

INCLUSIVE UNIONISM:

STRATEGIES FOR RETAINING IDEALISM IN THE SEIU

Keywords: Diversity, Industrial democracy, Labour unions, SEIU, Social change, Social inclusion/exclusion, Trade unions

Unions in general, and American unions in particular, have not always been beacons of progressivism—many have historically focused on relatively narrow economic interests and job control (Barbash, 1984; Kochan, Katz, & McKersie, 1986; Perlman, 1966). Early commentators observed that the American labor movement “has never been profoundly ideological, nor has it provided a particularly easy entry to a political career” (Bok & Dunlop, 1970: 55). But unions have once again become associated with social justice as recent efforts to revitalize have involved allying with community groups and anti-poverty organizations and incorporated social movement strategies (Clawson, 2003; Fantasia & Voss, 2004; Fantasia & Stepan-Norris, 2004). This has drawn into American unions, whose staff have historically been socially conservative and focused on ‘bread-and-butter’ issues (Barbash, 1967; 1984), new staff who associate union work fundamentally with social change and social justice (Rooks, 2004; Fantasia & Voss, 2004). Observations of the progressive reforms that have galvanized American unions have emphasized that professional staff in these unions led the radical innovations that have successfully revitalized these organizations and the labor movement (Fantasia & Voss, 2004; Milkman & Voss, 2004; Milkman, 2004; Rooks, 2004). Despite the vast amount of scholarship covering the progressive turn in unions in the US and in Europe (Clawson, 2003, Heery, Kelly,

& Waddington, 2003; Hyman, 2009) and a widespread recognition that it has been driven by the staff working for reformed unions (Bronfenbrenner & Hickey, 2004; Fantasia & Voss, 2004; Milkman, 2006; Milkman & Voss, 2004), there has been no examination of the causes, beliefs and identities that new generations of staff bring into the labor movement. The employment relationship between unions and socially progressive staff has implications for the sustainability of union revitalization as well as more broadly for understanding the relationship between organizations seeking to do social good and their employees.

The question asked in this paper is how personal projects—defined as a motivational narrative for social action—held by progressively minded union staff can impact inclusiveness in unions. A key focus is how staff’s personal projects interact with organizational structures and practices. The American labor movement’s revitalization has been attributed by many scholars to some unions’ abilities to recruit from outside the labor movement and especially from immigrant communities (Milkman, 2006; Bunnage, 2014; Rooks & Penney, 2016; Fantasia & Voss, 2004). Hence, examining the question of how unions can foster diversity of social activism is imperative. Yet, to date, scholarship on union revitalization has focused disproportionately on institutional revival (Gunawardana, 2011; Hurd, Milkman & Turner, 2003) and union strategy (Frege & Kelly, 2004; Clark, 2009).

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) offers an opportune context in which to study how personal projects brought into a union by staff interact with union practices. The SEIU is currently the second-largest union in the U.S. representing approximately 2 million workers. It has been one of only a few unions in recent decades to be credited with organizing immigrants and ensuring that minorities are represented in the ranks of the union (Getman, 2010; Kelley, 1997; Yates, 1998;

Bronfenbrenner et al., 1998; Mort, 1998). The union has been known for recruiting outsiders into its ranks (Ganz et al., 2004; Shaw, 2010), establishing linkages with activist groups on college campuses in the past two decades (Rooks, 2004; Van Dyke, Dixon, & Carlon, 2007), and incubating innovative projects based on staff ideas (Yu, 2008). The SEIU has been credited for leading the movement for unions to transition to a more militant organizing strategy (Frege & Kelly, 2004). When the national union federation, the AFL-CIO, was reticent to do so, the SEIU led seven unions into a new federation, the Change to Win (Fletcher & Gapasin, 2008). Innovative organizing has engendered a doubling of SEIU's membership in the ten years before 2008 while other unions experienced membership decline (Milkman, 2006). The SEIU has also expanded the role of unions outside the workplace and in the areas of politics and policy, influencing state and national elections as well as regulatory change through such initiatives as the \$15 minimum wage campaign (Rolf, 2016; Stern, 2016). Staff working for the SEIU have inspired new sociological categorizations (Fantasia & Voss, 2004), and have been noted for being creative, "most acclaimed" (Yeselson, 2017), and "genius" (Fantasia & Voss, 2004).

