wing groups, Unity dissolved in 1939 (Lichtenstein, 1995).

In order to gain power within the UAW, Reuther recruited centrist unionists onto his side and became a staunch anti-Communist. The UAW rewarded Reuther by appointing him director of the UAW General Motors Department in 1939 (Lichtenstein, 1995). Reuther needed to rebuild the UAW after years of factionalism and wanted General Motors to recognize the CIO-UAW as the sole union representative in collective bargaining. GM was a strong corporation with market and production power that only accepted contracts with clauses that undermined the role of the shop steward in addressing shop floor grievances. While Reuther supported shop floor democracy, he needed stability in the UAW to justify to GM the need for the union and, at the same time, knew GM would never concede power on the shop floor without a strike. In order to overcome this problem while facing a shift to the right in U.S. politics, Reuther sought ways to limit the power of management through grievance arbitration and New Deal regulations that would serve to create stable labor relations (Lichtenstein, 1995). Reuther hoped increased union power and government authority could “reorganize American capitalism within a more stable and humane framework” (Lichtenstein, 1995, pg.155). According to Lichtenstein (1995), “Reuther wanted an umpire system at GM to protect the union leadership from the consequences of undisciplined shop-floor activism. . . . Reuther convinced a corps of sometimes wary GM local officers that the new institution would protect them from the corporate reprisal and inner union factionalism that were so often the product of unconstrained departmental militancy” (Lichtenstein, 1995, pg. 147). Once a leader of dissidents and militancy, Reuther now created a system to control that dissent and
militancy. He “had become a prisoner of the corporation’s demand for continuous production” (pg. 147), Lichtenstein (1995) argues, while also needing “democratic, rule-bound governance on the shop floor” (pg. 149). Within a decade, the grievance system was “universal within unionized industry” with arbitration written into all labor contracts (Lichtenstein, 1995, pg.152).

Nonetheless, Reuther encouraged the use of the strike weapon when the strike demands aligned with his left-Keynesianism. As Lichtenstein (1995) states, “With the structural reorganization of American capitalism clearly blocked at the end of World War II, Reuther could hardly avoid tackling what had become the central issue in the political economy: the postwar relationship between wages and prices in the manufacturing sector” (pg. 222). In November 1945, the UAW went on strike demanding an increase in hourly wages by 30 percent in order to “sustain aggregate demand and to compensate for the income they lost when the postwar workweek shrank” (pg. 224). The strike lasted over 100 days, but GM did not concede to the UAW’s demands. GM and the UAW settled at 17.5 percent, the same increase that had been accepted by the United Steelworkers and the United Electrical Workers earlier in 1946. GM also refused Reuther’s request for the corporation to “open its books” to prove its inability to pay workers higher wages. “The failure of Reuther’s General Motors strike program marked an end to the New Deal’s capacity for a direct and progressive reconstitution of the nation’s political economy” (pg. 246), Lichtenstein (1995) argues, and “Roosevelt’s heirs proved too feckless and trade union leadership too divided to overcome capital’s intransigence” (pg. 247).

Nonetheless, Reuther was elected president of the UAW in 1946 in a narrow victory. He relied heavily on collective bargaining, which restricted the political visions and militancy of the Left in the union. However, he continued to lead the union to strike when it served his interests. Reuther stated: “We make collective bargaining agreements, not revolutions” (quoted in
In 1950, he signed a five-year contract with General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler called the Treaty of Detroit. In exchange for the loss of the right to strike and by ceding the right to bargain over certain managerial functions, the UAW gained a private welfare state including cost-of-living adjustments to wages, vacation time, and health, unemployment, and pension benefits. However, Reuther realized too late the binding consequences of arbitration, collective bargaining, and the shift of power to management. Lichtenstein (1995) argues that “his tragedy was that of a man imprisoned within institutions, alliances, and ideological constructs that were largely of his own making” (pg. 300). Reuther’s alliances with mainstream politicians also limited his ability to challenge the status quo. Collective bargaining, the Treaty of Detroit, and political pacts with Washington created the conditions for the business/service-style unionism that continues to plague the labor movement today.

In addition, Reuther also used one-party rule to keep control of the union and to stifle rank-and-file militancy. “The ‘Reuther caucus’ was a machine for the preservation of the status quo within the UAW,” Lichtenstein (1995) argues, “By the mid-1950s all officers and International representatives were expected to contribute to a ‘flower fund’ for this very purpose. ‘Keeping it in the family, that’s my job,’ Reuther told the executive board members who feared opposition from within their regions” (pg. 313). In the 1950s violation of caucus loyalty led to devastating retribution, including organizing opposition to reelection and being put on trial for Communist activities. In addition, as Reuther became more autocratic, he had the UAW take over radical locals, screened newspapers put out by opposition locals, put Communists on trial for violations of a previously unenforced clause in the UAW constitution, and used anti-Communist smear tactics against his radical opposition. Attacking Communist and Socialist groups within the UAW undermined the legitimacy of other opposition groups enabling Reuther’s caucus to control all of
the top officer positions in the UAW and the majority of seats on the National Executive Board (Lichtenstein, 1995). A.C. Jones (2010) maintains that:

The UAW officialdom managed for the better part of two decades to retain a certain hegemony over the union rank and file. It won widespread consent from the members to its leadership by providing them with historic improvements in their wages and living conditions, while at the same time crushing by force, when it could not co-op, oppositions coming from below, ruthlessly employing its one-party rule and huge bureaucratic machine to do so (pg. 282).

Reuther’s unionism became a template for Albert Shanker in his rule over the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT), as will be further discussed in this chapter.

The Radical and Militant Revolutionary Union Movements

Though control through one-party rule is difficult to challenge, the Revolutionary Union Movements (RUMs) were able to threaten Walter Reuther’s one-party rule in the UAW and influence the union without actually gaining control of the union. During the 1960s in Chrysler’s Dodge Main plant in Detroit, black rank-and-file members of the UAW formed a caucus, the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), in response to discrimination, foreman abuse on the shop floor, and police brutality in the city (Thompson, 2001). Black workers made up 50 percent of the plant (Jones, 2010). Organizing as part of the black revolution of the 1960s, DRUM was a black nationalist organization that fought against racism and capitalism in the factories and in the city. Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin (1998) argue that DRUM was not like other dissident caucuses that were angry at speedups, wage cuts, layoffs, and unsafe work conditions because DRUM members were also angry about the Great Rebellion happening in the 1960s and had a vision for a new, more humane society: They wanted to end racial discrimination and control the workplace. The caucus was different because it “bypassed the UAW to organize workers directly into a structure dedicated to principles which went far beyond simple trade unionism”
DRUM activists were interested in creating a revolutionary movement rather than just changing union leadership. Black workers had become disillusioned by the union’s inability to change shop floor relations and its lack of commitment to racial equality in its own ranks and in society. Though UAW leaders defined themselves as racial progressives, they often acceded in their views to the racially conservative white members of the union who felt threatened by insecurity, inflation, and black nationalist rhetoric (Thompson, 2001; Georgakas & Surkin, 1998). DRUM-like caucuses spread to other auto plants, creating a network of Revolutionary Union Movements (RUMs) in auto plants and other industries, with The League of Revolutionary Black Workers serving to coordinate workplace militancy.

In 1970 at the Chrysler’s Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle plant, three separate opposition rank-and-file groups were active because the UAW was not addressing worker issues, including unsafe working conditions, foreman abuses, and unjust layoffs. These groups included the Eldon Avenue Revolutionary Union Movement (ELRUM), a militant trade union group, and a radical group called Wildcat (Georgakas & Surkin, 1998). Both of the other groups were overwhelmingly white and worked with ELRUM but at a distance, as most RUMs were hostile to organizing with white workers. Black workers constituted over 70 percent of workers at Eldon, but the UAW refused to support the ELRUM-led wildcat strikes and other militant actions in protest of the “niggermation” of the auto plants. Thus, many ELRUM members were fired greatly weakening their ability to organize on the shop floor (Georgakas & Surkin, 1998).

As wildcat strikes by black workers spread to other plants, the UAW organized against its own members and began trying to keep auto plants open rather than support RUMs’ actions; union officials, according to Thomson (2001), “despised the fact that the RUMs made them look so impotent in front of management” (pg. 118). The UAW was also no longer able to deliver a private
welfare state for its members in the 1970s and relied more on coercion, physical force, cooptation, and denunciation to keep control of the union. In addition, early dismissal of RUM activists and internal divisions within the League undermined its strength as an opposition group within the UAW (Thompson, 2001). Jones (2010) argues that “the weakness of the League was that it could never decide whether it was a dual union, a rank-and-file caucus with the UAW, a black nationalist organization, or a revolutionary party” (pg. 294). Internal tensions and external attacks brought an end to the RUMs and The League of Revolutionary Black Workers in 1971.

Even though the RUMs never gained leadership in the UAW, as a result of their activism, more black people were hired as union staffers and within skilled and managerial jobs in the auto companies. DRUM forced the desegregation of the UAW’s leadership and of other unions that faced black opposition caucuses (Thomson, 2001). In addition, the League inspired young radicals to form alliances with the working class by getting jobs in plants, mills, and factories and immersing themselves in community life (Taylor, 2010). Heather Ann Thompson (2001) suggests that “ultimately the UAW’s deep-seated, and historically rooted, opposition to revolutionary politics blinded it to the legitimacy and potential usefulness of the militancy increasingly exhibited by its own constituency,” (pg. 190) making it unable to resist the assault of the auto companies in the 1970s because it had undermined its militant and dissident rank-and-file. She adds, “In time, however, the UAW found that management was a far greater threat to its power than militant workers” (pg. 214). While labor peace followed the destruction of the RUMs, the UAW was greatly weakened by its business/service-style unionism and its inability and refusal to create strong alliances between black and white workers, leaving it unable to protect Detroit and other parts of the Rustbelt from the deindustrialization that would soon come.

Are Radical Caucuses Agents of External Political Parties?
A recurrent charge against dissident caucuses is that they serve the interests of outside political parties and not those of the union. Diverse political groups, including Anarchists, Socialists, Communists, Trotskyists, and the Catholic Workers Party, with quite differing ideologies have historically formed dissident caucuses. Throughout U.S. labor history, red baiting has been used to purge dissident members and locals from traditional unions. For example, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which was built by Socialist and Communist organizers, according to Sharon Smith (2006), “expelled roughly 20 percent of its membership, nearly 250,000 workers” by 1950 and “by 1954, fifty-nine out of a hundred [CIO] unions had changed their constitutions to bar communists from holding union office, and forty unions had barred communists from membership” (pg. 190). Union dissidents often emerge from left-wing political groups and are also the most militant union organizers. Union members who belong to left-wing political groups usually are trained by their parties in political education and as organizers. As such, they tend not to burn out as quickly because they are ideologically grounded in organizing workers, conducting mass demonstrations, and taking militant action as a means to raise class consciousness and improve the lives of working people as a long-term project. Many analysts maintain one of the reasons for the weakness of the labor movement today includes the purge of radicals from the labor movement in the 1950s (Moody, 2017; Aronowitz, 2014; Taylor, 2010; Stepan-Norris & Zeitlin, 2003; Lichtenstein, 2002; Meyer, 1992).³¹

In my analysis of the role of radicals in teacher union caucuses, I locate educators in the Communist Party, as does Clarence Taylor (2010), as being one radical group that was able to both

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³¹ While leftists in the United States were most often purged from unions by traditional unionists, the Left was divided and there were occurrences of dissidents opposing one another’s political premises and expelling one another from unions, such as the Communist Party’s support of a trial and conviction of Trotskyists under the Smith Act in 1941 and Walter Reuther, who as a Social Democrat, ousted Communists from the United Auto Workers in 1947 and 1948.
support the politics of their party and fight for the interests of their union without undermining the American labor movement. Communist workers embraced and deepened the Community Party’s opposition to racial discrimination and all forms of bigotry and thus united workers and fought for better living and working conditions for all. Nonetheless, members of radical groups were often expelled from unions for being threats to the labor movement.

In the UAW, Walter Reuther, a victim of red baiting himself, used anti-communist tactics to finally rid himself during the 1947 convention of the union’s radical opposition. Reuther aligned himself with the anticommunist American Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU) within the union. As Smith (2006) argues, “Interestingly, even while communists were baited as taking orders from Moscow, ACTU was never charged with receiving its orders from Rome and emerged unscathed from the witch-hunt” (pg. 192). In addition, in his analysis of UAW Local 248 in Wisconsin, Stephen Meyer (1992) acknowledges that Allis-Chalmers workers did pass resolutions, write articles, and make donations following the Communist Party line; however, his historical analysis shows that leaders of Local 248 did this without undermining the economic needs of members. Indeed, according to Meyer (1992), they “united skilled and production workers, several ethnic groups, men and women, and blacks and whites . . . [and] bargained collectively, obtained contracts, created systems of shop floor representation, and forcefully challenged managerial authority at the workplace” (pg. 221). Nonetheless, Reuther placed Local 248 under administratorship and expelled the Communist leaders of the local in 1948.

Similar anti-Communist smear tactics occurred against the New York City Teachers Union (TU). In 1935 the Communist Rank and File caucus gained control of the Teachers Union, which had been organized originally in 1916 as AFT local #2; it survived until 1964. With the Communist Rank and File at its head, the Union completely rejected the service union model found in many
craft unions of the time and advocated for social movement unionism that would help transform society (Taylor, 2010). From the beginning, the TU was driven by the idea of social justice, building a democratic union, and encouraging every union member to become an organizer of teachers, parents, and students. While the TU fought for better salaries for teachers, pension programs, job security, academic freedom, and against budget cuts, it did so within a larger agenda that struggled for desegregation of social institutions including schools, culturally relevant curriculum, and solidarity with working-class communities (Taylor, 2010).

The TU also defended the Soviet Union and helped build a Popular Front without abandoning the fight for equality at the workplace. Taylor (2010) shows that “the TU placed the fight against racial, ethnic, and religious bigotry in the context of the war. According to the union, opposing racism was an essential component of the war effort because racism destroyed national unity. . . . The TU contended that fighting racism was an essential objective for the success of the popular front” (pg. 5). Parents in schools with TU members called them the “sincerest and strongest allies,” and one Brooklyn parent “described the Teachers Union as being in the ‘forefront always in explaining to us the needs and helping us to get better things’ for the children” (Taylor, 2010, p. 170). The TU embraced both the Communist Party and the interests of educators, parents, and students at the workplace.

Nonetheless, opponents of the Rank and File Caucus and of the TU used red baiting to get rid of Communist union activists. Before 1935, the TU was split into two caucuses: The Rank and File and the Progressive Group, associated with the American Communist Opposition. Knowing the Communist Rank and File were gaining power within the Union, then president of the American Federation of Labor, William Green, demanded the expulsion of Communists in New York City. While it did not happen in 1934, the TU was ultimately expelled from the AFT in 1941.
when fifteen of the twenty-four members on the board of the TU were active members of the Communist Party (Taylor, 2010). In 1943, the TU joined the Congress of Industrial Organizations and pushed for “a program for Federal aid to education, increased salaries for teachers with equal pay for Negro and white teachers, the right of teachers and students to join organizations of their own choice, and protection of academic and political freedom” (Zitron, 1968, pg. 42). By the 1950s, the Teachers Union had 7,000 members even after the reduction in its membership after its expulsion from the AFT in 1941 (Zitron, 1968). However, also facing red scare investigations in the postwar era, the CIO cut loose the Teachers Union in 1948. A Harlem community member stated: “Most of the teachers who they said were Communists and kicked out of the school system were much more dedicated to teaching black children the way out of the crucible of American life than the teachers we now have. When they left, Harlem became a worse place . . . These people were dedicated to their craft”” (Murphy, 1990, pg. 158).

Members of left-wing political parties who are devoted to certain political principles are instrumental in forming dissident caucuses. During their formations, caucuses often acquire their own sets of political principles based on who participates in their founding. If the leadership of the caucus respects democratic processes, then the caucus is most likely independent of a particular political party and follows the principles of the caucus. However, questions arise if the leadership of the caucus is loyal to an outside party and committed to the principles of that party rather than those of the caucus. In the case of the TU and the Socialists and Communists in Local 248 of the Philadelphia Teachers Union, also a social justice union, was expelled from the AFT in 1941. The Philadelphia TU advocated for academic freedom, civil rights, school desegregation, and led a fight for a teacher tenure law and protections for educators organizing politically. It was a “social justice union that combined an antiracist agenda with a concern for academic freedom in a way that was quite rare for its time, particularly among the ranks of grammar and high school teachers” (Toloudis, 2018, pg. 16). It was accused of Communist infiltration starting in 1935 and faced expulsion from the AFT in 1941 opening the way for the founding of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (Toloudis, 2018).
UAW, dissident union members were able to serve their political party without suppressing the needs of their unions and of the larger labor movement at the time.

The dissident caucuses in this dissertation, MORE and WE, make clear their principles internally, state them publicly, and strive to follow them. In respecting democratic practices, they allow for diverse perspectives and voices of dissent from within the caucuses, as long as members respect the social justice values of the caucuses. In addition, both MORE and WE have leadership bodies that represent diverse political groups and are thus not controlled by or loyal to one political party.

**Unity Caucus and One-Party Rule in the United Federation of Teachers**

In contrast to this broadly representative approach, “in the years since 1962, the UFT has been transformed into a union dominated by one leader, Albert Shanker,” argues Maier (1987), “As a result, teachers have a union that is only superficially democratic; Shanker, and his successor, Sandra Feldman, are elected, but rank-and-file teachers have little impact on union policy” (pg. 135). Like Walter Reuther and the Reuther Caucus, Albert Shanker used the Unity Caucus to maintain control of the United Federation of Teachers and as a mechanism to impose one-party control. The Unity Caucus has controlled the UFT since its creation in 1961. Maier (1987) explains the shift away from union democracy began before the solidification of the UFT because the Teachers Guild, which once was a group with vibrant internal debates, had moved away from participatory democracy by the time it joined the High School Teachers Association to form the UFT in 1961. In addition, as questions arose at the formation of the UFT around the structures that would exist within it, many UFT members wanted proportional representation to recognize minority groups. However, Unity incumbents in the 1962 election rejected proportional representation for a winner-takes-all slate system. This significantly shrunk dissent within the
UFT’s rank-and-file (Maier, 1987). Opposition to Unity was further reduced during the 1968 UFT strike as dissident caucuses left the union including a caucus of black educators who were shunned by the union during the strike. This meant that there was “no counterbalance to increasing union antagonism toward community groups” (Maier, 1987, pg. 128). Albert Shanker, President of the UFT and later the AFT, further consolidated Unity’s power through caucus discipline and use of union resources to entice members. Weiner (2012) explains:

In “disciplined” caucuses, once the caucus adopts a position—which in the AFT was the policy that Shanker wanted—caucus members cannot express a divergent opinion or in any way differentiate their point of view from that of the caucus. Voting or speaking against a caucus position results in expulsion, which in the AFT and the UFT means loss of “perks” the union controls, like full- or part-time staff positions within the union (pg. 87).

Caucuses that are not in power may also practice caucus discipline but do not have “perks” or the union apparatus to entice members to adhere to caucus decisions. In addition, the Executive Board of the UFT voted during Delegate Assemblies providing a large Unity block (Maier, 1987). Unity is still so dominant within the UFT that it has not felt the need to organize at every school. Weiner (2012) puts “the number of schools with no functioning union chapters at far more than one-third, probably closer to three-fifths. Many teachers are too frightened to attend union meetings or even meet privately with union staff at the school site” (pg. 200).

While there has been some counterbalance at the school and chapter level by the many dissident caucuses within the UFT (see Appendix A), few of these caucuses have been able to make a dent in the UFT fortress. Similarly to the UAW, the stifling of opposition and of rank-and-file participation in decision-making within the UFT has led to a traditional business/service-style union unable to respond to attacks on public education and public sector unions after 1976. Maier (1987) argues that a consequence of the Unity Caucus’ lack of democratic practices is that the union can no longer mobilize support from students, parents, or community members, as did the Teachers Union, the Teachers Guild, and even the UFT during its earlier, more
Maier (1987) contends that pressure from union dissidents during the UFT’s first two contract negotiations led to smaller class sizes and an increase in the hiring of black and substitute teachers. Today, the UFT failed to decrease class size, accepted value added measurements and standardized testing, compromised over charter school and school closings, allowed tenure to be more difficult to obtain, agreed to the elimination of seniority protections, and has been unable to retain teachers of color in the classroom. In reflecting on the 2014 UFT settlements with New York City, Mark Brenner (2014) stated, “The deals show how little juice is left for public sector unions trying to deliver using traditional tools at the bargaining table or in the political arena. If these are the limits in a union stronghold like New York . . . the news isn’t good for conventional strategies elsewhere.” Business/service-style unionism and the stifling of opposition have limited the ability of the union to fight back against the attacks on public school communities.