Simultaneously, the union has been criticized for being single-mindedly focused on its vision of growth at the expense of internal democracy (Erem, 2001; Moody, 2007), and for relying on paid staff to build the movement (McAlevy, 2012, 2016; Early, 2009; Erem, 2001). Recent conflicts such as desertion among Change to Win unions and internal battles with local unions seeking to break away from the union have been attributed to the SEIU's arrogance (Early, 2009; Yeselson, 2017) and lack of tolerance for dissent (Tait, 2005; Early, 2009). These criticisms indicate that the SEIU embodies the complex challenges faced by unions that seek revitalization in an increasingly hostile environment (Fairbrother & Yates, 2003; Clawson, 2003;

Frege & Kelly, 2004). By examining the plurality of personal projects brought into the SEIU by staff, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how unions successfully negotiate conflicting goals, such as member representation versus external organizing, as well as democracy as an ideal versus market power.

In the rest of the paper, I present data collected from interviews with staff in the building services division of the SEIU, focusing on the origins of personal projects brought in by staff and the implications that harboring different projects have for how staff respond to union practices. I show that different personal projects impacted staff's selection of roles, modes of skills development, and career progression in the union. I discuss the implication of different personal projects for revitalization through inclusive unionism.

Inclusive Unionism and the SEIU

Extant theories on union revitalization have focused on strategies for revitalization—including strategies that foster member participation (Clark, 1992), membership growth (Bronfenbrenner et al., 1998), political power building, restructuring, and international solidarity (Frege & Kelly, 2004)—with little regard to whether these strategies result in inclusion or exclusion. Although recent work on unions' adoption of social identity claims (Yu, 2012), representative unionism (Bronfenbrenner & Warren, 2007) and grassroots union leadership (McAlevey, 2016) have touched on similar themes, inclusiveness has not been explicitly addressed in the revitalization literature.

Inclusiveness (Boehm et al., 2013; Härtel, 2014; Nishii, 2013) reflects the realization that diversity itself does not necessarily lead to positive outcomes unless it is combined with organizational practices that enable people of diverse backgrounds

to collaborate effectively. Within the diversity management literature, inclusiveness in organizations is fostered when organizational practices enhance learning and integration among socially different groups as opposed to practices that foster competition, reproduce status and power differences, or unilaterally favor historically disadvantageous groups (Nishii, 2013). Drawing on this literature, I define inclusive unionism as a model of unionism that is open to integrating women, racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, and sexual minorities into the union's organizational realm through organizational practices. As pointed out earlier, the theoretical model of American unions has hinged on "bread and butter" unionism—while immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities have played an important role in the history of unionization, unions in the US have generally shunned ideology, and economic issues, not social problems, have been accorded priority (Barbash, 1967, 1984; Buhle, 1999; Perlman, 1966). Empirical studies have documented racial and gender exclusivity in most craft unions affiliated with the AFL as well as key unions in manufacturing such as the UAW and the Steel Workers Union (Needleman, 2003; Stepan-Norris & Zeitlin, 2003). The relative lack of attention to inclusiveness in American unions in current scholarly debates is concerning especially in light of studies that suggest that inclusiveness has been a significant factor in union revitalization. For example, Lichtenstein (2002) argued that historically US labor was in a position of strength when it was inclusive and affirmed racial and ethnic pluralism than when it did not. Fantasia and Stepan-Norris (2004) made a similar argument, connecting waves of progressivism in US labor movement to increased inclusiveness. The current juncture, where by one count thirty-seven percent of union households and the majority of White working-class voters cast the vote for Trump in the 2016 elections (Bruno, 2017; Klein, 2017), motivates an examination of ways in which inclusive unionism

can be achieved despite external and internal pressures against inclusion. A further motivation is that unions remain, despite recent declines in union density, the largest organization of women and color. Membership of racial and ethnic minorities and women in unions is larger than membership in NOW, La Raza, NAACP and LULAC combined (Bronfenbrenner & Warren, 2007). Hence, what unions do (or not) to integrate women and minority workers into their fold impacts hundreds of thousands of individuals.