The Movement of Rank-and-File Educators: “A Positive Alternative”

In response to the UFT’s business/service-style unionism, over the years, many dissident caucuses have formed within the UFT (see Appendix A). Currently, the Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE) defines itself as “the Social Justice Caucus of the UFT-New York City’s Teachers union. We are a positive alternative to the current union leadership” (About, 2018). Inspired by the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) in Chicago, MORE began in 2012 and has about 250 members (as of 2018). Since its creation seven years ago, MORE has undergone multiple iterations with different members leading and being active at different times. MORE formed as a coming together of educators from different educator groups and caucuses in New
York City including the New York Collective of Radical Educators, Teachers Unite, Teachers for a Just Contract, Independent Community of Educators, Grassroots Education Movement, and Occupy the Department of Education. Educators in all of these groups were involved in organizing against school closures, co-locations, franchised charter schools, and the impact of high stakes testing. MORE formed during the exciting time of the union leadership victory of CORE in Chicago and Occupy Wall Street. Just prior to the formation of MORE, the group of educators organized a conference, which was attended by more than 200 teachers and paraprofessionals. As Derek, an 8th grade English teacher and member of MORE, describes:

That was the atmosphere when MORE formed. The city had just been racked for several months by this huge disruptive protest. There was this very left-wing air in the city. A lot of the people coming out of Occupy the DOE were getting involved in MORE and the Left very much had the wind at its back. I think that gave many of us a sense that we had more ideological leadership in the group than we actually did . . . But at that time a lot of that was papered over by the excitement of this new group that was going to be a unified caucus.

33 Different groups have had different levels of formal and informal organization throughout their histories. The following information was gathered from websites and interview data.

New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE): Mission: “NYCoRE is a group of current and former public school educators and their allies committed to fighting for social justice in our school system and society at large, by organizing and mobilizing teachers, developing curriculum, and working with community, parent, and student organizations” (http://www.nycore.org/nycore-info/mission/).

Teachers Unite: Mission: “Teachers Unite is an independent membership organization of public school educators in New York City collaborating with youth and parents to transform public schools” (https://teachersunite.org/mission/). “We organize educators to stand against racism and oppression. We want a New York City where all teachers and students have democratic political representation” (https://teachersunite.org).


Independent Community of Educators (ICE): ICE formed in 2003 as an election opposition caucus of the UFT. It ran in the 2007 and 2010 elections in coalition with TJC in opposition to the Unity caucus. It is comprised of veteran and longtime UFT members and has not run in an election since 2010.

Grassroots Education Movement (GEMNYC): About: “GEMNYC educate, organize, and mobilizes educators, parents, students and communities to defend public education . . . GEM advocates around issues dealing with the equality and quality of public educational services as well as the rights of teachers and school workers” (https://gemnyc.org/about/). GEM was active between 2010-2012 and filmed The Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman.

Occupy the Department of Education (DOE): Occupy the DOE was a committee of Occupy Wall Street “calling all parents, students, teachers, school aides, community organizations, youth groups, and community members concerned about creating public education in the interest of the 99%” (http://www.nycore.org/projects-2/occupy-the-doe/). It was most active during the 2011-2012 academic year.
We were going to overcome the very historically scattered, it was the typical leftist thing, people scattered along many small groups.

MORE’s mission statement demands union democratization, educating and organizing the rank-and-file, an improved contract, quality curricula, an end to high stakes testing, and a rejection of the corporate takeover of public schools and of mayoral control (Mission statement, 2012). It is a member-driven organization with a central steering committee that makes major caucus decisions based on the input of members in caucus meetings. At the same time, MORE runs multiple campaigns led by members based on their interests. MORE’s platform for the 2016 elections included combating systemic school segregation and racism and building alliances between UFT members, parents, and communities (Our 2016 Platform, 2016).

MORE ran candidates in the 2013 and 2016 UFT elections against the Unity Caucus, which has been in control of the UFT since its creation in 1961. In the 2016 union elections, MORE ran a joint slate with New Action, another opposition caucus, and won all seven of the UFT’s high school Executive Board seats.34 Five MORE members participate on the Executive Board and have created space for other MORE members to bring in coworkers to present issues, such as parental leave, abusive administrators, and school closings, to the Executive Board. MORE has also been involved in the Opt-Out campaign, which gained steam in 2015 and forced Governor Cuomo to minimize the high stakes link between student test scores and teacher evaluations. Throughout the year, MORE conducts monthly membership meetings, forms issue committees, leads and

34 New Action Caucus: New Action/UFT formed in the mid 1980’s. New Action/UFT defines itself as “the only opposition caucus willing to support the leadership when we believe that a policy benefits the members. We will oppose them when we believe that a policy hurts the members. We are independent” (https://newaction.org/about-new-action/what-is-new-action/). In the 2016 elections New Action joined MORE to oppose the leadership, as “there are just too many obstacles to be working in the schools to be associated with the leadership in a way that there hadn’t been before” (interview with David, New Action member). The only time a non-Unity member has been an officer of the union was when a New Action member won the Academic High School Vice Presidency seat in 1985. Unity then changed the constitution to elect all union officer positions by the membership at-large rather than by their own division—in this case high school educators—in order to prevent any opposition from winning again (interview with David, New Action member).
participates in rallies and protests, has an active chapter leader list-serve and chapter leader trainings, and puts on educational meetings, conferences, and a summer workshop series. At its annual retreat in the fall of 2017, MORE members voted to take on issues of school closings, parental leave, immigration liaisons in every school, chapter leader and delegate support, the Black Lives Matter week of action, and a Stay Union campaign in response to the *Janus v. AFSCME* Supreme Court case.

MORE remains an overwhelmingly white organization, though it is constantly and actively trying to recruit more educators of color. In addition both Peter Brogan (2016) and Paul Bocking (2017), in their dissertations, point to the generational differences among MORE activists in which older activists are more likely to focus on chapter and union elections as a dissident group within the UFT, while younger teachers identify more with “anti-racist, queer, anti-authoritarian left politics” (Brogan, 2016, pg. 449). Due to its formation as a coalition of different groups, over the years, MORE has undergone multiple iterations with different members being active at different times. Nonetheless, MORE continues to be a force within the United Federation of Teachers pushing the union to take stances on high stakes testing, immigration policies, Black Lives Matter, parental leave, and abusive administrators.

**The Caucus of Working Educators: “Grounded in its Membership”**

In response to the Philadelphia Federation of Teacher’s decreasing power due to its traditional business/service-style unionism, the grassroots, educator-led Caucus of Working Educators (WE) was formed in March 2014 with the intention of pushing the union to take on more militant and radical policies, contract fights, and defense of public education. WE was

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35 The UFT is one of very few unions across the country that gives equal voting rights to active members and retirees, so retirees remain active in the union and in New York City’s dissident caucuses. There are 94,000 active members and 64,000 retired members of the UFT. The UFT is a New York City union with union offices in Boca Raton, Florida to serve its retired members.
created by educators—many of whom were also, and some continue to be, active members of Teacher Action Group Philadelphia—learning from Chicago’s Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators and the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union Strike.\textsuperscript{36} Shortly after the formation of WE, some of its members were part of the creation of the United Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (UCORE), a network of social justice caucuses across the country.\textsuperscript{37} WE has about 300 members and is composed mostly of educators but also has parents, community members, and academics who play active roles. WE defines itself as follows: “Our caucus seeks to support and further the mission of our union by tapping into the group’s biggest resource: their members . . . We believe in a social movement union that is grounded in its membership . . . We are proud to be PFT members, and the Caucus of Working Educators is a way to support our union and its leadership” (FAQ, 2018). WE is explicit in its platform in harnessing the power of teachers, students, parents, and citizens to make real change in Philadelphia’s schools and communities based in membership-led democracy, racial and economic justice, and safe and fully funded school communities (Our Platform, 2018). It is a member-driven organization with a central steering committee that makes major caucus decisions based on the input of members in caucus meetings. At the same time, WE runs multiple campaigns led by members based on their interests.

WE is very active in organizing within classrooms, schools, and school communities. WE sponsors book clubs each summer (Riley, 2015), annual conferences featuring keynote speakers and social justice unionism workshops, a monthly organizing meeting, and monthly meetings of its different committees, including the Racial Justice Organizing Committee, WE Political

\textsuperscript{36} Teacher Action Group (TAG) – Philadelphia: About: “TAG Philadelphia works to strengthen the influence of educators within schools and over policy decisions. While partnering with parent, student, and community groups, TAG is committed to fostering positive school transformation, environments where students and teachers can thrive, and community ownership and influence within education” (http://tagphilly.org/about/).

\textsuperscript{37} UCORE is a growing national network of social justice teacher union locals and caucuses that want to fight for economic and racial justice and democracy in schools by building power in schools and unions (Our Principles, 2018; Russom & Winslow, 2017).
Committee, Queer Educators Organizing Committee, Building Anti-Racist White Educators, and the Immigration Justice Organizing Committee (as of 2018). Throughout its history, WE has had a plethora of committees, sometimes more than ten different ones meeting regularly, to respond to the needs and interests of members and to the political climate the caucus is organizing in. WE expanded the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Week of Action in Schools in 2017 from one school in Seattle to a city-wide effort in Philadelphia. The BLM week of action uses the Black Lives Matter Movement’s thirteen guiding principles to organize for racial justice in schools and hold community events. The goals of the week included, “creating a space for dialogue and deeper introspection around the 13 guiding principles; provide deeper connections between educators, parents, students, and community organizers; stand in support with national organizing grounding the Black Lives matter movement” (Home, 2018). Learning from WE, the BLM week of action spread to other cities in 2018, including New York, Seattle, Baltimore, Chicago, Boston, and Washington, D.C. In 2019, the week of action grew into a movement in over 30 cities. The nationwide demands include ending zero tolerance and implementing restorative justice in schools, hiring more black teachers, and a mandated Black History/Ethnic Studies curriculum in K-12 schools. The movement added a demand for funding counselors not cops in schools in 2019 (Black Lives Matter at School, 2019). WE has also been involved in running delegates to the AFT National Convention, political campaigns in local elections, the campaign to dismantle the School Reform Commission and demand a people’s school board, the Opt-Out campaign, “a ‘Reclaiming PD’ campaign that includes an effort to push the school district to incorporate more teacher-drive professional development, and a pre-service teacher campaign where members speak in local

38 The Black Lives Matter Global Network’s thirteen guiding principles include diversity, restorative justice, globalism, queer affirming, unapologetically black, collective value, empathy, loving engagement, transgender affirming, black villages, black women, black families, and intergenerational (What We Believe, 2018).
college classrooms about the power and potential of unions” (Maton, 2016, pg. 46). While some campaigns are caucus run, many are developed and organized with parents, students, activist groups, other unions, and community groups. WE also participated in the PFT union election campaign in 2016. This was one of the first serious challenges for the Collective Bargaining Caucus (CB), which has run the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers since the 1980s and has had unopposed elections since 2004. While the slate of candidates did not win the election—they did win about 35 percent of PFT members’ votes—WE is determined to continue challenging the CB caucus in future elections.

As a result of the history and current reality of racism in public education and in unions and the composition of the teaching force, WE, like MORE, is composed of mostly white middle-class educators. In her dissertation about WE, Rhiannon Maton (2016) explains, “[WE] experiences difficulty in attracting teachers of color to join the organization and also struggles to form close and meaningful relationships with local communities experiencing social marginalization—and particularly those facing marginalization along racial identity lines” (pg. 4). In an effort to change this, WE centers on the fight for racial justice in all of its organizing work; it has an active Racial Justice Organizing Committee, and an Educators of Color and a Building Anti-Racist White Educators affinity groups. Malcolm, a high school teacher of African American history, explains:

Really being rooted with racial justice at the center of our analysis, I think that can guide us further than most as long as the folks who are actually involved [in WE] believe in that vision. We might differ on the conclusions of what that vision might ultimately take to get there, but that’s always going to happen. But we have to be very clear about where we are trying to get to and that needs to be a more racially equitable society. If not, then we are not addressing the real issues.
WE is a growing force within the Philadelphia School District actively pushing both the city and the PFT to address issues of democracy, safety, fair funding, and social, racial, and economic justice.

**A Possible Future for Social Justice Caucuses**

Caucuses are an important and necessary part of unions that can create spaces for debate, dissident views, alternative strategies, and broader visions. Social justice caucuses in particular have the potential to fight for militant, bottom-up, democratization within unions, which will be necessary in order for unions to survive the continuous attacks on labor. Learning from previous left-wing caucuses shows the difficulty dissidents have had in overcoming business unionism and the vicious attacks against them. Left-wing caucuses in power have also struggled to sustain the movement once in leadership positions. In addition, other than the attempt by the League of Revolutionary Workers, caucuses and oppositional movements have had little contact across industries.

Aronowitz (2014) argues it will take workers forming additional organizations outside of caucuses to make unions more democratic and militant. For the labor movement in the first half of the 20th century, this involved the Socialist and Communist parties and the anarchist federations which grounded workers ideologically and politically. Moody (2017) agrees that union democracy and militancy will take greater class consciousness coming from the larger organization and activity of rank-and-file workers and the overcoming of racial divisions that have been detrimental to building a stronger labor movement. Aronowitz (2014) also encourages rank-and-file caucuses to form alliances with workers’ centers and other movements willing to take direct action. This again points to the potential of social justice caucuses that form coalitions with communities and other groups fighting for similar issues, lead militant struggles for economic and racial justice, and
are comprised of left leaning workers–some of whom belong to left-wing political groups. Based on their platforms, actions, and activist members, there are radical possibilities in the organizing and mobilizing of MORE and WE for both the educational and labor justice movements.
CHAPTER 6: Organizing Dilemmas

Experiencing Membership Meetings

It is noon on a Saturday in New York City as I enter the City of University of New York Graduate Center. After showing my ID, I head up to the fifth floor where MORE convenes its monthly organizing meetings. The room is bright with large windows and is filled with yellow metal chairs set up in a large circle. As I enter, a MORE member sitting behind a large table welcomes me to the meeting and asks me to sign in. The table includes a sign-in sheet, stickers for nametags, t-shirts for sale, flyers for upcoming events, and donuts and coffee. I sit down and begin talking to MORE members who I know from campaigns we have been involved in together.

Between 25 to 40 people attend MORE’s monthly meetings, which almost always occur on a Saturday. On this particular Saturday, 28 educators attended the meeting, including 10 women, 6 people of color, and 4 retirees. MORE has tried to meet on a weeknight but with the size of the city and how far educators must travel after a long school day, Saturday works best. MORE members rotate as to who leads the meeting. The agenda usually includes an introduction and sharing of group norms, full group discussion, breakout groups, report backs, and announcements. This particular Saturday, the introduction is a “think-pair-share” about what is a widely felt issue in your school? It is followed by a sharing of the group norms that include asking: “Why am I talking?” to speak purposefully and not dominate the conversation, and speak to the issue, not the person. The full group discussion centers on what does it take to win a good contract? Members debate different strategies including whether building campaigns at the school level or vying for power within the union is a better strategy and about how militant the campaign should be. Some

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39 Think-pair-share is a collaborative learning strategy where students or members of a group think individually about a topic or question and then discuss their ideas in pairs before potentially sharing their ideas during a whole group discussion. Sharing can also happen in pairs, then in small groups, and finally in a whole group discussion.
of the other full group discussions have been about elections, the Opt-Out movement, solidarity actions with other unions, strategy from other educator caucuses, and political education. The caucus also invites students, parents, and other unions to come speak about their issues during these meetings to form alliances and build caucus support for campaigns.

Following the full group discussion, educators break out into discussion groups. These are sometimes based on different campaigns the caucus is participating in, educational topics, or internal caucus committees, such as membership, organizing, newsletter, and steering. After meeting in their smaller groups, MORE members come back together to give report backs from each group. The meeting ends after members make announcements about campaigns or events happening in the city and in their schools. The meetings usually end around 3:30 to 4:00pm. Dedicated MORE activists spend three to four hours every month in these Saturday meetings in addition to the organizing they do in their schools.

One hundred miles south of New York City, it is a Tuesday afternoon in Philadelphia. I arrive in the city around 3:00pm and jump onto a SEPTA train to get to a 4:00pm membership meeting. These meetings often happen in a classroom near the center of Philadelphia, but rotate to different parts of the city, including a restaurant far up in Philadelphia’s Northeast neighborhood. As I walk up to the high school, the football team is practicing on the field next to the school. The doors of the school are locked as this is afterschool hours, and a student, who organizes with WE, lets me in. I walk to the classroom on the first floor, which is filled with portraits and quotes of African American historical figures. Since I arrive early, I help move the desks into a large circle and set up the table at the entrance of the classroom that is soon filled with a sign-in sheet, WE pens and pins, t-shirts for sale, flyers, surveys, and snacks that members bring to these meetings. About 25 to 40 people attend WE’s membership meetings, including a few parents. This particular
membership meeting had 32 people in attendance including 21 women, 6 people of color, and 2 parents.

The agenda today includes introductions, surveys, practice, commitment, announcements, and a closing. After going around the room for introductions, the times and days of WE’s other group meetings, events, and campaigns are shared. WE’s groups include the Racial Justice Organizing Committee, WE Political Committee, Queer Educators Organizing Committee, Building Anti-Racist White Educators, and the Immigration Justice Organizing Committee (as of 2018). While 32 members are present at this Tuesday membership meeting, many more are participating in the other committee meetings.

The focus of WE membership meetings in the Fall of 2017 was on using surveys as organizing tools to win a strong contract, and creating a regional captain structure to make sure that surveys, one-on-one conversations, and advocacy for WE were happening in every school. With about 240 public schools in Philadelphia as compared to New York City’s 1,600, WE believes it can organize every school in every region despite its limited resources. The meeting involved discussions about the different survey questions, potential pushback about the surveys, and practice on how to have effective conversations. First, two caucus members modeled a survey conversation in front of the rest of the group and then members practiced conversations in groups of two. The conversations included an introduction, finding out the other person’s issues, and giving them a plan to win. Caucus members are trying to build relationships to organize colleagues in every school. At the end of the meeting, WE members went around the room saying how many surveys they are committed to collecting in their own school and neighboring ones before the next meeting. After announcements, the closing for this particular meeting was for all in attendance to offer one word describing how they feel. Many members expressed feelings of hope and
excitement for this school year’s organizing. Membership meetings end at 6:00pm as members head home, spend time with their families, and get ready for tomorrow’s school day. For the 2018-2019 school year, monthly organizing meetings have been replaced with monthly regional meetings in each of Philadelphia’s seven regions. WE members who are part of multiple committees spend a few nights a month organizing the caucus in addition to the daily organizing work they do in their schools.

There’s This Internal Tension

This chapter is a story of internal organizing dilemmas and how educator caucus activists address them to move their educational justice movements forward. The experience of activist educators in social justice caucuses is important at a time of increasing assaults on public institutions, such as schools and unions, and in a polarized society with growing politicization and activism from below. For example, as mentioned in the introduction, in January and February 2019, the Republican Senate in West Virginia attempted to pass a bill that would “raise class sizes, legalize charter schools, introduce school vouchers, financially penalize strikers, undercut job seniority, end wage equity by introducing ‘differential pay,’ and make it harder for unions to collect dues” (Blanc, 2019b). In response West Virginia educators organized one-day walkouts, building on their 2018 strike to defend public education. The West Virginia educators went on strike twice in less than a year after a lapse of 28 years with no militant actions.

As mentioned in the Methodology Section, there will be no differentiation in this study between MORE and WE members in my analysis of the beliefs and commitments of the activist educators who I interviewed. While I thought local context would play a major role, since Philadelphia and New York City have different sociopolitical and historical environments, the interviews I conducted and the meetings in both cities I participated in showed caucus activists
raising the same concerns and tensions. For example, educators in both caucuses mentioned actions in support of the Black Lives Matter movement as fracture points within their caucuses and tensions between educators organizing for social justice and those with a greater focus on trade unionism. While the internal organization of social justice caucuses varies in every city across the country, certain organizational issues transcend localities.

In addition, as an ally of both social justice caucuses and an advocate of their work, I felt uncomfortable making this a comparative case study that would turn the focus and potential critique from readers onto individual members of the caucuses rather than highlighting the organizational tensions and dilemmas that exist across social justice caucuses and that may be generalized to similar activist organizations. I use research about the work of the Chicago Teachers Union to show that the issues facing MORE and WE are also found in CORE, which is often used as a model for other social justice caucuses. To be more specific, while both MORE and WE struggle with caucus members who demonstrate racist tendencies, racism is a problem inherent in our society that reaches far beyond individual members of the caucuses. Therefore, I name the educators in this study without referring to the caucus that they belong to in order to focus the reader’s attention on issues that can be generalized beyond the specific caucuses rather than on the individuals within each caucus.

Moreover, Fine and Weis (2010) warn researchers about “treacherous data—data that may do more damage than good, depending on who consumes, exploits them” (pg. 454). In an era of attacks on public schools and public unions, the focus for this dissertation is on the lessons learned from activists rather than a comparative study of two caucuses that could be more divisive than constructive. Some of the “treacherous data” include discussing tensions and divisions in unions at a time when unions are losing members because of right-wing propaganda and legislation to
weaken unions such as through the loss of agency fee payers in public employee unions due to the *Janus vs. AFSCME* Supreme Court case. In addition, sharing caucus members’ responses to questions of racism and anti-racism could lead to more tensions rather than unification within the caucuses. The aim of this dissertation is to more broadly highlight the practical knowledge and shared experiences of activist educators in social justice caucuses rather than offer an internal critique of MORE and/or WE. The unit of analysis for this dissertation is the caucus rather than individual players within. The interviews were conducted with individual caucus members from both MORE and WE. I place the interviewees in conversation in this dissertation when they had similar points of view in their interviews.