While there has been a long-standing distinction in the labor literature between economic and social unionism as models of unionism (Perlman, 1966; Fantasia & Stepan-Norris, 2004; Fantasia & Voss, 2004; Piore & Safford, 2006), there is a need to move beyond abstract conceptualizations to examine key dimensions of inclusiveness empirically. This article does so by investigating how diverse ideational projects carried into the union by staff interact with union practices. As Hyman (1979) and others (Carter et al., 2012) have argued, staff, their behaviors, and the social relationships they forge are a crucial factor in determining whether unions are bureaucratic oligarchies removed from the daily lives of members (Michels, 1959) or whether they are vehicles to activism and democracy. Hyman (1979: 62) pointed out that given the need for unions to build economic power in expanding markets and to understand employer preferences, activism and democracy in unions are ideals that are always achieved “against the odds” due to the efforts of union officials.

Both the proportion of staff relative to members in unions and the recruitment of ‘outsiders’ into the labor movement has increased in recent decades (Fantasia & Voss, 2004; Clark, 1992). John Sweeney, formerly of the SEIU, drafted many reformists whose views were shaped by the civil rights movement into the labor movement during his presidency of the AFL-CIO (Aronowitz, 1998; Tillman &

Cummings, 1999; Piore, 1994; Mort, 1998). Fantasia and Voss (2004) argued that these staff represented a new type of unionists that they labeled *militants*, distinguishing them from previous templates, namely *bureaucrats*, who managed the workforce for employers, and *strongmen*, who built personal empires (Fantasia & Voss, 2004: 116-117). It was noted that many *militants* worked for a single union, the SEIU (Fantasia and Voss, 2004). Studies have shown that staff entering unions from different social movements have invigorated unions (Forerster, 2003; Ganz, 2000; Martin, 2007; Rooks & Penney, 2016) with “strategic vision and militant sensibilities” (Bunnage, 2014: 72). Yet unions on the whole have been known as “greedy institutions” (Franzway, 2000) that often neglect the high workload and emotional toll that staff undergo (Rooks, 2004; Erem, 2001; McAlevey, 2012) and provide little to no formal training and mentoring, resulting in high staff turn-over and disenchantment (Rooks, 2004). Hence, despite the central importance placed on progressive staff as the drivers of ‘social movement unionism’ (Johnston, 1994), we know surprisingly little about staff and their actions and aspirations.

Personal projects and value driven careers

To understand the motivations and guiding principles of staff who think of union jobs as conduits for social causes, I draw and build on the literature on meaningful careers. Social identities and ‘core’ values have been shown to matter for how a person interprets the rewards and challenges of one’s career (Baker & Aldrich, 1996; Mische, 2003). Personal sources of continuity in careers also include a ‘core identity’ (Hall, 1971, 1986) that represents a motivational narrative guiding one’s career trajectory and provides the tenet for determining authenticity (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Drawing on the concept of core identities as career

anchors, I define a personal project as a motivational narrative for social action (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Mische, 2003) that guides an individual's career. In theories of agency, one's project is one's account of where one wants to go, why, and how (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

The choices of those who pursue personal projects at work have important effects on job design and commitment, as well as on the employment relationship. Research on employees harboring personal causes has shown that they select workplaces based on whether they can be effective vehicles for realizing their mission (Cardador, Dane, & Pratt, 2011). Moreover, these individuals engage in proactive behaviors to make their work more meaningful. For example, they may select lines of work that facilitate their cause (Dik & Duffy, 2009), and alter the design of their work in order to expand tasks and relationships supporting their cause (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Followers of a cause sacrifice themselves in the pursuit of their duties, sometimes foregoing higher pay and better job opportunities, or volunteering for difficult and dangerous tasks (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Serow, 1994). Those who are following a cause may also demand more from their employers and peers and hold them up to higher standards (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Cardador, et al., 2011; Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). In an employment relationship, these individuals may remind their organization of its own commitment to social causes, intervene to steer organizational attention to these matters, and protest when an organization's commitment to the cause is breached (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). Scholars have argued that employees harboring personal commitments to a cause are likely to exercise voice rather than exit when personal causes come into conflict with organizational goals, seeking to change the organization through 'principled dissent' (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Graham & Organ, 1993). However, exit is also a