The number of social justice caucuses in teacher unions in the United States has grown exponentially since the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union strike led by CORE. While social justice caucuses share their successes and struggles through the United Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators network and learn from one another, each caucus is also organizing through trial-and-error as social justice caucuses are relatively new. As Malcolm states:

[Caucus organizing] seems like more of an experiment that has not been really experimented on the teacher level before, might not even be possible. But for me, I feel like this is the only realistic type of vehicle that we can use to actually address large aspects of our society that are actually headed in the wrong direction . . . I think that just that dynamic shift of focus away from just maintaining power but recognizing that you don’t get freedom then power, you get power then you get freedom. 40

Educators are ideally placed to create spaces of solidarity that reach beyond the school and have the potential to transform society. Educators have relationships with students, parents, and other unionists and activists, and public schools are central to communities where most community members have a child, extended family member, friend, or neighbor in school. In figuring out how to use their positions as educators in schools and active caucus members within their union, social

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40 See Chapter 3, Centering Educator Caucus Activists, for a description of caucus activists.
justice caucus activists are working through important debates about processes, strategies, and commitments. Ciara says:

I think that as a caucus that’s made up and created by rank-and-filers, you get people from all different viewpoints, politics, identities, and there’s this internal tension of which kind of issues are a priority. There’s so many issues that are a priority, and so we have to think about as a union caucus that’s trying to grow, that’s trying to put forth a vision of rank-and-file unionism, of how to kind of negotiate all these different competing interests and issues. It’s tricky.

Unions are organized by workplace rather than ideological commitment and so are some of the most diverse institutions in society. While social justice caucuses engage rank-and-file members with similar ideologies, they still attract a wide array of viewpoints leading to tensions in organizing priorities. In his analysis of the Occupy Movement, Smucker (2017) also highlights the difficulty of finding intragroup consensus, even in seemingly cohesive groups.

Debates and internal tensions exist in every group and can be empowering and/or detrimental to movements. In analyzing different Australian social movements, Maddison and Scalmer (2006) report, “And there was tension—with the media, with politicians and with each other—about the goals, direction and shape of the movement. In the case of the Sydney peace movement these tensions were to prove cataclysmic. Elsewhere these tensions created new alliances, new strategies and new knowledge” (pg. 3). Movement activists face an endless number of choices and decisions that happen during times of cooperation and of conflict all of which have risks and benefits with no single right answer (Jasper, 2006). Dilemmas can and often do lead to conflict; Jasper (2004) explains:

Dilemmas are frequently transferred into conflicts, as different individuals or factions favor different choices. In fact these debates are a useful method for examining the dilemmas. Participants may disagree permanently, say, over the relative importance of different audiences, a disagreement that may surface in decision after decision and perhaps lead ultimately to schism. Or a decision may be more vital to one faction than another, raising for them issues of the movement’s very identity (pg. 10).
However, Maddison and Scalmer (2006) found “whilst tensions were often difficult and frustrating, we also found that they could be the source of creativity and advance” (pg. 251).

Internal tensions and dilemmas are constantly occurring in movements and in social justice caucuses, and are important to activists. Maddison and Scalmer (2006)’s book is based on political tensions raised by activists themselves, and in his analysis of the Occupy Movement, Smucker (2017), an activist himself, also reflects on internal tensions in the movement. Jasper (2004) argues that it is important to analyze these dilemmas from a scholarly point of view because “the goals of activists are not those of scholars. Activists want definitive answers that can give confidence to their followers; they are not likely to acknowledge dilemmas to which there is more than one possible correct answer. Part of their business is to ‘know’ the right answers and dismiss alternatives. From the less urgent perspective of historical scholarship, we can ask why they take the positions they do” (pg. 4). This chapter seeks to explore the dilemmas faced by members of MORE and WE in their day-to-day organizing because there is much to learn from the experiences of educators in social justice caucuses. I believe that the knowledge these activists are producing as they organize illuminates what it will take to transform labor unions and public schools. I echo Maddison and Scalmer (2006) when they state, “It is a central tenet of our work that progressive activists and social movements have much to teach the rest of society” (pg. 4).

I write about the “internal tensions” Ciara mentions that exist in MORE and WE to highlight the complexity of movement building and the valuable lessons to be learned from caucus activists. The dilemmas raised come from the activists themselves. While fault lines can occur in diverse places and circumstances, in MORE and WE, they occur around organizing dilemmas and issues of criminal/racial justice, which is the subject of the next chapter. Jasper (2004) states, “Anyone who has sat through the endless meetings of a typical protest group knows how many
decisions are made, and how much attention, disagreement, and struggle they entail. I believe that these choices must be the explananda [what is to be explained] for any theory of social movement strategy” (pg. 6). Sitting through MORE and WE meetings is inspiring because of how difficult it is attempting to democratize a union with an emphasis on social justice in a society dominated by neoliberalism, individualism, and white supremacy.

There are many internal tensions and dilemmas in organizing. In *Getting Your Way: Strategic Dilemmas in the Real World*, Jasper (2006) explores 37 different dilemmas that players might face. In their book on Australian social movements, Maddison and Scalmer (2006) highlight eight political tensions that activists contend with. Building on Jasper and Maddison and Scalmer’s work, in this chapter I will explore the internal tensions in framing and with Jasper’s extension dilemma within MORE and WE, which explores how expanding a group decreases the coherence of that group. While Jasper and Maddison and Scalmer are social movement scholars, I will apply their theories to organized caucuses to show that in organizations as well, tensions are frustrating and lead to conflict, but are also sources of creativity and discovery. Ebbs and flows are integral parts of union democratization. In response to crisis, MORE and WE have attempted to solve the extension dilemma by adapting their internal structures and creating spaces where they can organize in the tensions that allow for the *both/and* rather than *either/or*. The caucuses, including CORE, also momentarily solve the extension dilemma through protest activity, like the CTU’s 2012 strike. Internal dynamics are important to understand and focusing on the tensions also illuminates radical possibilities.

**Depends on the Audience**

Social movements use frames, a concept in social movement theory, in many ways, including for recruiting, mobilizing, creating common identities within a movement, providing
counter narratives and attributing blame, attracting media attention, and building coalitions, all of which provide opportunities for tensions to emerge as different individuals have divergent ideas and interests within a movement. Frames are not static, but rather are strategic, and are products of long debates, contestation, and adjustments. Many social movement theorists argue that it is necessary to explore movement frames to understand a movement’s strategy (Snow et al., 1986).

Educators in social justice caucuses use motivational frames as a “call to arms” to get members into action (Gupta, 2017, pg. 146). They use frames for recruitment to and mobilizing of the caucus and to the campaigns they are supporting. For example, while caucuses call themselves “social justice caucuses,” many caucus activists disagree about the use of that term because it does not motivate people to act. Rachel states:

I feel like social justice unionism doesn’t really do the kind of work that we are doing justice because social justice unionism doesn’t necessarily call for deep structures that allow people to really build power through one-on-one conversations and relationship building. I feel like social justice unionism can sometimes be confused for: if your union is fighting for racial justice, it can still be done in a top down way or a union can still take a position on fight for $15 but still in a top down way.

Sonia agrees that “social justice unionism in name only doesn’t really mean anything that a true participatory democracy and a truly activated union membership will be able to move on the issues and then also be able to cause the effect and changes and development that we want to see.” Rachel and Sonia are referring to the fact that just because unions may have discourses and repertoires related to social justice does not mean that rank-and-file members have democratic control of their union; rather it may mean they have passively accepted whatever union leadership proposes (Ross, 2007). Malcolm echoes, “Social justice unionism is what is thrown out there. I think social justice, the term or the concept, has been effectively hijacked and discredited, and it’s kind of like nonsense, so I don’t really want to call it that, but at the same time I do recognize that it’s not business unionism.” Activists question the framing of the caucus as one that advocates for “social
justice” because of the coopting and diluting of the term, which prevents activists from organizing more members in the caucus and mobilizing members to action.

Instead, educator caucus activists have different ways of describing caucus activism. While many do use the term social justice unionism, others use the terms grassroots unionism, bottom-up unionism, member-driven unionism, and liberatory unionism to describe caucus work. Caucus activists need their struggles to resonate with educators, students, and communities to get people excited about joining the movement. Howard explains:

I sort of code switch depending on the audience . . . When talking to somebody who just has a labor background, I call it labor organizing. Somebody who has no reference of labor organizing or does not use the term social justice organizing, I talk about building our power citywide. But honestly, to me, it’s building a union that represents the membership and maybe call it a powerful, bottom-up union is kind of like the colloquial term I want to use. But I honestly don’t have one term. It really depends on the audience.

Rachel adds:

If someone is really into organizing, which not a lot of people are, you can say we are a union caucus that’s organizing or if someone is really into a membership driven union, you can say we are a democratic union caucus, we are a membership driven union caucus that is fighting for transparency in [our union]. Or if someone is really moved by social justice issues, like a union taking on gender justice or a union taking on racial justice, you can say we are doing social justice unionism where a union might take a position on Black Lives Matter.

Caucus activists strategically use different frames in order to recruit members to the caucus and to mobilize rank-and-file members into action.

Given that framing is an organizing tool, caucus activists use frames that best serve their organizing needs. However, there are internal tensions around the use of certain frames. Derek states:

I would call it socialism, what I would call a more left-wing approach to organizing and one that involves aligning with communities and one that links the conditions that students learn in to the workplace gripes of teachers so that is that good working conditions for teachers are good learning conditions for students and that’s our slogan. There is a lot of
disagreement about that . . . I think that there’s a lot of confusion about what people mean when they say they’re for social justice unionism.

Even in a caucus, which brings together likeminded people, rank-and-file members do not ideologically always agree about the use of certain frames to describe their work. Though most of the members of the social justice caucuses believe in the slogan, as a way to frame the work, that educators’ working conditions are student learning conditions, there is disagreement in how to frame the organizing. “If the disagreements are serious enough, they can lead to schisms and splits within movement organizations” (pg. 155), Gupta (2017) argues, but some disagreement can be good as it “energizes discussion and requires actors to be intentional in their framing choices” (pg. 156). Though it can be frustrating, discussing how to label the type of union organizing that they are doing leads MORE and WE activists to reflect on recruitment and mobilizing strategies for the caucus and to make changes when needed. As Gupta (2017) states, “Frames are also contestable and fluid—what might be mobilizing at one point in time may not work later” (pg. 147).

Over the past six years, different visions for the caucus has led to schisms in MORE. For example, as will be discussed in the next chapter, MORE put out a statement when the United Federation of Teachers in New York City sanctioned a rally against the police murder of Eric Garner in 2014. MORE members were divided about the framing of the statement and ended up releasing a hurried and neutral statement. Members later voted to retract the statement because the framing was too broad and not reflective of the racial justice goals of the caucus due to its solidaristic tone with NYC police officers.41 The debates about the framing of the statement led

41 The statement included: “We stand in solidarity with the Garner family, and countless families who have lost loved ones during low-level police-related encounters. Many of our members will march with the Garner family this Saturday, many will not due to the concerns surrounding the sponsorship and organization of this march . . . We encourage the leaderships of the UFT and PBA [Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association], to find ways to work together and unite . . . With our brother and sister officers we should seek improved practices and policies that will result in equal and just outcomes for all of our students and their families.” To read the entire statement see the MORE caucus website post called The March for Justice and Unity retrieved from https://morecaucusnyc.org/2014/08/21/the-march-for-justice-and-unity/#more-3750
some members to leave MORE. WE also has had debates and made changes in framing. Maton (2018) in an article about the Caucus of Working Educators, describes a shift in WE’s framing over the past four years from a neoliberal framework as the explanation for inequity in public education to a framework that intertwines both neoliberalism and structural racism. “The strategic capacity of the organization hinges, in part, on the incorporation of a critical problem framing that centres issues of race and racism” (pg. 17), explains Maton (2018), “Members strove to transform explicit statements of organizational values regarding racial justice in order to more accurately represent members’ beliefs and values, while also transforming which strategies and tactics were employed and how” (pg. 19). Both caucuses have reflected on, debated, and intentionally adjusted their frames to strategically recruit and mobilize members. As Howard stated about mobilizing educators through one-on-one conversations, “I honestly don’t have one term. It really depends on the audience.”

Discussion and contestation are integral to caucus organizing because social justice caucuses define themselves as member-driven. Caucuses enact practices that imagine the union they hope to create, and the active participation of members is a key part of that. While debate can be frustrating, discussing how to label the types of union organizing that they are doing leads MORE and WE activists to reflect on recruitment and mobilizing strategies for the caucus and to make changes when needed.

**The Extension Dilemma**

* A Big Debate About Audience

Many of the tensions in unions, schools, and communities are due to constant strategic dilemmas, like framing, that are integral to social movement strategy because they highlight “how many decisions are made, and how much attention, disagreement, and struggle they entail” (Jasper,
One of Jasper’s (2006) most recurring dilemmas is the extension dilemma, which he describes as: “The further you reach out to expand your team or alliance, the more diverse it will be and the less unified—in goals, resources, skills, and contacts. You gain breadth but you lose depth” (pg. 127). MORE and WE activists constantly struggle with the extension dilemma. For example, MORE’s crisis with the Eric Garner statement was a necessary limitation of trying to create a broad coalition. While the caucus gained breadth, the fact that it lost its depth in fighting for racial justice caused a split in the caucus. Maddison and Scalmer (2006) argue that in dealing with tensions, “Activists had developed a distinctive kind of knowledge . . . It was best understood as a mode of acting and reasoning, a particular kind of relationship between thought and practice . . . [called] ‘practical knowledge’ . . . It has a special character: local and partisan; social; intuitive; experimental; adaptive; narrative; and reflective” (pg. 250). MORE and WE activists use their practical knowledge to deal with the extension dilemma that is relatively permanent in activism. MORE members use the practical knowledge they gained from the crisis caused by the Eric Garner statement when making decisions about other issues within the caucus; the statement is often brought up in conversations.

One of the most frequent themes that appeared when I was analyzing the data was about inclusivity within the caucus. Derek explains:

We’re not a group for every teacher. We want every teacher to vote for us, we want every teacher not going to [long organizing meetings], but that’s going to be the activists. Sorry, there’s a militant minority, that’s what builds labor movements, that’s what history shows, so we want people who are going to be active and you’re going to find that on the Left. So there’s a big debate about audience. That’s a big debate, it gets framed by the other side of this debate that that’s about being a boutique caucus.

The themes that appeared most frequently (more than 50 times throughout the 25 interviews) when I coded my data included dilemmas/tensions, inclusivity within the caucus, racism/oppression, organizing at the school site, intersection of social justice and union democracy, common values, broader political analysis, union leadership does nothing, and organizing successes. For more on data analysis, see Chapter 3, Using Constructivist Grounded Theory and Intersectionality for Analysis.
Derek suggests that in order to reach their goals, caucus activists organize with the most active caucus members who have similar tactics and ideologies because activists get frustrated when most of the organizing time is spent on internal disagreements rather than on building the movement. Ciara explains, “We have to talk about how race plays into our work, and we need to be clear about our values . . . Otherwise, we will just continue having these tensions and internal fights every time we aren’t clear about an issue.” Claire adds, “I think establishing shared values and then trying to examine every action based on those shared values could be a way to make sure that those justice goals aren’t lost in fighting for one’s own membership.” Caucus activists see common goals and values as an integral part of organizing to form cohesion within the caucus, and thus struggle with expanding the caucus and having more diverse and less unified goals. Rachel cautions, “Somebody summed it up really, really well a couple of days ago . . . Sometimes there’s this tension between power and values and the tension is basically something around where you can be really driven by values but are your values going to pull everybody in or are your values alienating people?” Caucus activists want to create unity, while also growing their caucuses.

In order to strengthen the educational justice movement, caucuses need to increase their membership. Jasper (2004) explains, “Part of the extension dilemma is whether your membership will be restricted or open. Does your power lie in sheer numbers of members, no matter who they are, or in the kind of people they are? On the other hand, sheer numbers may be the source of a movement’s power” (pgs. 7-8). This internal tension often occurs in both MORE and WE between building a caucus based on broad politics in order to grow the size of the caucus or building a caucus that takes a stand and may exclude those who do not agree with certain social justice campaigns that the caucus undertakes. Noah declares:

You see a caucus [going] hard on the racism issue and that’s to their credit and certainly strategically and morally I wholeheartedly agree, but you could see how that will not
always be a popular position. And that will mean that they will have to be willing to be in a minority, have to be willing to not win elections, have to be willing to wait for a moment when that perspective and strategy can win over the majority, which is not going to be most of the time . . . Do we just try to get the maximum number of people on any basis of opposition or do we try to stick to some position? And that’s a real tension.

MORE and WE make decisions based on these strategic dilemmas as to which educators to recruit to the caucus. Jane Mansbridge (2009) explains that “to change the world, a movement must include as many people as possible. But to attract devoted activists, a movement must often promote a sense of exclusivity” (pg. 161). Mansbridge (2009) argues that while members may be ideologically pure, exclusivity creates homogeneity and an “us” versus “them” mentality that can prevent a group from making allies and the potentially necessary compromises to succeed. Writing about the Occupy movement, Smucker (2017) echoes Mansbridge but names it the political identity paradox. However, Mansbridge (2009) also contends that cohesive groups allow for spaces in which disagreements can be resolved through dialogue rather than conflict and activists remain engaged and committed to the movement in a deep and meaningful way. As Derek stated, “There’s a big debate about audience” within the social justice caucuses as to whether to organize likeminded educators or a broad coalition.43

Keep Moving Them Left

Social justice caucuses need large-scale member support in order to be a force for change inside their unions. But a broad definition of a caucus’s mission means the social justice identity of the caucus can be lost as well as the caucus’s power to take radical stands. Jasper (2004) explains:

43 While some caucuses, like Unity in the UFT, abide by caucus discipline (see Chapter 5, Unity Caucus and One-Party Rule in the United Federation of Teachers), MORE and WE do not. The caucuses vote on priorities, but this does not prevent a minority of caucus members from expressing divergent opinions. In addition, speaking against a caucus position does not lead to expulsion from the caucus. Divergent views cause internal tensions and schisms, but MORE and WE do not enforce caucus discipline.
Part of the extension dilemma arises from the benefits of maintaining a sharp collective identity: the broader the definition of that identity, the less specific it can be . . . This is a classic dilemma for revolutionaries, and Marxists have long grappled with it. Working-class revolutionaries tend to succeed when they build broad coalitions based only on what they all oppose—the old regime—so that various groups can work together, but after the revolution they have less influence on the new regime.

Some caucus activists in MORE and WE fear that having broad, less coherent goals reproduces the concessionary organizing of business/service-style unions and weakens the caucus’ ability to transform the union. Others fear emphasizing their social justice identity will exclude too many educators and prevent the caucus from ever gaining power. In trying to balance a sharply defined collective identity versus a broader definition of that identity, caucus activists are debating what is most strategic for the caucus. Do caucus members organize at school around educator issues first and then win colleagues over to social justice struggles or do they lead with social justice struggles in all of their organizing? “I don’t actually think you can develop a union by just focusing on social justice. I mean because you won’t necessarily organize,” Karen argues, “I think this asking people to stand up and be an active member of their union is a reasonable place to ask people to start. Mostly because people aren’t [at the stage of social justice unionism] yet.” Starting from the point of view that many educators are not yet ready for social justice unionism, she then suggests a recruitment and organizing strategy for the caucus:

I think that it means that you take social justice-oriented folks who already have that mindset and then you include in that also the mindset of some people who aren’t there yet. And one way to start getting them on that path is to build a union where they see themselves as active participants and then you look long-term to keep moving them left, left, left, left. I know that some people are not happy with my vision of it. I’d rather have strong relationships with people because I’ve built them, and I’ve worked on something really hard together, and we’ve won together because those people are going to be more likely to hear me when I say this is why Black Lives Matter.

For Karen, caucus activists have to organize at the workplace and build relationships with their coworkers before they can engage them in social justice struggles. She has had a similar experience
as Ahlquist and Levi (2013) who argue that unions can only have strong political activism if they have already won the material successes members need and demand. Karen also believes in reaching people where they are. Goodwin and Jasper (2009) argue that successful framing happens when activists enter into the worldview of those they are trying to recruit. Howard agrees with Karen:

Let’s focus on winning some of these union base line issues and in the process of doing that, move towards educating people about racial justice issues. I really do believe that there’s a world in which you do something well first and then based on that trust, you can move people to take on more radical politics. That theory of change is very much not shared by everybody.

He later adds, “We’ll be bold in elevating certain politics, but we’re not going to win election of the union on Black Lives Matter alone.” Howard also sees value in winning more “bread and butter” issues in order to build the trust of members rather than beginning the conversation with social justice campaigns, like supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. While balancing larger issues against the need to deliver better wages and working conditions is a dilemma for all unions, engaging in campaigns for equality and justice is a defining aspect of social justice caucuses. As Ross (2007) explains while business/service-style unions may have discourses and repertoires related to social justice, they do not mobilize forces to fuse union struggles with community movements to transform school and society. Thus, the extension dilemma in social justice caucuses tends to be more intense than in traditional unions as the caucuses are attempting to deeply mobilize members around bread and butter as well as social justice issues. On the other hand, business/service-style unions often superficially mobilize around social justice issues thus lessening the need for debate.