possibility when personal projects can no longer be reconciled with organizational practices. For example, Ganz et al (2004) demonstrated that labor leaders in California who held personal projects for social reform left their unions when their union jobs no longer allowed them to pursue social change. Importantly, personal projects interact with organizational and institutional settings (Barley, 1989; Gunz & Jalland, 1996). Hence, examining the conditions under which personal projects are nurtured and protected inside unions and how they interact with organizational role structures and cultures is called for. To address this question, this article examines how personal projects impact role and task selection as well as staff approaches to voice and exit (Hirschman, 1970). Finally, this study asks what unions can do to integrate personal projects into union strategy and practice.

METHODS

Building Services and the Justice for Janitors in the SEIU

Since the 1980s, the SEIU's property services unit, which serves 250,000 workers, has maintained a high profile among activists seeking a career in social justice through the success of its organizing campaigns for office janitors—the 'Justice for Janitors' (JfJ)—and security guards (Erickson, et al., 2002; Fantasia & Voss, 2004). The JfJ campaign is an opportune context in which to examine staff personal projects as the success of the campaign in more than two dozen cities over two decades in improving the lives of some of the most disadvantaged workers drew into it a large number of committed staff from diverse backgrounds. Even within the SEIU, the JfJ stands out for having brought into the union staff and members from a variety of ethnic, racial, and social backgrounds. Many studies have pointed to this campaign as the epitome of activist unionism (Clawson, 2003; Fantasia & Voss,

2004; Fantasia & Stepan-Norris, 2004; Milkman, 2006). The JfJ originated from experimental organizing that SEIU staff conducted in the 1980s to address rapid decline in unionization in the office cleaning sector prompted by the contracting out of cleaning services (Milkman, 2006; Erickson et al., 2002). As a result of deterioration in working conditions, a workforce that was once predominantly African-American was replaced with an immigrant workforce, many of whom were undocumented (Milkman, 2006). The campaign espoused several ingenious innovations designed to circumvent difficulties in traditional NLRB workplace elections, including market research that identified employer vulnerabilities, union recognition by card check, and public relations campaigns against building owners (Erickson et al., 2002; Chun, 2005).

Within the union, staff fulfilled roles that were distinguished by key tasks—organizing and servicing members, research, external outreach, and managing staff and organizational resources. Organizers mobilized members and non-members, conducted market research, and built and maintained relationships needed to demonstrate workers’ support for unionization in new markets. Organizing typically involved building a coalition with community based groups that helped instill workers’ trust in the SEIU and put moral pressure on employers (Erickson, et al., 2002). Service representatives were responsible for building activism and leadership among union members, representing members in grievance procedures, and bargaining labor contracts with employers. Both organizers and service representatives were promoted into manager positions. Managers in the union had reporting as well as hiring and firing responsibilities for subordinate staff. A small branch office typically had a small number of organizers, service representatives, and managers. Researchers and external outreach officers were only present in large

branches or in regional offices. While the JfJ arose as a product of specific circumstances in the industry, the increase in staff mobility between unions and other social movements confers theoretical validity to the questions asked in this study beyond the immediate environment that begot this campaign.

Sample and data collection

As part of a larger project examining the emergence of social movement unionism in the SEIU, interviews were conducted with staff in the SEIU's JfJ campaign. Between December, 2005 and March, 2007, 77 interviews were conducted with activists currently (69 interviews) and previously employed (8 interviews) by the SEIU in four local unions based in Houston, Washington DC, Los Angeles, and Boston, as well as in the national office in Washington DC. Interviewees comprised of a convenience sample obtained by snowballing from initial introductions made by the author's contacts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In addition, participant observation was conducted in the aforementioned local unions, where staff were observed performing their work. I shadowed 26 of the 77 interviewees in such contexts as meetings, conducting union tasks, and interacting with superiors, peers, and members of the union. Full sample characteristics, including educational and immigrant backgrounds, are reported in Table 1.