As MORE has been organizing for seven years and WE for five years, both caucuses are learning from their past experiences, building on victories, and adapting their strategies based on
less successful efforts. For example, Claire explains, “In terms of growing membership and people feeling united and moving forward, a lot of our strongest campaigns have been the campaign for election or the contract campaign or campaigns that are visibly in opposition to union leadership. Those are the ones that grow membership and activate the most people.” Election and contract campaigns that address more typical “bread and butter” union issues galvanize a lot of rank-and-file members. Rachel adds, “I think there are a lot of people who are attracted to the caucus because of the social justice piece but many of them are not teachers.” Claire and Rachel are reflecting on why some people in the caucus argue for prioritizing organizing on bread and butter issues. Steve also described the difficulties of organizing for social justice issues:

There’s no literal, direct, right now connection between the struggle on Standing Rock and what’s happening in my classroom tomorrow. There’s broader political connections that we can talk about, but I think that for a lot of people it’s hard to see why that is work we should be doing . . . I supported it and I think it was an important political struggle and I thought it was great that we engaged in it. Whether or not it’s how we should be allocating our scarce resources, it’s debatable. 44

Caucuses need to recruit and mobilize members, sustain activism, build coalitions, and win campaigns in order to transform educators’ working conditions and student learning conditions. Their insights illuminate why certain choices are made and the reasons for debate inside the caucuses.

However, there are also other important motives for emphasizing social justice struggles. Fighting for social justice is both a moral and strategic issue for caucuses. Both MORE and WE have difficulty “attracting teachers of color to join the organization and also [the caucuses] struggle . . . to form close and meaningful relationships with local communities experiencing social

44 From April 2016 to February 2017, a grassroots indigenous rights movement led by the Sioux Tribe on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation protested the building of the Energy Transfer Partners’ Dakota Access Pipeline to protect clean water, indigenous land, and ancient burial grounds. Thousands of indigenous people and nonindigenous allies joined the resistance and offered support in media, money, people, and resources.
marginalization—and particularly those facing marginalization along racial identity lines” (Maton, 2016, pg. 4). Malcolm explains that people of color are often skeptical of joining majority white caucuses that do not have the priorities of people of color at their center. His goal is to show people of color that the union can be a vehicle for change because “racial justice is not only about race. It is about race interconnected with economic justice.” For Derek, focusing on social justice is also important to build solidarity with parents and school communities. He states:

There’s no reason that parents should care about what a teacher making $75 or $80,000 a year thinks about their broken copy machine if they’re not getting backed up in their own struggles. And that if we don’t have those deep alliances, it’s very easy because we are public sector workers, we do care work for other people’s children, it’s very easy to pitch striking teachers as selfish, self-motivated, self-interested . . . Well if you’re not for those parents, there’s no reason they should care about you making $5,000 more a year, so it’s really important strategically to make those alliances and to see them as a priority.

Derek highlights that for educators’ working conditions to be students’ learning conditions, educators must also fight against the oppressions faced by students and their families outside of school. He connects the fight of educators for good working conditions to the struggles of all working people for fair treatment because he sees these issues as interconnected.

All caucus members do organize around educator issues at their schools, but there continues to be disagreement over strategy. For Malcolm racial justice has to be at the center of all organizing that the caucus does: “I view that we can’t speak on social justice if racial justice is not at the center of it, so that is my philosophical kind of conception of what [unionism] is.” Malcolm focuses all of his organizing on racial justice and keeps broad politics away because “otherwise, you get Hillary Clinton.” Rather than prioritizing bread and butter issues, Malcolm believes the caucus needs to win over rank-and-file union members by making racial justice central to caucus organizing because broader statements will not inspire educators to change the world and will keep unions on the defensive, thus reproducing the current organizing and mobilizing of
business/service-style unions. As the extension dilemma describes, groups can win power in broad coalitions, but once they win, they have less of an ability to insist on more radical politics for the new regime. Janelle makes a similar argument: “Are we going to stand for something? Or are we going to cast a really wide net and try to get everyone in and be a real true representative of the diversity of political opinion in the [union]? And we can’t. I mean no one is going to follow a wishy-washy organization that doesn’t really stand for anything. People will not be inspired by contradicting ideas.” Janelle also believes the caucus needs to lead with its more radical social justice politics because people need to believe in the work of the caucus in order to want to join the movement.

The debate about trying to grow and organize a large number of people on any basis of commonality or coalescing behind what is perceived as a narrower position is often framed between caucus members as a binary. However, Maddison and Scalmer (2006), reflecting on tensions, ask, “[Are these] really opposed or mutually exclusive? Do they in fact overlap?” (pg. 68) and argue that tensions can be more like “bedfellows rather than strangers” (pg. 69). With time to reflect and without the polarizing effects of being in the debate as it is happening, caucus members also see the overlapping internal tensions. In referring to her caucus’ fight for racial justice, Rachel states:

> When we say we have well-funded neighborhood schools that’s Black Lives Matter also. Do we need to call it Black Lives Matter? Some people say yes and some people would say no . . . I used to think that we had to say yes or no, but right now I’m like it really just depends on who the hell you are talking to. If you polarize around race immediately then hell no you shouldn’t do it.

Rachel is dealing with the extension dilemma and recruitment and mobilizing strategies with adaptability and creativity. She is trying to see working with the tension as a both/and rather than an either/or proposition. Derek also explains his attempt to balance both:
So part of this debate is who our audience is . . . How do we frame our politics so that they’re relevant to these people? My practice has always been that that starts with making people’s work lives better, but you don’t drop other issues like immigration rights. For example, I spent all day defending members who are in disciplinary trials, but two weeks ago we had a forum on know your rights if ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] knocks on your door at your school and that was organized by [the caucus] at my school and a bunch of other community groups.

Derek also suggests that caucuses need to be creative in addressing both aspects of the dilemma, especially since all educators in social justice caucuses have the similar goal “to keep moving [their colleagues and school communities] left” on issues of democracy and justice.

**Resolving the Extension Dilemma**

Most groups want to be cohesive and grow at the same time as they attempt to juggle too many issues in a restricted amount of time and with limited capacities. While many groups face the extension dilemma, there are differing ways to solve it. Often it takes a special moment, a crisis, an opportunity, a moral shock, and/or a charismatic leader. Throughout my participant observation from 2014 to 2018, it has been crises that have resolved aspects of the extension dilemma for MORE and WE. The crises occurred when there was an unresolvable political disagreement within the caucuses because of diverging viewpoints on the core principles of the caucus itself. For example, while most MORE and WE members believe in organizing for bread and butter and social justice issues and try to make the two overlap, tense debate between the two during caucus meetings can make member retention difficult. Activists are trying to figure out how to do both; a social justice caucus needs to organize more union members and also take a stand on social justice positions that dare to challenge the status quo. Rachel says, “I think that there’s a tension between the numbers and the values, like do we have the votes versus are we living our values as an organization? And I think that what I’m trying to do is just see value in the tension and see opportunity there.” As Maddison and Scalmer (2006) found tensions can “prove
cataclysmic” or “[create] new alliances, new strategies and new knowledge” (pg. 3). Caucus activists are learning from these internal tensions to try out new strategies and produce new knowledge. Steve argues:

Some people . . . criticize the social justice viewpoint as if to say that people who are raising social justice issues actually don’t care about doing organizing work at their schools and supporting union democracy when I would say it’s actually the opposite. The people who are actually doing the organizing work and who are putting in the most work organizing in their schools are also raising social justice issues.

Steve has seen many of his fellow caucus members successfully organize at their schools and fight for social justice at the same time. He adds:

There’s going to be teachers who think that it’s much more important that we spend a lot of time speaking about police brutality or racial justice than that we talk about union democracy just because, for whatever the reason is, that’s a more important issue to them. And I think that’s ok. And they can spend more time on that and someone who doesn’t want to cannot spend more time on that. But I don’t think it’s impossible for the caucus to accommodate both of those people.

Both MORE and WE have had angry members, some of whom have left the caucuses due to how polarizing the debate can be.

MORE and WE have differing ways of solving the extension dilemma often prompted by a crisis. MORE and WE have adapted their internal structures. Both caucuses, at their founding, based their structures, procedures, and bylaws on the CTU’s Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE). Over time and as the caucuses gained more experience, these structures and procedures have changed. In addition, MORE and WE attempt to solve the extension dilemma by creating spaces where they can organize in the tensions that allow for the both/and rather than either/or. The caucuses, including CORE, also momentarily solve the extension dilemma through protest activity, like the CTU’s 2012 strike.
The disagreement over MORE’s statement for the Eric Garner march in 2014 in New York City led to a split in the caucus because some members did not want to alienate their “brothers and sisters” in the police union, while other members believed there should be no show of support for the police union by a caucus that includes the fight for racial justice in its core principles. While many of the founding members of the caucus remained, some of the younger activists, many educators of color, left the caucus or became inactive members. The caucus lost at least ten active members as a result of the debate over MORE’s statement for the Eric Garner march. Disagreements between trade unionism and social justice unionism also led five active retirees, who wanted the caucus to prioritize union elections over broader social justice struggles, to leave the caucus. While the number of members who have left seems low, it disproportionately affects the caucus when these are highly active members in a small caucus –about 25 to 40 people show up to organizing meetings. Some of the members that left the caucus had also completed terms on MORE’s Steering Committee, its leadership body. In response to these crises, MORE has changed its bylaws and lengthened the term on MORE’s Steering Committee from 6 months to a year to bring more stability to the caucus and give its leadership body time to work together cohesively.
In Philadelphia, WE also reorganized its internal structures because of a crisis resulting from political disagreements. As explored in Chapter 7 of this dissertation, some members of WE’s leadership team actively disorganized the Black Lives Matter Week of Action in their schools because they did not believe it should be the work of the caucus. Similarly to MORE, racial justice is a core principle for WE. Having individual members who are supposed to represent the caucus reject the Black Lives Week of Action conflicted with WE’s core values and detracted from WE’s ability to attract and organize educators of color. In response, WE shifted decision-making from the Steering Committee to the Organizing Committee, which is made up of the active leaders of committees, projects, and regional groups, rather than elected leaders.

Both MORE and WE want their leadership bodies to be cohesive groups that can make decisions based on unified values rather than spending their time debating differences on core caucus values. The changes in the internal structures led both caucuses to focus on their core principles making clear the values they want caucus members to respect. This restricted membership to the active core of the caucuses but unified the caucuses to enable them to move forward in organizing and mobilizing.

Nonetheless, both caucuses also have decentralized structures through committees and groups that can organize and mobilize with broader goals and larger alliances. MORE worked closely with Change the Stakes during the Opt-Out Campaign and WE organized with a coalition fighting against the School Reform Commission until the commission dissolved at the end of June 2018. For both caucuses, committees and groups have appeared, disappeared, and reappeared in new formations based on the ambitions and capacities of hard-working, active members. The

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45 As discussed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, Underfunding and Privatization in Philadelphia, in 2002, the state of Pennsylvania replaced the elected Philadelphia School Board with the School Reform Commission to put in place a portfolio management model that closed one-fourth of the city’s public schools and withheld millions of dollars in funding each year from the school district in the name of fiscal oversight.
caucuses also have membership meetings, list-serves, and breakout groups in which decisions can be made. They create different arenas in which debates and dilemmas can arise but in structures that can still keep their educational and labor movements going forward. The bylaws and internal caucus structures are not static and will continue to be adapted based on the need to solve the extension dilemma. Caucuses are balancing how to achieve both breadth and depth in organizing. As Malcolm stated at the beginning of this chapter, social justice caucuses organizing in teacher unions is experimental.

Solving the extension dilemma continues to be a work-in-progress as the caucuses experiment with different strategies, one of which is organizing embracing the both/and approach rather than the either/or one. MORE and WE fight for both bread and butter issues and social justice issues. Both caucuses use Labor Notes trainings to teach members the basics of organizing, including having one-on-one conversations, mapping the workplace and its leaders, choosing an issue, and escalating a campaign (Bradbury, Brenner, & Slaughter, 2016). In order to find out more about worker issues, the caucuses also set up structures to talk to educators. WE now has multiple monthly regional organizing meetings in different parts of the city rather than one monthly membership meeting in central Philadelphia. MORE has experimented with regional “happy hours” in the different boroughs of New York City. At the same time, both caucuses participate in the Black Lives Matter Week of Action in Schools and the Opt-Out campaign, which are social justice campaigns. In focusing on individual points of view in the debates happening within the caucuses, it can feel as though the caucuses are fighting for bread and butter issues or social justice issues. However, in zooming out to get a fuller picture of caucus activism, social

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46 Labor Notes is a media and organizing project that supports labor movements built from the bottom up. It provides resources for leaders and union members: “Through our magazine, website, books, conferences, and workshops, we promote organizing, aggressive strategies to fight concessions, alliances with workers’ centers, and unions that are run by their members.” See more at labornotes.org.
justice caucuses are doing both. Individual caucus members may be doing more of one than the
other, but as Steve says above, “I don’t think it’s impossible for the caucus to accommodate both
of those people.” In addition, Eric explains:

I think that what [people] think of as the separate issue are things like conditions facing
students, conditions facing the communities, or just sort of important issues having to do
with social justice that face the society that are not obviously or blatantly tied directly to
what teachers day-to-day workplace gripes might be. I think in [the caucus] we’ve tried to
synthesize them. I have tried to synthesize them and I think there is a contingent of us that
are trying to synthesize these issues.

Caucus activists in MORE and WE are attempting to solve the extension dilemma by finding the
overlapping both/and in the internal tensions. Even though there is disagreement on strategy, one
of the goals for all social justice caucus members is, as Karen described, “to keep moving [their
colleagues and school communities] left, left, left, left, left.”

Organizing is an iterative process: “Because strategies change over time, movements must
continually visit that tension as they plan their campaigns” (Maddison & Scalmer, 2006, pg. 68).
In addition, Jasper (2004) warns, “Nor do all of [the dilemmas] represent simple either-or
alternatives. In some cases there are three or four general possibilities, in others a whole continuum
of options. They are meant to show that there are different ways to engage in politics, that
protestors are continually making decisions” (pg. 6). Organizing is a complicated process and as
social justice caucus organizing is an ongoing experiment in teacher unions, there are potentially
unexplored possibilities in solving the extension dilemma. While I started my dissertation research
with the assumption that tensions need to be overcome, educator caucus activists in MORE and
WE have shown me that radical possibilities can and do emerge in very difficult and frustrating
moments of struggle. The process is messy and imperfect, but it provides an experimental space
for educators to potentially transform schools so that they are liberatory spaces.
Caucuses illuminate the need for adaptability and creativity in democratizing a union. Educator activists believe that change is possible and modify their own internal structures and strategies to reach their goals. They use their practical knowledge to solve the extension dilemma. Many scholars argue traditional, business/service-style unions must also alter their internal structures and strategies if they are going survive the current anti-union, neoliberal era in the United States (Gindin, 2015; Peterson, 2014/2015; Aronowitz, 2014; Weiner 2012; Fletcher & Gapasin, 2008). The process is frustrating and does lead to fractures, and as Jasper (2006) states, “There is no single right answer for all times and places” (pg. 172). Nonetheless, an analysis of dilemmas facing caucuses highlights the internal dilemmas activists struggle to resolve and values activist knowledge.

*Lessons from the Chicago Teachers*

Another way the extension dilemma has been resolved is through protest actions. It is through actions like strikes that individual and collective identities shift and change. In forming new political actors, contention enables movements to grow by momentarily overcoming divisions. MORE members unified when organizing school walk-ins for parental leave within the UFT in the spring of 2018, and WE members were cohesive in testifying and delivering a petition in April 2019 to the Philadelphia City Council demanding an end to the ten-year tax abatement and toxic conditions in public schools and for fair funding of schools, libraries, and housing.

In Chicago, the model for social justice teacher unionism, the CTU, as a union representing all educators in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), cannot choose its members and so is less affected by the extension dilemma. However, CORE as a caucus at the leadership of the CTU, contends daily with the extension dilemma. In *How to Jump-Start your Union: Lessons from the Chicago Teachers*, Bradbury et al. (2014) explain that “being a dissident caucus ensured plenty of debate
and even discord, before and after [CORE] got elected . . . Sometimes that debate was rough-and-tumble. Sometimes it took a lot of time. But leaders recognized that, if you want people to take big risks and do big things, they have to own the decisions” (pg. 186). Debate, discord, and difficult choices were part of the buildup to the 2012 CTU Strike. Caucuses committed to social justice embrace that debate as part of building power among rank-and-file union members. In addition, CORE, leading the CTU, was experimenting and making mobilizing decisions based on strategic choices. Bradbury et al. (2014) argue:

Leaders recognized that members could change if their expectations were raised. A few years ago CTU was not a union of thousands of militant, activist members. A majority didn’t necessarily agree with all the arguments the CORE leaders put forth (scary tactics, issues that seem “too radical,” untested strategies like parent alliances). But those leaders argued for a clear vision and dove into democratic debate over the way forward, with faith that members would come to the same conclusions they had (pg. 185).

CORE found creative ways to balance the tensions of the extension dilemma to build both the breadth and depth needed to wage the successful 2012 strike.

In addition, the strike itself helped momentarily solve the extension dilemma. One educator stated, “I think citywide everybody was surprised that it was such a sea of red all over. Once they saw everybody was united it just built up the momentum stronger and stronger” (Noonan et al., 2014, pg. 15). Another educator reported, “I remember getting on the ‘L,’ to go downtown . . . and the car was filled with teachers in red t-shirts . . . And there is something about people being together and being very unified” (Noonan et al., 2014, pg. 19). CORE, leading the CTU, continues to use the strike weapon to galvanize members and get both breadth and depth in its organizing. The CTU led a one-day strike in April 2016 against the lack of a state budget, almost walked out in September 2016 but a contract with CPS was negotiated at the last minute, and led three strikes against charter school operators during the 2018-19 school year. Protest actions help overcome aspects of the extension dilemma for social justice caucuses.
Reflections on Strategic Dilemmas

Reflecting on the extension dilemma—the further you expand your group to gain breadth, the less unified you become and lose depth—can help illuminate the workings of organizations and social movements. In applying the extension dilemma to MORE’s and WE’s strategic decisions, I found being able to name the extension dilemma and possible ways to solve it was helpful as a means to analyze and understand organizing in social justice caucuses. However, the extension dilemma’s large scope is overwhelming when considering practical uses for activists. The wide array of possible choices, lack of easy answers, and the idea that none of the choices are mutually exclusive when describing a dilemma can lead to more frustration and feelings of being overwhelmed for activists trying practically to apply the theory. However, as Jasper suggests, “You will make better choices if you are aware that you are making choices than if you are simply following custom or (as a recent book recommends) intuition. You can think about the hidden as well as obvious costs and risks, and you can work to deal with them as soon as possible” (pg. 176). In addition, as Maddison and Scalmer (2006) show in their analysis of diverse social movements in Australia, there are benefits to dilemmas and acknowledging those benefits as well can help activists deal with tensions in productive ways.

There are also different ways of studying dilemmas. Jasper (2006) proposes four different sets of questions to analyze dilemmas, including describing why a dilemma exists, explaining the choices made by players facing the dilemma, analyzing the effects of a dilemma, and evaluating the effects of the choices made by players. The conversations in the interviews for this dissertation focused on the dilemma itself, which answered Jasper’s (2006) questions about a dilemma including: “What is it about psychology, information, organizations, and so on that leads to this trade-off? And does the trade-off reflect a strict either/or situation? . . . Is it possible ever to get the
balance right, to solve the dilemma and get the benefits of both its horns?” (pg. 175). Focusing on the dilemma itself limited my analysis. It did not answer questions about the effects of the extension dilemma and choices that may have been more practical for activists. Further research can explore Jasper’s other sets of questions.

Tensions and dilemmas have negative connotations, but as Maddison and Scalmer (2006) highlight, they can also lead to new strategies and knowledge that advance a movement and value the practical knowledge of activists. As Steve believes, “I don’t think it’s impossible for the caucus to accommodate both of those people”—those that prioritize union democracy and those that spotlight racial justice. Goodwin and Jasper (2009) explain that movements with strong collective identities can be weakened if they have papered over differences among movement participants. In having debates and working through dilemmas, social justice caucuses are recognizing the diversity of participants in the movement rather than obfuscating reality. Maddison and Scalmer (2006) state:

Difference is always present. It adds richness and complexity to a social movement’s process of identity construction. At times it causes splits and divisions—such is politics. Searching for a solid and unchanging unity will always lead to a dead end. Politics involves a range of commitments and concerns. Some differences are irreducible and inescapable, but they do not necessarily preclude a contingent form of unity (pg. 137).