Each interview lasted approximately one to two hours. Interviews obtained biographic and work histories, and inquired about reasons for choosing to work with, and in some cases, leave the SEIU. Particular attention was placed on gathering interviewees' accounts of what working for the union meant for them personally, the importance they placed on different tasks, and interviewee attitudes towards their roles. Interviewees were also asked about their reactions to union policy and practices. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Field notes were also transcribed,

usually during the same day and always within two days. Interviews and observation notes were coded using Atlas-ti, a qualitative data analysis software.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in stages. At a preliminary stage I determined that most but not all staff interviewed (71 out of 77) could be discerned as pursuing personal projects, defined as perceiving work as a moral duty in the advancement of a social cause (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Elangovan, et al., 2010). Interviewees' accounts of why they chose to work for a union, career goals, and answers to questions such as 'What is the best thing about your job' were taken as indications of personal projects. For the remaining six individuals, work was mostly a means of self-advancement and/or a source of financial rewards (Wrzesniewski, et al., 1997). Therefore, given the research question examined here, further analysis was limited to a theoretical sample (Strauss & Corbin, 1990: 176) consisting of the 71 staff members who had personal projects in the union.

An early motivation for examining personal projects was provided by a 'native' (Van Maanen, 1988), in this case a high-level union executive, who explained that staff in the union distinguished between 'Popes', those who built the union, for example, by becoming branch presidents, and 'missionaries,' those who "wake up every day and worry about building a movement". These tips from informants in the field (Van Maanen, 1988) were used as initial indicators of personal projects. A first-order coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was performed to identify the types of causes that respondents explained motivated their work as well as the core identities (Hall,

1986) they described as defining their selfhood. Second-order coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) then aggregated and abstracted away from first order coding to identify theoretical constructs that specified the properties of personal projects more generally, resulting in the final categories of personal projects, Movement Building, Institution Building, and Social Activism. Using these categories, it was determined that 26 staff members were primarily drawing on the Movement Building project at the time of this study; 22 drew predominantly from the Institution Building project, and 17 drew mainly on a Social Activism project. I also coded the types of actions staff undertook to ‘design the job’ (Wrzeniewski & Dutton, 2001) in order to fulfil their personal projects. Examples of codes identified in this stage include ‘select roles involving direct mobilization’ and ‘mediate conflict’. The most salient grouping of codes was around how staff selected roles and modified them to enable their personal projects; of these codes, ‘role separation’, ‘role integration’ and ‘sojourning’ were each associated with movement building, institution building, and social activism, respectively.

A second step in data analysis coded the data for the types of skills staff following different personal projects believed were important, and whether these skills were specific to work in the SEIU. Subsequently, I focused on the relationship between the personal projects identified and specific actions taken with regards to organizational practices that highlighted the tension between different goals in the union and were seen as potential challenges to inclusiveness. This analysis identified key differences between how Movement Builders, Institution Builders, and Social Activists dealt with tensions between idealism and union practice.

FINDINGS

Origins of personal projects

The roots of personal projects brought into the union by staff typically lay in their biographies, whether growing up as a child of undocumented immigrant workers or becoming radicalized through Teach for America. For many staff, identification with economic hardship and lack of social mobility was based on direct experience, not least for the 36 interviews who came from immigrant families. For example, a service representative whose parents were Mexican immigrants described an intimate knowledge of poverty as the reason for working for the labor movement:

We didn't have vacations. We had a pair of new shoes in a year. It's not like we were unhappy. That leads to why now I've chosen to do this type of work. Just because I know what people go through. We never had any medical insurance, any dental insurance, none of that. It was like, go off to TJ [Tijuana, a Mexican border town] and go see a doctor if it was really getting that bad. Other than that there was home remedies, and hope for the best.

The majority of my interviewees reported becoming politicized while in college, which many could only attend as a result of family sacrifices: "My parents worked really hard to make sure they sent us to private schools. It was off of working their butts off." Staff mentioned the desire to "give back" often, referring to their education and their union job as privileges.