Educator activists in social justice caucuses have debates about strategic choices in framing and balancing the need for breadth and depth and for caucus and movement unity. In his lessons from being a lead activist in the Occupy Movement, Smucker (2017) states “I have outlined a number of things that successful social justice movements and organizations do: develop a core and a broader base; build a culture and a system of plugging new members into meaningful and capacity-building roles; maintain an outward focus so as to avoid insularity; and engage with existing infrastructure rather than constantly starting from scratch” (location 3423). However, these goals
are also deeply embedded in many strategic dilemmas, including the extension dilemma, that social
delicacy movements and organizations face. Throughout many hours of participant observation, I
have witnessed activists in MORE and WE working toward achieving these goals as a long-term
process that involves frustrating debates about the right strategy to get there. Nonetheless, even
with its many challenges, activists embrace social change as a process that involves much
reflecting, debating, experimenting, and then adjusting strategies when they do not work. Caucus
organizing is never perfect but rather is an attempt at finding practical resolutions to dilemmas that
are otherwise seen as dichotomous. As Howard stated about framing caucus work, “I honestly
don’t have one term. It really depends on the audience.” The debates within caucuses lead to
strategic action in the caucuses rather than becoming a stand-in for action itself. Caucuses
illuminate the need for adaptability and creativity in democratizing an organization and the radical
possibilities in attempting to solve dilemmas.
CHAPTER 7: Racial Justice Tensions

The Divisive March for Eric Garner

In August 2014, the UFT sanctioned a rally in New York City, called by over eighteen labor unions and nonprofit organizations, against the police murder of Eric Garner. In response, a group of UFT teachers—many with family members who are police officers—wore pro-New York Police Department t-shirts on the first day of the 2014-2015 school year to protest the UFT’s modest act of support for criminal justice reform (Campanile, Calabrese, & Golding, 2014). The rally itself had been framed as not being anti-police or as castigating the New York Police Department largely because “labor unions [organizing the rally] faced backlash from police unions, over both their involvement in general and because the demonstration, on Staten Island, was led by the Rev. Al Sharpton, a lightning rod in police-community relations in New York City” (Stewart, 2014). Nikita Stewart (2014) reported for the New York Times that Michael Mulgrew, the UFT president, supported the rally because “‘the U.F.T. has a long history of working in civil rights,’ he said, noting that the group helped finance the Freedom Riders in the 1960s. ‘This is not anti-police,’ he said of the demonstration. ‘I’m not going to be part of polarizing workers against workers,’ Mr. Mulgrew said.” With 17 other labor groups, including 1199 S.E.I.U. United Healthcare Workers East and the Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union, and various non-profit organizations participating, Mulgrew may have felt pressured to also have the UFT participate in the rally and to support his union “brothers and sisters” in unions other than the Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association. Nonetheless, the UFT had managed to anger many members, some of whom demanded Mulgrew’s resignation, while the other unions participating in the march did not face “widespread public condemnation of the demonstration” with most of their members supporting the march (Stewart, 2014). Stewart (2014) added that Ed Mullins, president of the
Sergeants Benevolent Association, declared, "‘Labor has a history of labor sticking together for the common cause of labor,’ he said. ‘We also have a great many husbands, wives, children who are teachers.’ The teachers’ union essentially asked members to march against their relatives, he said.” While other unions may have members with relatives who are police officers, there seems to be a particularly abiding connection between educators and police officers.

The Eric Garner march was divisive not only within the UFT but also within MORE. The caucus was divided about what kind of statement to release, with some educators not wanting to alienate their “brothers and sisters” in the police union and others questioning the rally’s leadership by Al Sharpton, while other educators supported the BLM movement and wanted justice for Garner and his family. A MORE member I interviewed for my pilot study explained:

It almost split [our caucus] entirely down the middle . . . We kept having meetings that were very divisive . . . There was no one anti-civil rights, but there were people saying, “This is not what being a rank-and-file caucus is about and we need to focus on getting a better contract and getting rid of abusive administrators and we are getting distracted and we have spent our last three meetings discussing something that has nothing to do with being a teacher” (June 2015).

MORE released a hurried, broad, neutral statement inclusive of all of the views, which caucus members later voted to retract as the statement did not unquestionably support the march and felt too supportive of the police for a caucus that defines itself as fighting for racial justice in schools and society, including getting rid of the police presence in schools and advocating for restorative justice.47 The crisis the statement caused was a necessary limitation of trying to create a broad coalition within a social justice caucus that has explicit principles around racial justice. MORE lost members as a result of the divisive nature of the debate over the “Eric Garner statement.”48

47 The report Building Safe, Supportive and Restorative School Communities in New York City (2017), explains that “Restorative practices, also called restorative justice in schools, is used to build a sense of school community and resolve conflicts by repairing harm caused by conflict and restoring positive relationships” (pg. 4). Some of these practices include restorative questioning, restorative circles, and restorative problem solving.

48 See footnote 41
Many MORE members in this study believe the statement should never have been released in the first place, since the caucus struggled to achieve consensus as it opened up its space to the messy democratic process. Educators’ ties to police officers complicate the support for criminal justice struggles within unions and within caucuses themselves. However, as will be explored in this chapter, social justice caucuses like MORE provide spaces for debate, adaptability, and other democratic processes that have the potential to raise consciousness among educators and school communities about anti-racism with radical possibilities for schools and unions.

Racial Justice

A weakness of the labor movement and specifically teacher unionism over the decades has been their failure to confront racism, to support community groups fighting for racial justice, and to push their members on issues of racial inequality (Uetricht, 2014; Weiner, 2012; Taylor, 2010). Social justice locals and caucuses are working to transform their unions, but the structure of unions in the United States raises questions for unionized educator activists about how best to integrate issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and immigration into unions typically structured to address narrow economic issues of wages and benefits. The tensions become most apparent around issues of racial justice. Taylor (2016) argues that movements for racial justice “destabilize all political life in the United States” (pg. 205) because as Martin Luther King reasoned “the Black movement ‘forc[es] America to face all its interrelated flaws—racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism. It . . . expos[es] the evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society. It reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws’” (as quoted in Taylor, 2016, pg. 205). Witnessing unions respond to the Black Lives Matter movement and other struggles for racial justice made

49 Many MORE members did attend the march in Staten Island in August 2014 against the police murder of Eric Garner. Some members report that there were more MORE members than Unity Caucus members at the rally (See comments section in The March for Justice and Unity post – see footnote 41). While the UFT put out a statement in support of the march, the leadership did not organize member turnout for the march.
me wonder: Can and will union members with diverse political views built on and sustained by racial capitalism and white supremacy support racial justice struggles? The fight for racial equality seems especially important in political times when both public education and public sector unions—both comprised of and supported by large numbers of people of color—are under attack.

Social justice caucuses are also comprised of members with diverse political views across a left-leaning political spectrum and internal tensions around issues of racial justice arise in these caucuses as well. Fault lines can exist anywhere, but from the national level down to the caucus level, issues of racial justice are destabilizing the labor movement. This chapter introduces the racial justice fault line in teacher unions and analyzes how MORE and WE are attempting to work through the internal tensions to advance racial justice struggles in their unions and schools. I argue that in fighting for racial justice, social justice caucuses are enacting a robust democratic process necessary to transform both unions and schools and, in the process, win racial justice struggles. For activist educators in MORE and WE, union democracy is incompatible with inequality, racism, and oppressive social relationships. The process is difficult and frustrating, can cause splits and divisions, and will never be perfect. Nonetheless, as Maddison and Scalmer (2006) argue, “[Activists] remind us that democracy has never been an abstract or formal system. They insist that it is something more radical and challenging: an attempt to overturn injustice and take on the powerful . . . [Activists] experiment with the best ways of working together. The quest to change the world can produce sparks of democratic discovery” (pgs. 107-108). For Maddison and Scalmer (2006) activist democracy is creative and “as they fight for justice, activists invent new ways of talking and making decisions” (pg. 100).

In this chapter, I will explore some points of consensus and of contention in MORE and WE. While the caucuses agree on many social justice issues, racial justice struggles—especially
those involving police officers and/or police unions, which I will refer to as criminal justice struggles—have generated major fault lines. The tensions are not only present in caucuses, but in city-wide teacher unions as well, in both business/service-style, including the UFT and PFT, and social justice unions like the CTU. In facing the criminal justice fault lines, social justice caucuses become spaces in unions that enact broad democratic practices that include building relationships, having difficult conversations, sustaining cultures of solidarity, and participating in protest activity, all while developing a sharp analysis of the larger political context in which the caucuses organize that enables educator activists to raise the consciousness of those they work with. It is through difficult, time-consuming, creative practices and processes that social justice caucus activists win support for all types of racial justice struggles in schools and society. Social justice caucuses expand conceptions of union democratization and create moments and spaces of radical possibility.

**Points of Consensus**

The research for this dissertation did not begin with a focus on racial justice. The original main research question focused on the tension between union democracy and social justice. Caucus educators were asked to share both moments of unity and moments of tension in caucus structures and campaigns. The caucuses have many points of consensus in their organizing work, including fights against abusive principals, membership recruitment work, *Labor Notes* trainings, and school closings, among others. They also have reached a shared consensus around issues of social justice. For example, elections and contract campaigns are two of the caucuses’ main tools for advocating for economic justice with and for members. For all unions, contract campaigns and elections are the major ways that unions activate their rank-and-file members. This is no different for caucuses. Caucus activists use contract campaigns to engage members in fights for economic justice. They
make connections for union members between educators’ working conditions and social justice issues. Rachel explains that “in some of the messaging that we had around the actual contract like it’s a problem that people are being asked to pay more into their healthcare because that’s an economic justice issue. There’s a way to do [messaging] that’s more than just teachers are getting screwed, which leads to the teachers are greedy message in a lot of ways.” An integral part of caucus work is framing working conditions as social justice issues. In also speaking about the contract, Aaron states:

Paraprofessionals for example, they should get a decent pay. That’s economic justice. It also falls under social justice. Their [work] conditions: people talk down to them, they’re in rooms all day with one period lunch, and so all of that. They have issues with using the bathroom or a medical condition that is ongoing. So they are on the same contract, but they have some things that are not contractually sound.

He adds, “If you’re a teacher and you are in a school and you’re not getting the materials you need, how can you be successful? It goes to the contract and it goes to the social justice issues, so we make the connections.” Economic justice is a point of consensus for caucus members and most union rank-and-file, though rank-and-file members often do not frame their issues in terms of social justice without the caucuses’ help in making those associations. As discussed in the previous chapter, framing is an important tool of caucus work.

Another social justice issue around which there is caucus consensus is immigration justice.\(^{50}\) This is also an issue on which both MORE and WE have successfully moved their unions and school districts. Steve explains: “That’s another one that is easier for people to come together on because there’s the reality of us having many undocumented students, many students from

\(^{50}\) According to the AFL-CIO, immigration justice includes: “Instead of deporting immigrants, we need to ensure that all working people have rights on the job and are able to exercise them without fear of retaliation.” The AFL-CIO includes resources for responding to workplace raids or audits, Know Your Rights fliers and resources, and information about Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program and the Temporary Protected Status through which people receive work authorization (Immigration, 2018).
travel ban countries, all this type of stuff, so I think it was easier for people to see the connection there.” MORE and its allies played a role in the UFT resolution that was adopted demanding immigration advisers in every school (United Federation of Teachers, 2016). The resolution was presented to the New York City Department of Education and then Chancellor Carmen Fariña. WE and its allies pushed the District of Philadelphia to host mandatory trainings for educators called Creating Safe and Welcoming Schools for Immigrant and Refugee Students (Caucus of Working Educators, 2017). Rachel excitedly describes her caucus’s fight for immigration justice: “I mean the immigration stuff was a key win for the city, especially in term of all the sanctuary city stuff and pushing the mayor to be in support of it and all of that.” Derek passionately highlights the work he did in his own school: “We had a forum on know your rights if ICE knocks on your door at your school and that was organized by [the caucus] at my school and a bunch of other community groups.” While not every caucus member and every rank-and-file union member supported the caucuses’ fights for immigration justice, it was galvanizing enough that it did not become a source of major internal tension in the caucuses or in the unions’ Delegate Assemblies/general membership meetings.

Caucus activists also find consensus in the Opt-Out movement, an educational justice movement that convinces parents and at times educators to reject standardized testing. As Eric explains, “Standardized testing is an education policy issue. There’s a class and racist dimension to standardized testing and then it affects what we have to teach. It affects how we’re evaluated. It affects closing of schools in low-income communities, especially communities of color. So there’s many dimensions where it’s a synthesizing kind of issue.” The Opt-Out movement became a moment of consensus for caucus members and for educators beyond the caucuses because it is an issue of educational justice for students and of justice in the workplace for educators. It is a
campaign that embodies the slogan of social justice unionism—“educators’ working conditions are students’ learning conditions”—a slogan that social justice caucuses organize and mobilize their members and their union around.

Struggles for racial justice, one of the animating principles of social justice unionism, pose especially difficult tensions for caucuses. Wayne Au (2009) argues that racial justice cannot be narrowly defined. It includes the fight against systemic racism, colonization, cultural oppression, nativism, and white supremacy; a critique of Eurocentrism; a celebration of anti-racist struggle; a deep respect for the lives and experiences of people of color; an examination of privilege; and an evaluation of historical, institutional, social, economic, and cultural inequalities. An anti-racist education empowers students, parents, educators, and communities to combat racism, value difference, demand equality, and transform their lives. Within Au’s broad definition of racial justice, there are points of consensus in the caucuses and the broader rank-and-file. For example, many educators participate in Black History month, teach aspects of anti-racist curricula, and support the hiring of more black and brown educators. Eric says, “So one thing was disappearing black educators [which] was an issue that everybody said was really important and [the caucus] did do some stuff on it. We did a resolution. We petitioned around it. We got a commitment from the [union] leadership to sort of do more about including more black educators.” There are aspects of racial justice, like fighting against the disappearance of black educators, which are moments of consensus within the caucuses and in the larger union.

However, racial justice struggles associated with the police, such as supporting Black Lives Matter, generate tremendous internal tensions in the caucuses and in unions. This has been a major issue for the labor movement nationwide since police unions are part of the national AFL-CIO and so are considered union “brothers and sisters.” In addition, police are a controversial topic within
teacher unions as many educators have partners and family members who are police officers. Teacher union groups across the country have reported losing members because of the factions that emerged over the possibility of demonstrating solidarity with Black Lives Matter protests arising across the United States starting in 2013 (Paslay, 2018).

**Points of Contention**

In listening to social justice caucus educators in interviews and meetings, I became interested in this particular fault line: of police officers being the source of internal tension on issues of racial justice. Caucus educators are able to reach consensus within their caucus and to win over rank-and-file union members beyond the caucus on many social justice issues, yet criminal justice issues cause deep divisions and major clashes in teacher unions city-wide and within the caucuses themselves. The tensions are visible in teacher unions in major cities, such as New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago.

On April 1, 2016, the Chicago Teachers Union—one of the most progressive unions in the country led by the social justice Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators—and its allies led a day of action in Chicago against city budget cuts. The CTU has been explicit about the central role of racial justice in its organizing. The CTU has an active Black Teacher Caucus, and in 2012, with an expiring contract, the CTU made its bargaining demands through a counter narrative expressed in a booklet called *The Schools Chicago’s Students Deserve*. The booklet included ten essential points many of which stemmed from the racial discrimination within Chicago Public Schools. During the strike, according to Bradbury et al. (2014), “CTU didn’t shy away from making the strike about racial justice, going so far as to call the CPS system Exhibit A for educational apartheid” (pg. 184). Since the 2012 strike, the CTU filed a lawsuit against Chicago Public Schools charging it with racial discrimination in its school closure policy. In addition, shortly after Michael Brown’s murder
in August 2014, the CTU participated in the Justice for All march in St. Louis. It also supported Black Lives Matter activists with food as they occupied Chicago’s City Hall in November 2014 in a sit-in that lasted 28 hours following the announcement that Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson would not be indicted for his fatal shooting of Michael Brown. Nonetheless, on April 1, 2016 in front of a large rally that included Reverend Jesse Jackson and BLM activists, Karen Lewis, president of the CTU and a black woman, said, “Cops are not our enemies. If they let us, we will make them more helpful. Our kids are not criminals,” while making a broader argument about structural injustice. Following Lewis, Page May, a BLM activist, ended her speech with “fuck the police, and everybody fuck with them.” The statement polarized the city, including teacher union members, and the Fraternal Order of Police asked Lewis to condemn May’s comments. May responded with:

The CTU keeps acting like they are on our side, but then Karen Lewis refuses to say cops need to get out of schools . . . I went [to the rally] knowing I would say exactly what I said, especially after seeing the ways labor has been so slow to support the [Black Lives Matter] movement and asks the cops to come to rallies and events. Until they come out explicitly opposed to cops in schools, I don’t think we are fighting on the same side (Moor, 2016).

The CTU stated that May is not a teacher union member, and Lewis tweeted, “Police are NOT our enemies.” The CTU had recently joined Black Lives Matter activists in the Black Friday protests after the November 2015 release of the video showing the Chicago police murder of Laquan McDonald. In response to the polarization after April 1, Johnaé Strong, a CTU member stated:

CTU is in a transition period . . . Its members understand that this is an important political moment and as a union we’ve taken some very explicit, forward-facing steps in messaging. But, of course, there are 27,000 people in the union and not everyone is a supporter, so there’s some tension there (Moser, 2016).

Criminal justice struggles expose the fragile dynamics of the labor movement. Even the most radicalized teacher union in the United States struggles around issues of criminal justice in balancing its support for Black Lives Matter and its solidarity with the Chicago Fraternal Order of
Police, a fellow union.

While the CTU has a complex relationship with the police and does support the Black Lives Matter movement in many ways, traditional business/service-style unions are much less willing to engage in criminal justice issues. Both MORE and WE brought resolutions to their business/service-style union Delegate Assemblies/general membership meetings in asking the union to support the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Week of Action in Schools.\(^{51}\) While the BLM weeks of action can and do occur without union support, presenting resolutions to their Delegate Assemblies/general membership meetings is a way for the caucuses to elevate debates about racial justice within the union, educate other members, force the leadership to take a stand, and hold the leadership accountable to its members and community allies. However, neither the Philadelphia union nor the New York union voted to support the week of action, even though both the PFT and the UFT have many people of color in leadership positions and the caucuses in power are much more diverse racially than either MORE or WE. In Philadelphia, during the 2017 Black Lives Matter Week of Action in Schools, PFT president Jerry Jordan implied that he supported the week as a black man, but that the union should not make political endorsements, even though individuals and caucuses may choose to do so (Fieldnotes from WE meeting: Sept 12, 2017). In New York City, during the 2018 Black Lives Matter Week of Action in Schools, LeRoy Barr, the Assistant Secretary of the UFT and the chair of the ruling Unity caucus, argued that the BLM week of action was a “divisive” issue and that the union needed to stay united because of the then upcoming *Janus v. AFSCME* Supreme Court decision on union dues paying.\(^{52}\) The UFT leadership refused to take

\(^{51}\) See Chapter 5, The Caucus of Working Educators: “Grounded in Membership.”

\(^{52}\) Both Jerry Jordan and LeRoy Barr are black men in positions of power within the union. In her chapter, Black Faces in High Places, Taylor (2016) argues that “the Ferguson rebellion . . . exposed Black elected officials’ inability to intervene effectively on behalf of poor and working-class African Americans” (pg. 106) because “Black elected officials’ gazes were so trained on electoral politics that they could only articulate political gains through the calculus of elections” (pg. 103). Taylor (2016) makes the case that in choosing electoral politics as the means for black liberation, black officials are complicit in the racialized political economy of the United States.
a stand for fear of alienating educators and members of the public who support and/or are related to police officers, and UFT members overwhelmingly voted against the week of action. Opponents of the resolution said it was anti-police, while educators supporting the resolution argued it was about people of color being treated fairly by cops. A parent interviewed after the vote asked, “If this isn’t the right time, when is the right time?” (Christ, 2018).

While some educators described the debate on the BLM resolution as an anti-police controversy, others counterposed injustices seeing some as more valuable to educators than others. An anonymous educator posted on the DOEnuts blog (2018), which reported on the debate within the UFT, “Most teachers don’t want the UFT preoccupied with racially charged movements when most of us are sinking quickly—from targeted veteran teachers to ATRs, 4 observations to discontinuations [sic], unsafe working conditions to forced grade changing—we shouldn’t be worrying about the BLM movement. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs reflects on that fact.” This anonymous educator sees competing forms of justice in which criminal justice is less important to educators than bread and butter justice issues.

In writing about the UFT’s vote, Weiner (2018) believes the vote weakened the union rather than keeping it strong and “united,” as LeRoy Barr argued. Weiner (2018) states:

Teachers are human and are not immune to toxic social prejudices and bigotry. In response, unions often assume the irreversibility of members’ current beliefs, adopting what seem pragmatic policies. In reality these seemingly “practical” policies undercut possibilities of successful resistance by alienating our potential allies and demoralizing the most politically conscious union members. Barr’s position and the DA’s vote to support it makes building support for union struggles that affect kids’ lives in classrooms harder. Their position weakens the union at the moment teachers and public employees most need to build trust in communities of color.

The goal of the BLM week of action was to “provide deeper connections between educators, parents, students, and community organizers” (Home, 2018), yet police “presence” prevented teacher union members from voting to endorse the Black Lives Matter week of action in schools.
The BLM week of action could have been used by the UFT and PFT to strengthen relationships with parents, students, and community members in order to build broader public support in union fights against the dismantling of public education and public sector unions. However, criminal justice is difficult for members to prioritize in times of deteriorating working conditions and attacks on union resources and benefits and is compounded by the relationships between educators and police officers and between teacher and police unions. As Au (2009) explains in his call for anti-racist education: “In these times of high-stakes testing, the standards movements, shrinking budgets, and increased workloads; teachers are continuously being pushed to leave justice and equality behind. Instead they find themselves having to focus on test scores, pacing guides, and scripted instruction” (pg. 4). Yet, educators and their unions in major U.S. cities need the support of communities of color to demand more funding for public education to pay for smaller class sizes, more staff, high salaries, strong benefits, and better resources for students. Social justice union activists argue that fights for justice and equality are morally important for the creation of a better world and also strategically important as an organizing strategy for public sector unions to build and strengthen public support.

Nonetheless, without the backing of the school districts and unions, both MORE and WE successfully organized and participated in the Black Lives Matter Week of Action in New York City and Philadelphia along with other educators, parents, students, and community members. In Philadelphia, educators shared BLM curricula and lesson plans publicly, schools focused their curricula on African American studies for the week, entire staffs at schools wore Black Lives Matter buttons and t-shirts, and students, parents, and community members participated in highly attended public panel discussions to address and have conversations about the racial inequality in public education and society (Anderson & Cohen, 2017). Actively embracing and taking on the
national demands—end zero tolerance, mandate black history and ethnic studies, hire more black teachers, and fund counselors not cops—provides an opportunity for the caucuses to strengthen their much needed relationships with communities and educators of color. Educators and communities of color seek to see a race-conscious caucus that is actively anti-racist. MORE and WE worked through their internal tensions and successfully pushed forward the Black Lives Matter weeks of action in schools.