Union work had deep personal meaning for staff who saw their own kin in the low-wage workers movement. Paradoxically, staff were passionate about their work with the union because they did not think of their work as "working for a union":

I go down to the field and see the workers and see them obtain their benefits, so rewarding. Because I see them and I see my parents. I don't think I'm working for a union. When I go out there and I see the workers it could be my Aunt or my Mom, their livelihood.

Many staff talked about their work as being paid for a passion—as one respondent put it, “In a way, this is my life’s work continuing”. Therefore, a recurring theme in interviews was that staff felt “lucky” to have their job with the union. Staff appreciated that the labor movement provided both economic security as well as career development opportunities.

Movement Builders

A subset of respondents could be distinguished for their zeal in growing the labor movement over commitments to other social causes. They explained their rationale for having joined the JfJ primarily in terms of improving workers’ lives by protecting their right to decent conditions and voice at work. Movement Builders were attracted to the JfJ for its “state of the art” and “cutting edge” strategies; they believed it represented hope in an otherwise bleak labor movement.

Movement Builders separated out roles and tasks that directly related to growing the labor movement—such as mobilizing non-union workers, building activism among union members, and organizing protests—from all other work, and focused on the former. Although organizing roles in the union provided more opportunity for these tasks, several service representatives were also following the movement building project. These staff engaged in a highly nuanced classification of roles in the union in order to focus on those that directly benefited the low-wage workers’ movement. For example, within organizing, adopters of this personal project

further distinguished between organizing that benefited low-wage workers and organizing that did not. They opted to stay out of what they called ‘elitist organizing’:

The only thing I didn’t do was health care but I really didn’t want to do healthcare. Based on what I had heard, health care was sort of the prestige organizing, and generally, again, it was local white organizers. They considered it professional organizing. [...] Only selected people were put in this team, so they were kind of elitist.

Within the organizing role, tasks that staff deemed essential in affecting ‘wins’ in the campaign through direct mobilization were accorded priority, time, and effort:

To me, I can say do I spend a lot of time and energy getting people to attend meetings versus attend rallies, where’s my emphasis going to be? I do, I mean, we do mailings here to get people to come out to the meetings, but the important thing is we need people to come out to go attack this building owner that just cut us.

Managerial roles, which necessitated investing more time in supervising staff and less time dealing directly with members, were eschewed by Movement Builders. They advanced their careers by accepting larger roles within organizing or servicing instead of moving up in the organization. Hence, they were likely to exhibit horizontal rather than vertical patterns of career progression (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977).

Bob’s career exemplifies a typical pattern of mobility for Movement Builders. He was recruited into the union in the late 1990s out of a prestigious university on the West Coast. He described his first campaign in the union, which resulted in janitors in a Midwest city obtaining employer-based health insurance for the first time, as life-changing. He worked on several other campaigns in the region to organize janitorial

workers and went on to become the Director of Organizing for a Midwest local. Others in the union recognized Bob and those like him as having resolved to “bury their bones” in organizing. Often, they expressed an intense affective attachment to improving the livelihood of low-wage workers where no other types of work were seen to provide the same subjective rewards. As Bob expressed it:

I have to say that the more I worked around the JfJ the more I wanted to work on the JfJ and that’s really not the same as saying that I want to work on external organizing. It’s just that I wanted to work with that program.

Those that exclusively focused on building the movement had few complaints or concerns about the union’s strategy and reported extremely high satisfaction with their jobs:

I think this is the job for me; I never want to leave. This job kicks my ass every day, I learn something new I push myself and grow and learn. The industry changes so quickly that you can’t stay still.

Institution Builders

For a second group of staff, it was important that organizing campaigns resulted in a community that workers could thrive in, where members came together socially as well as in solidarity for the next fight and where they developed into the next generation of union leaders. This group of staff, which I labeled Institution Builders, strived to build a union that could be a vehicle for such a workers’ community. Institution Builders embraced the diversity of roles in the union, and did not confine themselves to roles directly related to mobilization. Hence, an implication of this personal project was role integration, the analytical opposition of role separation. Whereas Movement Builders were disinterested in union administration,

staff employing an integrative approach saw management roles as necessary for protecting idealism. Where managing the union came into conflict with serving union members or growing the movement, these staff tried to resolve the conflict in the best interest of those involved but were mindful of preserving the union as an institution.