**It Gets Real Deep, Real Quick**

The internal tensions around criminal justice are also present in both MORE and WE. Derek explains:

> Usually the stumbling block is anytime questions of racial justice get brought up. There’s a big aversion among some people . . . to talking about racial justice issues . . . There’s also the idea that that’s a boutique issue or it’s not something that has a broad enough appeal and so it’s going to turn off a kind of silent majority . . . of like teachers who are alienated by anti-racist language or activism.

Noah adds:

> And here’s another structural thing: out of [the total union membership], how many have intimate family members who are police, including partners, siblings? Probably shitloads. So there’s a lot of stuff that comes up when you start talking about [racial justice] and basically all that tells you is how deep racism goes in the society, how deeply entrenched it is that if you start pulling on a thread of it you are going to piss somebody off who’s used to it being the way it is.

The internal tension was especially visible during the Black Lives Matter Week of Action because a few members of MORE and WE actively showed their disapproval for the BLM week. Sonia states, “Even within a half dozen or a dozen people who are centrally involved with [the caucus] and who helped pull off the Black Lives Matter week, even in that small group there is disagreement and debate about what to do and what not to do . . . It gets real deep, real quick.” Rachel adds:
We have people who argue that Black Lives Matter week of action should not be the work of the caucus. They will actively disorganize it in their schools. They will tell people not to participate or they will let the principal know that it is happening or they will do all sorts of bullshit, and those are people who are in our leadership. Some people are organizing against the Black Lives Matter Week of Action because they are actually racist and then other people are organizing against it because they actually think that we will lose people if we come out very strong in favor of something like that.

Criminal justice struggles expose the fragile dynamics within unions comprised of members with diverse political views and expose the complicity of educators in the criminal justice system. They show how the educational system and current labor structures implicate educators—willfully or not—in the racial violence against black and brown people. Criminal justice struggles also add another layer to the extension dilemma, examined in the previous chapter, as caucus activists figure out how to balance the breadth and depth of organizing and mobilizing within the caucus; re-quot ing Rachel, some educators organize against the BLM week of action because “they actually think that we will lose people if we come out very strong in favor of something like that.”

Criminal justice struggles force caucuses committed to social justice to figure out how to fight for all aspects of racial justice in the context of a capitalist, white supremacist system that divides working people. The struggle for criminal justice, among other oppressive systems, by social justice locals and caucuses is necessary because we will not fundamentally be able to change society without a fight against racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, or xenophobia. Restating the Combahee River Collective Statement (1977), “We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.” While I pull apart the different types of oppressions in this chapter, they are all interconnected and must be fought against in interlocking ways. This is a necessity for all movements for liberation, including social justice caucuses fighting for educational justice.
However, for educators, organizing for criminal justice “it gets real deep, real quick” causing profound internal tensions that are difficult to overcome.

**The Right Side of Justice**

Even with the fault lines on issues of criminal justice, social justice caucuses organize and mobilize through the tensions to move their members and their unions towards anti-racism, in addition to becoming movements for educational, cultural, social, economic, gender, dis/ability, sexuality, and immigration justice. Rod states:

> We have to, as a matter of integrity and sustainability of the union, to be on the right side of justice and the leadership of the union needs to use their leadership position as a bully pulpit for that even when members are not on board with it. Even when members are not on board with it, you should engage them around it. If you’re in favor of restorative justice and then you poll your membership and 30 percent are in favor of it and 50 percent are against it or whatever, you have to engage your members around why it’s so important and crucial that restorative justice is a way forward on dealing with the issues that we’re dealing with.

As Rod indicates, social justice struggles, criminal justice ones in particular, expose the fragile dynamics of union democracy, including debates and decision-making based on the demands of the rank-and-file, all of whom may not support struggles for justice. Rod is also challenging traditional notions of majority rule democracy, insisting that the union needs better ways of working together to overturn injustice. As he expresses further below, Rod believes union democratization also involves difficult conversations and cultures of solidarity within the union and beyond to change rank-and-file consciousness. He is committed to justice because:

> All the right wingers, all the crazies, all the racists, ... the elites, they get to win at that point if we aren’t tight with the communities that we serve ... If we remain divided and the [union] has a bad brand in this city, the working-class people don’t identify with us as an institution that represents their kids well or represents the school system, we’re not going to get anything done. I think we’ve got to be the leaders of that.

The concept of union democracy is contested. In fighting for criminal justice, caucuses create their own dynamic definitions in the process of transforming their schools and unions.
Lee Ann Bell (1997) argues that social justice is “both a process and a goal” in that it encourages “full and equal participation of all groups in a society” through a process that is “democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacity for working collaboratively to create change” (pgs. 3-4). Social justice is not possible without a democratic process in which everyone feels that they have an opportunity to participate in making decisions. However, many traditional, business/service-style unions across the labor movement struggle with rank-and-file participation, stifling the possibility for labor to actually become a social justice movement. They struggle “to be on the right side of justice.” In their organizing and mobilizing work, social justice caucuses are attempting to redefine what union democracy might look like in their unions.

See Opportunity in that Tension

While I began my research wanting to find ways to overcome the tension between social justice and union democracy, I learned from educator caucus activists that, actually, it is more about embracing the tension and finding the spaces where social justice and union democracy do not only coexist but also can become interdependent. Maddison and Scalmer (2006) also found that tensions are “intrinsic to the work that social movements do, as productive rather than simply negative, and as capable of being managed rather than of being transcended” (pg. 9). Most of the educator caucus activists in this study challenged the distinction and dichotomy between social justice activism and trade unionism. Steve argues, “I’m not even sure that creating this dichotomy makes sense. I’m not sure it doesn’t make sense, but I don’t think we should assume that it exists . . . . I think the tensions are ok. I think tension will always exist. There is always going to be tension between these different perspectives of what unions should be and that’s normal. Not all teachers are going to agree.” Rachel adds, “I’m trying much harder recently to see opportunity in that
tension instead of seeing it as a problem. I think it is a problem, but I am trying not to organize around it as a problem, I am trying to see it as an opportunity because when I see it as a problem, I don’t want to talk to anybody.” Educator caucus activists want to create spaces where tensions can hold in the both/and—rather than flatten the debate to a neutral stance or an either/or—and still move their educational justice movements forward. They seek to organize for criminal justice and to protect the rights of educators, support the Black Lives Matter movement and their union brothers and sisters, and mobilize fellow union members simultaneously around bread and butter issues and issues of racial justice.

MORE and WE experiment with what it means to democratize a union. They are willing to live in and work through internal tensions as a process leading to increased democratization and anti-racism in the caucus, union, and society. Many educators and members of school communities need to be won over to participating in struggles for racial justice, and activists in MORE and WE are doing that difficult work in a variety of ways. Sonia explains:

I think one example is talking about hiring and firing practices in our contract . . . specifically looking at populations of teachers of color, which have gone down in the last 10-20 years . . . And then a lot of that was attached to school closures in the last 10 years and that even though technically if the school closes those teachers aren’t necessarily fired, they go back to the pool, it still forces many people into retirement. It encourages people to look elsewhere and then those kind of closures targeted more veteran teachers of color that are among the most valuable educators in our district and they are lost . . . On the surface many people go, “Oh, it’s just school closures, it’s about managing your resources, it’s about funding,” and people don’t automatically look at it through a racial justice lens or a social justice lens. And that our work seeks to put it through that lens and encourage people to think about it in that way.

As analyzed in the previous chapter, Sonia reiterates that part of caucus work is strategic framing around campaigns to help educators make connections between their working conditions and issues of social justice. In organizing and mobilizing to democratize their union and for all aspects of racial justice, social justice caucuses shift the practice of democratization through and beyond
the narrow electoral realm to practices that include building relationships, having difficult conversations, sustaining cultures of solidarity, and participating in protest activity, all while developing a sharp analysis of the larger political context in which the caucuses organize that enables educator activists to raise the consciousness of those around them. Their organizing and mobilizing has the potential to be radical because they see opportunity in the tensions they experience within the caucus, the union, and the school.

The findings for the sections that follow in this chapter emerged from conversations based on the following interview question: How do social justice caucus activists relate to fellow educators who express racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist, or xenophobic views? In our current polarized and increasingly unequal society that blames the victim, elevates the individual, and divides communities, I expected to find some bitter relations between colleagues. However, educator activists in MORE and WE were in solidarity with their fellow educator colleagues. They spoke about building relationships to lay the groundwork for cultures of solidarity and open up spaces to talk about race. These practices provide a basis for raising consciousness, creating action-oriented bonds, and changing political identities, all of which are strengthened through protest activities. Building relationships, having difficult conversations, engaging in protest activities together fight oppression and help democratize teacher unions by involving rank-and-file members and community members at the school site in daily organizing, mobilizing, and decision-making processes of the caucuses and their unions. They reaffirm the importance of union democracy in the educational justice movement (Weiner, 2014). Social justice caucuses fight oppression through practices that democratize their unions, and at the same time, their focus on social justice issues drives the need for increased union democracy.
Figure 2: Democratic Practices

People Move Because of Relationships

While unions and caucuses may focus on larger, unifying issues to win elections or maintain leadership in divisive times, social justice caucus activists in MORE and WE do the laborious work of building relationships with union members they disagree with. In the context of today’s societal polarization, social justice caucus educators push back against divisive narratives and see the potential in each other as workers. Janelle, states:

Everyone deserves to be supported and to be represented. When teachers do not live up to our expectations, we need to ask: What are the conditions of this teacher? Did they get the support they needed? . . . It’s also the responsibility of teacher training programs and the school district to educate school staff. I mean everything is a process. Nobody is born knowing everything. I’ve worked through a lot of my own biases and racist tendencies, and I’m constantly reflecting and learning. And do I always do the right thing? No! But I try to surround myself with people who will call me in and help me reflect and to think about how I can be a better educator and what is causing me to not be successful in this moment. And it’s really hard because we are part of a system that was designed to make us and our students fail.

Janelle does not vilify her coworkers and works to create an environment in which they can interact on common ground. She believes in a work environment in which colleagues develop strong relationships with one another so that they can “call each other in” to become “better educators.”

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53 In social justice activism, “calling out” someone means pointing out their oppressive behaviors. “Calling in” also seeks to change problematic words and actions but does so with more guidance and compassion.
She then connects working conditions and student learning conditions in her vision for an education system that sets up both educators and students to be successful.

Social justice caucuses embody what Fantasia (1988) calls cultures of solidarity in which the association of workers with one another can by itself be a revolutionary act because it changes both the workers’ reality and the workers themselves. Janelle’s worldview allows her to be open and understanding toward her coworkers, creating the possibility of a culture of solidarity. In schools, educators are often isolated in their classrooms and divided by grade or subject, and working in competitive environments structured by standardized testing, merit pay, and the scarcity of time and resources (Moody, 2017; Hargreaves, 2010). Instead, social justice caucus educators seek to build relationships with enough trust and compassion for “calling in.” In challenging traditional, fragmented school cultures through their actions and words, educator activists embrace Fantasia’s (1998) call for cultures of solidarity that emerge as “oppositional practices and meanings” (pg. 17). For Karen, the solidarity needed to build a union in a hostile workplace begins with relationships:

If we’re not connected in any way, there’s no reason that anyone is going to trust me. . . We have a very segregated city. Often by choice and definitely by design and that means that if I’m trying to get somebody from “I live in an all white neighborhood, I’m white, my family is white, all my friends are white” . . . And then I say so now we’re going to build this union together. I’m going to need you to wear a Black Lives Matter shirt and I know your brother is a cop and I know that your father is a cop or was a cop. We can sit there and talk at each other but where have we built a connection? . . . I think I’m being a realist in saying people don’t just move because you want them to move. People move because of relationships.

To build social justice caucuses, educators value cultures of solidarity built through relationships with people who are willing to engage divisive narratives. As Fantasia (1988) argues, “These activities of ‘struggling,’ ‘uniting,’ and ‘constituting’ ought to be considered processes of class consciousness . . . Marx sought to ground consciousness in life activity, in social being” (pg.9).
Educator caucus activists are willing to build difficult relationships and persevere through uncomfortable conversations to transform their unions and schools. In all of the interviews, educator caucus activists chose to express solidarity with their coworkers rather than vilifying them.

The practice of building relationships is necessary to creating cultures of solidarity even when challenges arise. As Karen says, “People move because of relationships” that allow for spaces in which union members can come discuss racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist, or xenophobic points of view in productive rather than divisive ways. Educators in social justice caucuses bring strategies of solidarity into schools and beyond.

*Come to this space, let’s talk about it*

Building upon interpersonal rapport and relationships, educators in social justice caucuses can then engage in the difficult conversations and debates that most unions shy away from. Having done the time-consuming work of building relationships, another aspect of creating cultures of solidarity is the opening up of space for communal consciousness raising. Educators in social justice caucuses would like to have sensitivity trainings and spaces to dialogue, learn, and grow with their colleagues, especially those they do not agree with. Ciara explains:

> It’s about coming to it with humility and saying, “My god, there’s work to be done within our group or our communities” and that means maybe holding spaces, workshops . . . Do that kind of work within the union and say, “Why is there such high tension about race? Come to this space, let’s talk about it.” And then get the history together, help form common understandings because if you create polarized sides, that’s all you’re going to create . . . The important thing is are we doing the work to come to a place for common understanding about how racism exists and white supremacist thinking happens in our psyches whether we like it or not because we perpetuate policies?

Ciara highlights the importance of open, honest conversations to build consciousness and common understandings around controversial issues in order to strengthen the caucus and union and to
move forward the education justice and labor movements. These conversations are necessary because questions of race, racism, and anti-racism are omnipresent in schools.

Over half of public school students are now from minoritized groups compared to a teaching force that is overwhelmingly white, 84 percent nationally (Hrabowski & Sanders, 2015). Many educators lack the training needed to understand and respond to the racial dynamics that exist in schools and classrooms. King (1997) calls it a “dysconscious racism” among white teachers, who take for granted a system of racial privilege and societal stratification that benefits white people. For example, even if there is something of a consensus about needing to counter the disappearance of black educators in schools, Eric, reflecting on some of his fellow union members at Delegate Assemblies/general membership meetings, states that hiring more educators of color still raises “the question for white educators, like are we going to alienate white educators who are getting the feeling that we’re saying that they’re not good teachers or that they’re not needed or something like that?” While white educators are the majority in most schools, Noah mentions:

It’s not just white teachers that have racist, condescending attitudes towards students. It’s black teachers too. There’s a class thing. There’s a thing about the position: I mean you have a bunch of people with masters’ degrees of whatever complexion and you put them in front of students in overcrowded classrooms without enough resources and the blame game is going to happen. And especially in this context where if those students are not aroused and their families are not aroused and organized and do not present as powerful people then it’s . . . the idea that there’s something wrong with people like first they are oppressed and then flows the ideas about why that is rather than the other way around.

Educators may also take for granted systems of class, citizenship, patriarchy, dis/ability, gender identity, and sexual orientation that marginalize students and even educators themselves within schools. Aaron explains, “In these times when you have these anti-immigrant sentiments, the Muslim students, you see what happens when you bring up [social justice resolutions] at the Delegate Assembly [of the union], a lot of folks and I’ll just call them out, who do not believe in
immigration, sadly, will just vote them down and there’s no conscience.” Many educators are perpetuating systems of oppression in their schools. Rod describes a white caucus member who

Wasn’t in favor of them doing a bunch of rezoning to integrate the schools . . . First off, I didn’t take offense to that perspective. I wouldn’t have felt uncomfortable engaging in a more extensive or serious discussion with her . . . This is a commitment that we should make. We need to be encouraged to have those conversations amongst ourselves . . . I do think that the union should be actively and proactively having discussions, encouraging our chapters to have discussions around these issues and have our members actively thinking and grappling about these issues, explicit political education, which is not happening right now.

Rod, like many MORE and WE members, believes conversations about tough racial issues are necessary to change the consciousness of his fellow educators. For example, Janelle states, “We’re a bunch of white teachers teaching students of color and no one is talking about race in the union. This is criminal. And I think if the union was really having these conversations and really educating its members, then I think our political beliefs would be different, the way we operate on a political spectrum would be different.” Janelle speaks to the idea that a more politically educated and racially aware union membership can lead to greater union democratization (Guinier, 1994).

Social justice teacher union caucuses are important political spaces that create openings for educators to reflect, discuss, strategize, and organize beyond the classroom walls. They give educators the opportunity to connect with their colleagues and with the communities in which they work rather than remain isolated in their individual classrooms and schools. Malcolm similarly argues that a more politically and socially conscious union membership is needed to transform the labor movement:

Within our society, which is structured from the very beginning based on racialized exploitation, which is basically class and race tied together, you just simply can’t address issues of class and neglect race and think that you are making progress . . . I don’t think that a lot of people are somewhat clear in that analysis, which makes it difficult to actually have conversations like I’m trying to engage in right now. I focus a lot of time on building up levels of consciousness or understanding when it comes to these types of topics whether that be through professional development or through dialogues with other caucus members
who are creating opportunities for caucus members to go outside their own comfort zone and their own bubbles.

Caucus activists agree that they will not be able to change their unions and transform their schools without a greater consciousness, created through difficult conversations, among their colleagues about issues of social justice.

Educator caucus activists are willing to do the difficult work of engaging in hard conversations about racism and other oppressions. MORE and WE activists embrace Freire’s (1970/1990) call for conscientização, or consciousness raising, which is “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 19). Freire argues that dialogue is a key aspect of liberation by helping develop equal relationships between people so that there is a constant sharing of fellowship and solidarity through inquiry, critical thinking, and the unveiling of reality. He explains that “solidarity requires true communication” (pg. 63) and that “a true revolution must initiate a courageous dialogue with the people” (pg. 122). Social justice caucuses create spaces for educators to have the difficult debates needed to democratize the union and to speak in terms of both/and instead of either/or. Claire states, “I think one of the things that drew me to [the caucus] was that it was a place of open, honest dialogue.” The democratic process of talking about and analyzing criminal justice issues is a critical first step in raising consciousness among educators, thus building their power to transform their unions and schools. As Ciara said, “Why is there such high tension about race? Come to this space, let’s talk about it.”

Social justice teacher union caucuses are important political spaces that provide opportunities for educators to create through relationships and ongoing conversations cultures of solidarity with their colleagues and with the communities in which they work rather than remain isolated in their individual classrooms and schools. But such opportunities for discussion, while
essential, are not sufficient to build a larger movement. Reflecting on social movement theory Anyon (2014) states, “Raising people’s consciousness about their oppression through reflection and talk (as in critical pedagogy classes) is not enough: Physical and emotional support for actual participation in public contention is required” (pg. 11). Building cultures of solidarity in divisive times means building relationships and having difficult conversations that lay the groundwork for higher stakes, oppositional protest activities. Educators in social justice caucuses are continually engaging themselves, their colleagues, and allies in public contention in drawing attention to workplace grievances and injustice to students, supporting social justice campaigns, and leading and participating in protest activity people in society shy away from.

_Fighting for a Union Creates a Bond_

Social justice caucuses push for robust union democratization that not only happens at the ballot box but also in the streets. Activist educators in MORE and WE noted that during protest activity, everyone feels connected. These fights are most often focused on school closures, abusive administrators, and the end of mayoral and state control of schools, as well as election and contract campaigns. Maddison and Scalmer (2006) argue that “acting in public together reinforces the attachment a person has to a movement . . . The point of protest, in other words, is not just instrumental; it can be the glue that binds activists together to make a movement” (pg. 80).

It is frequently through common struggles that differing perspectives can be overcome. Karen explains:

If you have fought alongside somebody and you have common victories together, then when somebody does say something [racist/sexist/homophobic/ableist/xenophobic], there’s already an in. I feel like I’ve seen this my whole life. I’ve seen it playing softball. I’ve seen it when people just go through a hard thing together . . . You have a bond and certainly fighting for a union creates a bond.
Coworkers who may not agree politically are able to overcome the fault lines between them when fighting for something they both want. The protest activity creates a stronger bond between coworkers and an opening for more fruitful political discussions now that a relationship has been created. Derek confirms, “I’m not going to exclude [Trump voting educators] from organizing because they have shitty ideas. In fact, the only way their ideas are ever going to change is if they are engaged in working with people and being involved in struggle with people who are different from them.”

Educator activists believe political identities change through protest activity confirming Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly’s (2001) analysis of fifteen cases of contentious action in institutional politics, which shows that collective action shifts the identity of actors and redefines relationships. Contention leads to the formation of new political actors. For example, the authors argue that during the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott,

African-Americans were hardly unaware of their shared racial identity prior to the movement, but the nature of that awareness was often complicated by other identities (class, region, gender, darkness of skin) that tended to divide rather than unify the population. For many, the onset of the movement effectively reordered these identities, placing the shared racial identity in the foreground and muting, though not eliminating division within the black community (pg. 320).

It is through contentious action that individual and collective identities shift and change. In forming new political actors, contention enables movements to grow by momentarily overcoming divisions.

This echoes the feelings of Chicago educators during the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union’s strike. During the strike, more than 30,000 red-shirted members and supporters took to the streets of Chicago. One educator said, “I was really surprised about the people that were stuck in the bus surrounded by teachers in the streets. The bus couldn’t move, but the people on it were cheering us. It was really something” (Noonan, Farmer, & Huckaby, 2014, pg. 15). Another educator added,
“The day we went downtown, that was also wonderful. Right before school was ending, to go downtown and to hear Karen Lewis speak and to see a sea of red shirts. I know that I’m part of history and know I’m going to make a difference” (Noonan, Farmer, & Huckaby, 2014, pg. 16).

In addition, Bradbury et al. (2014) write that a lesson from the strike was “Education Happens through Action. Members learned not just through union position papers or public forums but by engaging in struggles and experiences that gave them the confidence to demand more, dream bigger, and take risks” (pg. 186). Caucuses often need such larger fights to create the conditions for racial tensions to be confronted if not overcome. This was further confirmed in the 2019 teachers’ strike in Los Angeles. Arlene Inouye mentioned, “Teachers I spoke with over the past few days have felt the outpouring of support. Lots of them have told me that this strike was the first time that they’ve really been thanked by parents and the community for being an educator” (Inouye & Blanc, 2019). Educator protest activities, including strikes, help overcome divisions and build bridges between communities, including educators and parents.

Throughout history, union members have changed their ideas about race and racism and overcome racial divisions in their unions through struggle (Kelly, 2001; Nelson, 2001; Letwin, 1998; Goldfield, 1997; Kelley, 1990). In his analysis of race and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), Michael Goldfield (1993) investigates multiple CIO unions during the 1930s to 1940s and found that many left-led unions fought for civil rights. For example, Goldfield (1993) found that “along with Alabama miners and steelworkers, Mine Mill members engaged extensively in voter registration and in campaigns against the poll tax and lynching” (pg.14) and Local 1199 in New York City “was the only labor organization besides the [United Packinghouse Workers of America] UPWA that both gave money to [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] SCLC and mobilized its membership actively in support of civil rights” (pg. 22). However, Goldfield (1993)
explains that these choices were only predetermined over time: “For many white industrial
workers, the benefits of successful solidarity, even on a day-to-day level, often outweighed the
benefits of racial exclusion and division” (pg. 23). More recently, Bradbury et al. (2014) report
that in building toward the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union’s strike, “making an issue of the dramatic
loss of African American teachers, and the racism of the schools in general, could have been
controversial among CTU’s white members. It took time, but support for this issue grew. Leaders
knew that action opens minds, and they actively wanted to raise consciousness and build a common
core of beliefs” (pg. 184).

In addition, organizing with social movements shifts consciousness within unions. The
Black Lives Matter movement has spotlighted the link between economic and racial justice. BLM
activists joined unionization campaigns in the U.S. South highlighting the racism in anti-union
drives by corporations with majority black workforces. In 2016, BLM activists marched in the
streets in support of the unionization campaign in an Electrolux factory in Memphis, Tennessee
forcing the company to lessen its anti-union tactics so as not to seem racist. The International
Brotherhood of Electrical Workers was victorious in unionizing the plant, a rare victory in the
South (Elk, 2018). On the other hand, Nissan’s anti-unionization drive in 2017 was successful in
preventing the unionization of its plant in Canton, Mississippi where 80 percent of the workforce
is black. However, “After a narrow defeat, labor leaders charged Nissan not only with illegal anti-
union conduct, but with racism . . . labor leaders say they are starting to see a shift and that
multinationals, particularly European companies, are concerned about being seen as racist when
they move their operations to the South” (Elk, 2018). Organizing with Black Lives Matter has
shifted consciousness within unions emphasizing racial justice in their struggles for economic
justice.
All of the educators interviewed accept that worker consciousness can and does change. As Ciara says, “I think that if we approach people, other human beings, from the space that they can’t change and they’re not human beings, teachers too, then what are we doing? As a society, we’re not going to transform.” Marxist ideology begins with the premise that class consciousness is a subjective awareness of common vested interests and an understanding of the need for collective working-class political action to bring about social change. Some may argue that educators are not part of the working class (Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich, 1979). However, Hagopian and Greene (2012) maintain that educators should be considered as part of the working class. They contend that educators “play an indirect—but critical—role in the creation of profits. Moreover, by educating the next generation of workers, teachers play an essential role in enhancing the productivity of the workforce, thus increasing the labor power and the potential for capitalist extraction of surplus value” (pg. 165). In addition, educators are increasingly losing control over what happens in their workplaces with crowded classrooms, oversized workloads, high-stakes standardized testing, understaffed and under-resourced schools, and scripted curricula (Hagopian & Greene, 2012). The feelings of powerlessness, isolation, meaninglessness, and self-estrangement that educators experience in the neoliberal era are the feelings of alienation that Marx (1939/1973) describes among factory workers. While many of the members of social justice caucuses do not self-identify as Marxists or socialists, all of the educator activists interviewed believe in collective action among working people for social change. Educator activists in social justice caucuses believe people can change through action, building consciousness, difficult conversations, and relationships. As Karen stated earlier, “Fighting for a union creates a bond” that paves the way for people to shift their political identities.

The Deeper Nuances of our Existence
Educator activists in social justice caucuses are able to build relationships, have difficult conversations, and engage in protest activity because they have a sharp analysis of the inequalities in the educational system and society that breed oppressive tendencies and sustain oppressive structures. They are political actors who are constantly making connections beyond school walls. In reflecting on issues of racism in the caucuses, in schools, and in society, Malcolm and Rod offer powerful explanations, which were echoed by other activists. Their analyses place the racial dynamics that play out on a day-to-day basis in schools within a larger context that enables caucus activists to continue their broader fights for educational, economic, and racial justice even in the face of frustrating tensions. Malcolm explains the problem of organizing in the context of a country built on white supremacy:

We haven’t really ever as a society truly reconciled, let alone really had an honest conversation about it on a larger scale. Inherently I believe that under the structure of white supremacy that we exist in, organizations inherently tend towards being conservative and protectionist and that’s just the nature of how white supremacy works because the individual’s own kind of well-being is above everybody else’s and it’s just premised at the root foundation of what America’s based on . . . and it’s just not egalitarian at all. So to try to develop an organization where people are basically breastfed on such sentiments is very difficult.

Malcolm does caucus work focused on the fight for racial justice, since he sees the need to dismantle the larger structural racism that is woven into every fiber of U.S. society. He understands that he also has to overcome the divisiveness of neoliberal ideology rooted in austerity, individualism, and massive inequality when trying to organize his fellow educators. He adds:

Generally most folks are too concerned with the precariousness of their conditions to ever have time to deal with the deeper nuances of our existence, so with that type of recognition coming up with innovative, creative ways of framing kind of how do we address things, also an acknowledgement of what has been done, is not working, and is ok to kind of go out on a limb and experiment with some ideas that haven’t been tested out . . . I think that we can actually move things in a different direction. Now are we anywhere near that at this point? At times I feel like we are, at other times I feel like we are not.
Malcolm is aware of where his colleagues are and the context in which he is organizing as he searches for creative ways to move rank-and-file members toward embracing all struggles for racial justice, including those for criminal justice.

Rod also organizes within a larger political context that enables him to raise worker consciousness based on where his colleagues are. He fights for criminal justice through solidarity because he understands that a united workforce is stronger together and that employers will use any tactic to prevent that: “We have to keep our eyes on the prize of the fact that the elite want to keep working-class people divided. We can’t fall for that trap. So the Trump supporters, I got tons of issues with that vote, but I need to dialogue with those people more than ever.” Rod perseveres in having difficult conversations with his coworkers because he can see the bigger picture in which educators, students, and school communities have more in common with one another than with the elite who have power in the United States. Solidarity helps build worker consciousness on multiple levels: it fights against the isolation of the classroom; the rights consciousness that replaced collective work rights with individual ones based on race, gender, and other attributes and identities to the detriment of both individual rights and labor (Lichtenstein, 2002); and the competitive work environments based in lean-production methods that exaggerate divisions among workers (Moody, 2017, 1997).

In being political actors, educators in social justice caucuses then provide a political education for others. Rachel describes the work of another caucus member:

Some of the people who are leading have really strong politics and then also are able to communicate it really effectively. They have taken on roles and positions in the work that allow them to communicate it to lots of people . . . One example is [a caucus member] who does all this work around whiteness and white supremacy and what it means to dismantle whiteness as teachers. He has done so many different presentations and workshops and facilitations in spaces and rooms of 20, 30, 40 people, and so people leave those rooms like they’ve been taught. They’ve learned from [the caucus member] who is a really good teacher and has really good politics.
Social justice caucuses provide spaces for educators to be political actors who can provide a political education, in this case about whiteness and white supremacy, for other caucus members, colleagues, and their students.

While there is still much work to do, social justice teacher union caucus activists are fighting to create a school system where union democracy, all aspects of racial justice, and educational justice are inseparable. The caucus creates a space where educators can make connections to the broader political economy exploring “the deeper nuances of our existence” that allow them to move beyond the isolation of the classroom toward collective struggle. In addition, the broader political consciousness of caucus activists themselves enables them to meet coworkers where they are and persist in the face of difficult conversations on racial issues.

Caucus activists build relationships that lay the groundwork for cultures of solidarity. Building upon interpersonal rapport and relationships, educators in social justice caucuses then have difficult conversations and debates with the potential for communal consciousness raising that further strengthens their cultures of solidarity. While relationships build trust and difficult conversations build consciousness, protest activities amplify and solidify those trust and consciousness building practices.

**A Window for Hope in an Entrenched System**

Social justice caucuses value a wide array of democratic practices. As my earlier analysis of the literature suggests, critical theorists’ views on the role of education range on a spectrum from overemphasizing determining structures to excessive emphasis on human agency (Giroux, 1983; Katzenelson & Weir, 1985; Bowles & Gintis, 1976/2011). In making political/economic connections beyond the classroom and sharing those with colleagues through difficult conversations and cultures of solidarity, caucus activists are resisting neoliberal and white
supremacist discourses while demonstrating a clear understanding of the structural limitations they face. They think and act with “critical bifocals” (Weis & Fine, 2012) and are able to organize their colleagues in their schools and then beyond it to fight against the oppressive structural systems that are part of their daily lives; they file grievances against abusive principals and also mobilize in the streets against school closures, the lack of funding for public education, and racist police violence. Educators in social justice caucuses navigate the both/and of structure and agency, a dilemma that many theorists tend to write about as an either/or. As Rachel said, “I’m trying much harder recently to see opportunity in that tension instead of seeing it as a problem.” Educator activists’ organizing is imperfect and the internal tensions remain, yet they show a potential way to organize and mobilize educators to challenge the many injustices engrained in public schools and in society in the United States. This is a potential and not guaranteed, but it is a window for hope in an entrenched system.

Social justice caucuses also continue to grapple with, within, and across criminal justice fault lines. It is through difficult democratic practices that social justice caucuses are building support for all racial justice struggles to transform their unions into social movements. Social justice caucuses organize for union democratization embracing Lani Guinier’s (1995) concept of group democracy that is about having a public conversation in public space “that demands communication, sustained interaction, and coalition building” (pg. 16) beyond the individualistic one person/one vote type of democracy. It is democracy not based in majority rule, winner-take-all politics, but based on collaboration and participation in which a range of views is discussed and integrated through vigorous debate between politically mobilized groups. As Ciara suggested earlier, “Why is there such high tension about race? Come to this space, let’s talk about it.” Guinier (1995) argues, “Individuals, empowered by their association with other like-minded individuals,
can be subjects rather than objects of democracy’s conversation. Individuals, acting in concert, can transform our democratic project” (pg. 21). However, as Guinier (1995) also contends, race matters in democracy, “If we are talking about a democracy in which everyone feels that they have an opportunity to participate in making decisions about things that affect their lives . . . Indeed, when racial minority-groups members are confident that they are being respected, when they do not feel the need to ‘racialize’ an issue just to be recognized, then they can participate vigorously and confidently in cross-racial majorities” (pg. 6). In fighting for criminal justice, social justice caucuses become spaces of collective struggle where difficult conversations, strong relationships, political education, cultures of solidarity, and protest activity occur at the same time as they are attempting to be spaces in which racial-minority groups and other oppressed communities can participate vigorously and confidently. While still fraught with tensions, fights for criminal justice also build worker consciousness to transform schools, unions, and society into more just and equal places. As Malcolm explains, they give educators and school communities the opportunity “to deal with the deeper nuances of our existence.”

An anti-racist education is necessary for the democratization of teacher unions. Similar to anti-racism struggles in schools, racial justice in labor unions means supporting social movements fighting against racial oppression, helping workers examine their own privileges, analyzing historical and institutional inequalities, and building an inclusive union that asks whose voice is heard and who gets hired in the union and in the workplace? Anti-racism empowers workers to combat racism, value difference, demand equality, and transform their lives (Au, 2009). It also means supporting the struggle for criminal justice. Debates and internal tensions will continue to arise, but educator caucus activists highlight the importance of creating movements that can articulate, embrace, and grow from and with the complexity of what it means to be human in
school, community, and society. They also bring attention to the political role and the work of educators beyond the classroom, including in schools as institutions, in communities, in politics, and in the streets. Social justice caucuses expand conceptions of union democratization and create moments and spaces of radical possibility.

The particularity of criminal justice struggles in causing such strong divisions within teacher unions is a finding that emerged from this research. Since it was not an initial focus of this dissertation, it raises questions for future research. Most prominently, why is there such a strong connection between educators and police officers? Some hypotheses include the large number of marital and family relationships; their ties as public sector union “brothers and sisters;” the fact that they live in similar communities that are different from those of the black and brown communities that they serve; the similar positions of authority, especially in cities, of white educators and police officers having to “police” black and brown students within schools and in the streets; and how criminal justice struggles are challenging the fact that white educators and white police officers have historically been protected by the educational and criminal justice systems from racist behavior toward black and brown youth. A future study would focus on confirming or disproving these hypotheses.
CHAPTER 8: Concluding Discussion and Implications

This dissertation demonstrates the difficulties and tensions of organizing within the Hydra—“the internal organs of the Hydra [being] neoliberalism, structural racism, Whiteness and White supremacy, racial capitalism, and accumulation by dispossession” (Picower & Mayorga, 2016, pg. 4)—and the radical possibilities generated by the daily actions of educator activists involved in social justice caucuses. MORE’s and WE’s organizing and mobilizing illuminates the successes of social justice caucuses, while at the same time, revealing the obstacles and limitations that still need to be overcome.

A Class Struggle Approach

Educator caucus activists critically engage with the project of democratizing their unions. Moody (1997) argues that an integral part of social justice/movement unionism is “asserting the centrality of union democracy as a source of power and broader social vision, and outreach as a means of enhancing that power” (pg. 4). MORE and WE engage in the democratic practices of discussion and debate, building relationships, political education, cultures of solidarity, and protest activity so that those whose interests are most affected are the ones making decisions. The caucuses generate different organizational flows and organizing tactics to accommodate and expand union democracy. Sitting in MORE and WE meetings is seeing democratic practices in action with full group debates, norms and procedures to engage discussion in fair ways, and the use of committees and breakout groups that lead to better, more informed member decision-making. Union democratization is an ongoing process that is long, messy, filled with tensions and dilemmas, and changes over time, as shown by MORE’s response to the Eric Garner statement. Yet I found, similar to Maddison and Scalmer (2006), that “Tension sparked political improvisations; conflict brought surprising discoveries . . . [Activists] responded to organizational failure by developing
new forms of ‘activist democracy’” (pg. 251). For MORE and WE, fighting for racial justice inspires creativity and adaptability in practices that democratize their union, and at the same time, the focus on racial justice drives the need for greater union democracy.

While elections are one part of caucus strategy, voting is not a democratic end in itself nor is it given a disproportional weight as the most important expression of democratization within social justice caucuses. Rather it is one of the many means of realizing union democracy. As part of his feedback, after reading the data chapters of this dissertation, Derek stated:

Simply put, if you have a strategy that views power as something that is won through the broadest possible electoral appeal, then any “divisive” issue like BLM will be a non-starter. This is a fundamentally different idea than the one shared by the “social justice” educators that have more of a class struggle approach that isn’t primarily electoral in orientation and is therefore less afraid of polarization, that views power as something won from below rather than simply through gaining union office.

Derek explains that some members of the caucus, who view electoral success as the main means for union democratization, left the caucus as their strategies and goals for the caucus clashed with members who believe union democratization is won through a broader “class struggle approach.” For Derek, these “different strategies of union democratization very closely mapped onto these disagreements around criminal justice or race” that the caucuses are having. A class struggle approach to democratizing the union embraces fights for racial justice in a way that an electoral approach does not. Social justice caucuses are necessary within the labor movement in order to lead unions back to the class struggle politics and approaches they embraced in the later 19th century and in the 1930s. Workers then fought for their rights through working-class movements that extended far beyond the factory floor without the constraints imposed by narrow collective bargaining structures focused on wages and benefits. For example, workers in the Great Upheaval of 1877 shut down railroads in protest of multiple wage cuts but also against the increasingly wealthy corporations and the dire poverty of the working masses. Workers fought for the
redistribution of wealth for the whole community and against the wealthy’s ability to corrupt
governments for their own benefits (American Social History Project, 2008). Caucuses that are not
in power, like MORE and WE, try to influence their unions with their class struggle approach
presented at Delegate Assemblies/general membership meetings, during elections and contract
campaigns, and in their actions, such as the Black Lives Matter Week of Action in Schools.

Weiner (2014) argues that “when unions are not democratic, even if they fight for social
justice, they perpetuate hierarchical relations that disempower working people, allowing bigotry
and oppression to remain embedded in social relations.” Many social justice caucus activists are
committed to addressing issues of inequality and power and believe that union democracy, if it is
to be realized, is incompatible with inequality, racism, and oppressive social relationships. Ciara
confirms, “And as far as union democracy, I think that coming to that space with a social justice
lens is how you create democracy within a union.” Eric adds, “To me union democracy is a subset
of social justice. I think that union democracy is in itself a social justice sort of issue.” Since social
inequality is seen as an impediment to democratic participation, the fight for racial justice in
addition to struggles against all forms of oppression are integral parts of social justice caucuses’
fights for the democratization of the union. Many of these struggles are outside the realm of
collective bargaining and yet remain central to caucus organizing and mobilizing. I believe that
the example of organizing for social justice as a necessary part of the democratization of the union
is one of the most important lessons learned from MORE and WE. Democratic process does not
automatically lead to an end to oppression unless both are fought for simultaneously (Guinier,
1994). Fletcher and Gapasin (2018) add that social movement unions must embody consistent
democracy, which embraces antiracist practices, including supporting working-class leaders of
color and women leaders, mirroring leadership and the rank-and-file, and incorporating and
coordinating with social movements of color. Social movement unionism is about class struggle versus trade union struggle because class oppression cannot be isolated from other forms of oppression, such as race and gender (Fletcher & Gapasin, 2008).

MORE and WE also show the power of the rank-and-file rather than top-down mobilization in unions. As Aaron states, “Union democracy is the involvement of ALL [union] members in ALL stages of decision making.” In a review of two labor intellectuals, Early (2004) states, “We need more, not less, of their kind of thinking about the centrality of the workplace, the importance of rank-and-file power, and the potential of ordinary people to transform themselves and their organizations through the experience of labor solidarity and struggle.” Educator activists in MORE and WE embrace Early’s call to action as part of member-led, rather than leadership-driven, workplace organizations that believe in forming coalitions beyond the workplace as part of an educational justice movement.

However, the road toward transformation is not a progressively linear movement forward. In addition to the current political economy in the United States that is oppressive and structurally constraining to progressive social movements as those with money have disproportionate power, there are false starts and obstacles that limit MORE’s and WE’s potential. MORE and WE remain small caucuses of about 200 to 300 educators within much larger business/service-style unions: the UFT has about 185,000 members and the PFT has about 11,000 members. The caucuses have succeeded in shifting certain ideas within their unions about social justice and the democratizing of the union through a class struggle approach, but it often takes a larger struggle, such as a strike or walkout to politicize members. In the cities and states across the United States in which educators have recently protested, educators have organized against low salaries and benefits, allocation of local and state funds away from public education, and increased privatization. However, New York
and Pennsylvania fare better than most other states in most of these areas. While the high cost of living in major cities, such as New York City and Philadelphia, means higher staff salaries are actually lower than they seem, when compared to other states, teacher salaries are higher in New York City and Philadelphia than in many other states, as is state and local funding, potentially making it more difficult to organize members around issues of salary and funding of public education (see Appendix C). Privatization could be a mobilizing force in Philadelphia where over 35 percent of public school children now attend a charter school, though now that the Philadelphia School Reform Commission is back in the public’s control, the growth of charter schools may drastically decrease. A movement around privatization is more difficult in New York City, where not quite 10 percent of public school children attend charter schools, since those charter schools are disproportionally located in three or four of New York City’s 32 community school districts that include the city’s elementary and middle schools. In addition, the privatization of schools in New York City rarely occurs at the high school level where the more politicized educators often work. The growth of charter schools in New York City disproportionately affects certain educators more than others, thus making it more difficult to mobilize the entire union. While New York City educators do face systemic shortages of time, resources, and staffing, these issues have not yet galvanized educators and their unions into action.