Those who adopted the institution building project typically came to recognize its value through personal and professional learning experiences. For example, Nadia came to realize the downsides of constant organizing while she was assigned as an organizer in the Washington DC JfJ campaign, one of the fiercest battlegrounds in the campaign's history. Crews of organizers swept through the city in wave after wave of the campaign, and she came to believe in the need for a stable organization: "The national staff were always in and out. But once the workers became members, it became more difficult since they wanted to be part of the local [union]." She took a leadership position in the fledgling local union that emerged from the campaign and garnered respect as an institution builder. Around this time, she married a fellow activist in the union and started a family, which restricted the couple's mobility. In recognition of her expertise in union management, she was promoted to incrementally higher positions in the union's East Coast operations.

In contrast to Movement Builders who eschewed the union bureaucracy, Institution Builders recognized potential advantages (as well as weaknesses) of the central union bureaucracy. The general sentiment was expressed by one local union administrator, who justified tolerating bureaucracy and hierarchy for the power that an efficient organization bestowed:

[...] the reality is that it also helps us organize faster, win more and win better rates and benefits for our members. We have trade-offs. For one, we're a bureaucracy so when you want to get something done out of [recently merged

local] it's very difficult, it's plodding, it's like moving a giant ship, a cruise liner or whatever. It takes a long time to move that sucker. But once you move it then it goes; it's like a tank - just plow the water and it's very powerful.

Institution Builders were in the front lines of the many tensions within the union—they were often thrust into problem solving and conflict resolution in the absence of well-developed organizational scripts for dealing with conflictual situations. These staff recognized the limits of an organizational culture focused on growth and often took it upon themselves to deal with conflict through negotiation and pacification. They showed empathy and understanding towards members who expressed grievances around lacking voice in a union that appeared to place external organizing over members' needs for service. Institution Builders instinctively understood the threats to organizational sustainability that a strategy predominantly based on recruitment can pose (McAlevey, 2016):

It's a constant tension because there is no other source of money for organizing than the members [membership fees]. But members want service, it's inescapable. But at the same time there is an ethos and culture in the union that the union is all about improving the lives of members. Underlying this culture is an assumption that members don't care about the process by which that happens. But in [this city], it turns out that that doesn't always hold true.

Institution Builders were often forced to improvise in order to reconcile competing goals—for example, one director, initially deployed to northern California to manage an organizing campaign, instead found she needed to deal with members threatening to secede from the SEIU. Staff adopting the institution building project often had to redesign their roles so that they acted as a buffer between the union's aspirations and the reality faced by frontline staff. A regional director explained how,

when tasked with implementing SEIU's strategic vision in her region, she instinctively turned to capacity building among staff: "When I started it was supposed to be a high-level job moving the recommendations of the [Organizing] Institute by interfacing with department heads. But it's evolved so that I've worked much more closely with field staff." She feared that if she did not, staff would not survive the change: "Personally I see my role as helping them survive in the labor movement." Institution Builders understood that the union's goals around diversity would be difficult to meet if staff didn't work to make it a reality. As one staff put it, "the union is a predominantly White male organization". She therefore sought to promote women and minorities to positions of power in the union.

The institution building project called for difficult decisions that required balancing principles of union democracy with the union's central agenda. An example of such situations was local branch elections where union members ran against candidates favored by the central SEIU office. The SEIU aggressively campaigned against what it characterized as dissident member groups, inviting criticism that the union did not respect internal democracy. Institution Builders defended union actions based on their knowledge of the situation.

It wasn't a case of the big bad union squashing workers' democratic movement. Journalists who say that are writing out of their politics. They don't know that the opposition group was only supported by a minority [of union members].

Throughout the union's reform years in the 1990s, Institution Builders were at the forefront of dismantling the power base of existing leaders accused of nepotistic and fraudulent practices. Often, they personally assumed leadership positions in these locals after the existing leadership was deposed. Their moral commitment to the low-

wage workers movement sometimes elicited contempt towards local union administrations that engaged in ‘sweetheart’ negotiations with employers:

All in the eighties [a