While organizing members in social justice caucuses has been a struggle, so has the possibility of winning a union election in order to democratize the union. Given the smaller number of public schools in Philadelphia (about 237 as compared to New York City’s 1,600 public schools), WE does have the potential to win as the caucus has the ability to organize in every school even with a small number of activists. In addition, in its first elections in 2016 as a newly formed caucus, WE won one-third of the total vote. They have been organizing since and are now
more well-known as a caucus, greatly helping them in the upcoming 2020 elections. A hundred miles north in New York City, it is highly unlikely that MORE will win an election anytime soon against the entrenched Unity Caucus led by Michael Mulgrew. As discussed in Chapter 5, Unity’s hold on the UFT is significant, with major structures in place to assure its grip on power. In addition, the opposition is divided inside the UFT. Unlike in the PFT where WE is so far the only opposition caucus in the 2020 elections, two other caucuses, New Action and Solidarity, along with MORE, challenged Unity in the 2019 UFT elections. MORE was even less likely to win with votes divided among three opposition groups.

However, as I have argued, winning a union election, in and of itself, is not sufficient to democratize a union. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1996) highlights the infeasibility of an idealized participatory democracy, which is one aspect of democratizing the union. She states, “My question is how anyone can transform that normal, day-to-day sense of civic alienation into a participatory democracy that will call itself radical. How can one force people into participation? For me the question can only be answered by way of an unfinishable pedagogic project” (pg. 220). Social justice caucuses in teacher unions are ideally placed for this long-term, ever-changing pedagogic project. As educators, caucus activists have the potential to educate themselves, each other, colleagues, rank-and-file union members, students, parents, and community members. They understand the need for a political education that reaches beyond the classroom to the broader workplace and into the streets. Caucus activists also recognize that not only does one need education in order to participate in and fully understand democratic practices, but also that participation itself, in all of its forms, is educative. Educators in social justice caucuses are continually engaging themselves, their colleagues, and allies in public contention, drawing attention to workplace grievances and injustice to students, supporting social justice campaigns,
and leading and participating in protest activity. Education is political and it demands that educators assume a political role, a role that educator activists in social justice caucuses wholeheartedly embrace. For social justice educator Paulo Freire (1970/1990), education is an integral part of revolution and “must be present in all its stages” (pg. 132). I believe, based on the analysis presented in this dissertation, that educator activists in social justice caucuses have the potential to carry out Spivak’s “unfinished pedagogic project.”

MORE and WE enact the democratic practices they want their unions to perform instead of maintaining the hierarchical structures of traditional, service-style unions. Their organizing is an attempt to prevent the bureaucratization and conservative tactics of the “iron law of oligarchy” (Michels, 1911/1962) and the reproduction of oppression, and, in the process, to reinvigorate unions. Their class struggle approach to democratizing the union embraces and fights for social justice. Social justice caucuses act like the union they hope to create: They make broad contract demands and engage in activities that will improve the lives of educators but also those of students and their families.

**Consciousness Raising**

In organizing and mobilizing, educator activists in MORE and WE bring strategies of solidarity, collectivity, and inclusivity into schools and beyond. They attempt to raise consciousness on issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, immigration, and politics. It is through collective struggle and acts of solidarity that consciousness changes. This dissertation sought to situate social justice caucuses in teacher unions within the larger struggle to deepen and expand working-class consciousness. Through their actions and political education efforts, MORE and WE have shared their knowledge with fellow union members as well as with their school communities on issues of immigration, racism, and neoliberalism, helping others make
connections between intersecting oppressions. As part of her feedback after reading the data chapters of this dissertation, Janelle says, “Our union and school district should be creating space for us to undo the racism, sexism and classism we have been taught our whole lives, so we don’t perpetuate it.” Since the unions and school districts are failing to do this difficult work, MORE and WE create spaces and actions to raise working-class consciousness.

Part of consciousness raising for MORE and WE has been a shift from individual to collective struggle. Neoliberalism accentuates individualism over a logic of collective action. In addition, Lichtenstein (2002) emphasizes that the increase in rights consciousness of the 1960s and 1970s arose in part due to the lack of mobilization around racial and gender issues by the majority of unions and also because struggles were transformed from collective political ones to individual or interest-group legal ones. Resisting this approach, social justice caucuses are winning rights collectively. For example, with the 2012 strike, the Chicago Teachers Union won paternity leave, break time for nursing mothers, and a plan to search for and recruit racially diverse teachers (Bradbury et al., 2014). In the spring of 2018, MORE organized school walk-ins demanding parental leave within the UFT, which became a union victory in a deal with New York City, and WE has started pressuring the new School Board in Philadelphia, elected in summer 2018, to recruit, hire, and retain more black educators. WE, standing with its allies, also organized, testified, and delivered a petition in April 2019 to the Philadelphia City Council signed by more than 3,000 people (including 2,500 PFT members) demanding an end to the ten-year tax abatement and toxic conditions in public schools and for fair funding of schools, libraries, and housing. In July 2019, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf announced the state would spend over seven million dollars to remove lead paint, mold, and asbestos from Philadelphia’s public schools. Social justice caucuses
fight so that workers’ rights are won collectively in the workplace rather than individually in the courts.

In addition, in the many meetings I have participated in, activists in MORE and WE do not see themselves as professionals separated from the communities in which they work. Educators in MORE and WE believe in organizing with parents, students, and community members to transform schools and society rather than embrace the narrow professionalism by many union educators demonstrated during the 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville United Federation of Teachers strike. MORE and WE activists embrace Freire’s (1970/1990) call for conscientização, or consciousness-raising. Educators in MORE and WE are playing an important role in raising the consciousness of working-class people through coalitions. For example, during the 2012 Chicago Teachers Strike, an educator reported, “Students realized they were part of it. I think that triggered a whole level of consciousness that they would never have had, had they not participated in that experience” (Noonan et al., 2014, pg. 17).

This dissertation also strove to contribute to the literature that argues that workers’ beliefs about class, race, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and immigration are not immutable. For example, throughout history union members have changed their ideas about race and racism and overcome racial divisions through struggle (Kelly, 2001; Nelson, 2001; Letwin, 1998; Goldfield, 1997; Kelley, 1990). I do not write to romanticize interracial unionism. The racism woven into the fabric of the United States, the “color line” historically ingrained in every societal structure in the South and other parts of the country, anticommunist purges in unions, and the aggressive tactics of employers to divide workers by race, means interracial unionism has been unable to date to eliminate or even fundamentally challenge the larger racist social structures of the United States beyond the individual union. In addition, deteriorating living and working conditions exacerbate
racist ideas as workers blame one another rather than capitalist accumulation and dispossession. However, I believe there is still potential and hope in the radical possibilities of interracial unionism that reaches far beyond the workplace. Social justice/movement unions reinvigorate the fights against oppression within unions and in society. I believe social justice caucuses can shift working-class politics in similar ways as did the interracial unions of the CIO era. Goldfield (1993) argues that unions with a large number of African-American workers and/or with Left leaderships, usually integrated and committed to racial equality, did develop interracial solidarity and egalitarian union structures through struggles on the shop floor. In these kinds of union organizations, white workers are able to fight beyond their own narrow interests. Educator activists in social justice caucuses also believe that workers can change. As part of her feedback to this dissertation, Janelle also states:

If our union really engaged its members in conversations about race and racism in education and society as a whole, then the beliefs of its members would shift. Most people do not have spaces where they can engage in facilitated dialogue about racism and their biases. We need a union that educates its members about the root caucuses of inequality in the United States and collectively comes up with solutions. We cannot rely on politicians to find the answers to our questions.

MORE and WE activists have a unique practical knowledge and embrace social change as a long, ongoing process. The experiences of educators in MORE and WE also speak to white workers organizing against oppression through struggle and contribute to the literature about the role of left-leaning workers in racial justice struggles and other fights for the liberation of all people. In addition to Clarence Taylor’s (2010) important work on the history of the Teachers Union, more analysis is needed that highlights the role of educators in working-class struggles against all intersectional forms of oppression.

However, as stated in the previous section, the road toward transformation is not a progressively linear movement forward and MORE and WE face considerable challenges to
exerting greater influence on changing working-class consciousness. MORE and WE are still working on recruiting educators of color to their caucuses and building relationships with communities of color beyond school walls. The Black Lives Matter Week of Action in Schools has been an important collaboration between educators, students, parents, community members, and community organizations in both Philadelphia and New York City. While supporting the Black Lives Matter movement has caused some splits and dissentions in the caucuses, both MORE and WE organized Black Lives Matter Week of Action in Schools’ events in their respective cities and public schools. Actively embracing and taking on the national demands—end zero tolerance, mandate black history and ethnic studies, hire more black teachers, and fund counselors not cops—throughout the year, and not only during the BLM week of action, will help the caucuses strengthen their relationships with communities and educators of color. As part of her feedback after reading the data chapters of this dissertation, Ciara mentions, “The Alliance for Quality Education, as well as, the Coalition for Educational Justice, both parent/community organizations, wrote an op-ed in the Daily News condemning the UFT leadership’s lack of support. It really became the straw that broke the camel’s back for parent activists’ support of the UFT.” The UFT’s and PFT’s failure to endorse the BLM Week of Action this past February, even though it was endorsed by nearly 30 AFT and NEA union locals, provides an opportunity for MORE and WE to gain the increasing trust and support of parents, communities, and educators of color. It also helps them to keep on pushing their unions to join the movement, if the caucuses genuinely embrace the national demands. Educators and communities of color need to see a race-conscious union that is actively anti-racist.

Building relationships with parents and communities is difficult work. Since the caucuses remain small, activists in MORE and WE are spread thin and do not always have the capacity to
support all parent and student issues. For example, New York City has over 1,600 K-12 public schools with more than 1.1 million public school students. Reaching all of these school communities necessitates resources MORE simply does not yet have. While it is possible to form relationships and support school communities as an opposition caucus within a union, it also helps to be the caucus in power with the resources of the union. For example, Samir Sonti (2019) reports on the 2019 United Teachers Los Angeles strike:

In 2014, UTLA began hiring full-time parent organizers who, together with ROS LA’s constituent organizations, have done the slow, rarely glamorous work of training parents and students about the threat privatization poses to traditional public education and preparing them to take that message back into their communities. The groundswell of popular support for the strike grew out of that organizing.

MORE and WE do the difficult work of building worker consciousness without being in the leadership of the union. They help union members and school communities make connections between interlocking oppressions in order to build a movement that works to defend and improve public education. There is still more organizing work to do, but these educator activists embody the notion that education is political and thus use their role as workers in schools to educate within and beyond school walls.

**Labor and Social Movement Theory**

In analyzing social justice caucuses in teacher unions in this dissertation, I sought to contribute to the literature reuniting labor and social movement theory. Mann (2014) argues that the current cycle of labor protests happening in the United States—including rank-and-file insurgencies against conservative union leaderships, the public sector strikes in Wisconsin in 2011 and the Chicago Teachers strike in 2012, and the low-wage undocumented worker strikes across the country since 2006—embody certain aspects of social movements, including Charles Tilly’s WUNC performance model (worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment), repertoires of
collective action, and political process theory. In her most recent analysis of WE’s organizing work, Maton (2018) also uses social movement literature; in her article, she applies the concept of social movement frames. Fanelli and Brogan (2014), also writing about labor and social movements, maintain that it is only with trade unionists and social justice activists fighting together for the entire working class that the potential arises for resisting austerity and neoliberal policies and providing an alternative for a better future. Social justice caucuses like MORE and WE seek to organize within their unions but also reach beyond them to organize and stand with the working class as a whole. Analyzing frames and dilemmas used in social movement theory helps illuminate the strategic and organizational capacities of MORE and WE and their ability to contest power, oppression, and inequality. In addition, an analysis of organized social justice caucuses within a union shows that working-class organizations have the potential to act as social movements. Smucker (2017) goes so far as to argue that organizations are necessary for a social movement to be successful.

As discussed in Chapter 6 of this dissertation, exploring the internal dilemmas and tensions of social justice caucuses in teacher unions as well as those in social movements in general is important in creating an intellectual framework from which to compare, generalize, and learn from, since there currently is little literature to build on. In addition, social movement literature is strengthened when it is based in the practical knowledge of activists and is movement-relevant, thus finding a praxis that does not get lost in abstract theoretical thought (Bevington & Dixon, 2005; Maddison & Scalmer, 2006). Jasper (2006) challenges social movement theory that explains movement strategy solely from a structural point of view, such as in resource mobilization and political process theory that are limited by macro explanations. Jasper (2006) states, “Strategic dilemmas and choices are useful causal mechanisms. They frequently mediate between the micro
and the macro level: micro choices have macro effects, and macro conditions shape the micro choices” (pg. 175). Social movement literature provides more in depth context and explanations when it uses critical bifocals to analyze the daily dilemmas, actions, and agency of unionized educators while also drawing attention to the historical context and political economy that influences and constrains them (Weis & Fine, 2012). This dissertation sought to highlight the daily work and practical knowledge of educator activists in MORE and WE, while emphasizing that social justice caucus activists are making decisions in a neoliberal and white supremacist climate in which competition and lean production are rampant at many workplaces, including in schools.

Business/service-style unions remain conservative and hierarchical organizations with little rank-and-file mobilization or movement building. However, social justice caucuses like MORE and WE show that the labor movement can and should be an integral part of social movement theory and is still relevant in developing theories of social change.

This dissertation is also an example of public scholarship that attempted to be collaborative with educators in order to illuminate critical social problems relevant to communities, and to contribute to the public understanding of social justice caucuses and their fights for public education. In doing so, I interrogated tensions and fractures within the caucuses not to air caucus members’ dirty laundry in public but rather to generate theory and discussion around what it means to organize in a social justice caucus in a public sector union at a time of vicious attacks on public institutions and civil rights (Cohen, 1999). This dissertation confirms the value and importance of public scholarship and movement-relevant theory (Bevington & Dixon, 2005) and encourages a greater emphasis on both in academia.

Relevance for Today’s Progressive Education Movement

The past several years have seen a wave of educator-led actions and strikes that are not
close to ending. From the strikes in West Virginia, Arizona, Kentucky, and Oklahoma in the spring of 2018 to the strikes in Los Angeles, Oakland, Denver, and West Virginia at the beginning of 2019, educators and their student, parent, and community allies have been leading the labor movement in the United States. “The number of workers involved [in major work stoppages in 2018] was the highest since 1986 (533,000 workers),” the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019) reports, adding that “educational services and health care and social assistance industry groups accounted for over 90 percent of all workers idled in 2018.” The two largest work stoppages of 2018 were led by Arizona and Oklahoma educators (BLS, 2019). The educator strikes revealed to public school communities and to the larger public that neoliberal “reforms” in education and the privatization agenda behind franchised charter schools were in fact undermining rather than supporting increasing equity in education. They also showed how educator strikes that embrace the solidarity of students, parents, and communities can begin to slay the Hydra’s heads attacking public education: standardized testing, mayoral control, school closings, attacks on teacher unions, school choice, franchised charter schools, philanthrocapitalism, and the standardization of curriculum all the way up to teacher preparation programs (Picower & Mayorga, 2016).

Activists, educators, and scholars have been reflecting on the educator strike wave, and warn “there’s still a long way to go” (Sonti, 2019) because “educators say they’re still fighting for the same changes” (Reilly, 2019) they went on strike for. The strike wave has yet to drastically change the way public education is funded in the United States. Educators want more investment in public education to fund an increase in teacher and support staff pay, smaller class sizes, updated textbooks, and counselors, social workers, mental health practitioners, and nurses in every school (Reilly, 2019). The charter industry also remains strong, and Weiner (2019) cautions that the strikes have not shifted the Democratic Party’s overall education policy or the party’s relationship
to teacher unions. She suggests that striking educators must form social justice caucuses in order to protect their gains and to move the movement forward. Teacher unions need “a genuine rank-and-file caucus. The pushback and feedback a caucus provides is irreplaceable; it is the spine of union democracy” (Weiner, 2019).

Left-leaning educators in many of the striking states and cities have begun forming social justice caucuses. As MORE and WE learn from striking educators about what and how to galvanize educators into major protest activities, these new caucuses can also learn from MORE and WE. Social justice caucuses need to embrace democratic practices beyond the narrow electoral realm, working toward the broader democratization of their unions as well as being actively anti-racist. They must also be creative and adaptable in response to the internal organizing and mobilizing dilemmas that they will face. These lessons may be generated by a small group of activists, but as educators continue to learn from and with parents, students, and communities, there are radical possibilities for the labor movement and for public education. We must improve public schools. The road ahead may well be long, but educators in social justice caucuses are helping create a wider working-class movement that has the potential to fight for a transformative public education for all.

Radical Possibilities

I started this dissertation with the assumption that there are radical possibilities in social justice caucuses, and I continue to see hope and possibility in them for unions and schools. The contributions of social justice caucuses go far beyond union democratization. Strikes led by activist educators committed to social justice/movement unionism have shifted the conversation in public schools and in communities about the problems facing public education. While politicians and the mainstream media often blame educators, parents, and students, activist educators called out the
corporate power and the effects of racism in education and the taxation schemes that benefit the wealthy and defund public education. The emphasis of social justice caucuses on broader bargaining demands and contentious actions that reach far beyond wages and benefits has broadened the conversation about the challenges facing public schools and challenged traditional union practices in times of austerity and attacks on public sector unions. The broader contract demands shift union tactics, such as valuing a class struggle approach to unionism that takes the time to build cultures of solidarity. For educators, parents, students, and communities that participated in the strikes and other solidarity actions, schools became sites with the potential for radical possibilities, including positive relations between educators and the communities they serve, rather than oppressive spaces that are harmful to students and their communities. While they may be small in number, educator activists in social justice caucuses have changed conversations and perceptions about how teacher unions work and have shown some of the ways in which educators are much more significant than their classroom practices. They also provide a potential for revitalizing a declining labor movement.

In addition, educator activists in MORE and WE challenge their business/service-style unions and education “reforms” and “reformers” in public schools through organizing and mobilizing their colleagues, students, parents, and school communities. Instead of seeking solutions for improving public education elaborated by privatizers and mainstream policy makers, they fight for educational justice grounded in workplace power, building collective struggles, and merging labor and social movements. While facing frustrating and difficult conditions, educators in MORE and WE embrace activist tensions that lead to creative and adaptable democratic practices necessary to transform unions and society. When worker consciousness and worker organizations are strong, the labor movement can become a social movement for justice. Jean
Anyon inspired me to begin the dissertation process, and it is with her wise words that I choose to end it: “It may be that some readers will feel that in arguing for a new social movement I am indulging in utopian thinking. To that charge I reply that the utopian thinking of yesteryear becomes the common sense of today” (Anyon, 2014, pg. 6).

**Further Research**

This dissertation is limited to a study of two social justice caucuses in business/service-style urban teacher unions on the East Coast of the United States that are part of the American Federation of Teachers. The caucuses are not in leadership positions in their unions and remain small. This study also examines a moment in time for two caucuses that are constantly experimenting and changing and so only reflects a small kernel of their daily realities. Further research is needed to provide a fuller picture of social justice caucuses in teacher unions. For example, research about caucuses that are in power, such as the CORE caucus since the 2012 strike in Chicago and the Union Power team in Los Angeles, would be important. It would also be interesting to see if social justice caucuses in locals of the National Education Association, such as the Social Equity Educators in the Seattle Education Association, are facing similar tensions as ones in these two AFT locals. There are also social justice caucuses in states without collective bargaining, such as Organize 2020 in the North Carolina Association of Educators, and ones forming after the wave of teacher strikes in the spring of 2018 in West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Arizona.

In addition, further research is also necessary for a more comprehensive picture of MORE and WE. This research might include analysis of how educator participation in social justice caucuses affects their pedagogy and if that pedagogy extends beyond the classroom in working with families and school communities. Educators in social justice caucuses work through
dilemmas and internal tensions within their caucuses; further research may also analyze how educators deal with contention within their classrooms. In addition, this dissertation focused mostly on race as an obvious fault line. In an overwhelmingly female teaching force, research could focus on gender as another tension in the caucuses. This dissertation also did not focus on the leaders of the caucuses; rather, it emphasized the role of their rank-and-file caucus members. Further research might highlight the identities of leaders and the role leaders play in horizontally organized caucuses. It could also explore the influence of different left-wing political parties on the organizing choices caucus activists make. The Democratic Socialists of America has grown tremendously during the writing of this dissertation and members of the organization actively participate in social justice caucuses. Finally, as mentioned in Chapter 7, further research should also explore the relationships between educators and police officers.
APPENDIX A: UFT Caucuses 1960-2014

Source: Education Notes. Created by founding MORE member Norm Scott (2014)
APPENDIX B: Interview Questions

What work do you do in schools?
Is it a charter or neighborhood school?
How long have you been working in the school?

Why did you join MORE/WE?

What would you call or how would you describe the type of unionism that MORE/WE does?
Why is it important? What are the top three priorities of this type of unionism?

How would you define social justice? How would you define union democracy?

What is the caucus working on? Do you see these as part of union democracy, social justice, or both?

What are some of the tensions the caucus has been facing? Do you see these as part of union democracy, social justice, or both?

What types of processes, strategies, campaigns, and organizational structures do caucus activists find effective versus those that have been unsuccessful?

How does the union relate to teachers who may need a lot of support in the classroom (or not belong at all) and/or who have racist, sexist, homophobic, or xenophobic tendencies?

What would you do if you got power in the union based on a social justice campaign?

How do the commitments of activist teachers potentially support or undercut union work?
**APPENDIX C: Staff Salaries and Education Funding by State**

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<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Average Staff Salary 2018 ($)</th>
<th>Total Expenditure per student 2018 ($)</th>
<th>State funding 2016-7 ($)</th>
<th>Local Funding 2016-7 ($)</th>
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References:
REFERENCES


Chicago Teachers Union. (2012). *The schools Chicago’s students deserve: Research-based proposals to strengthen elementary and secondary education in the Chicago public schools*. 241


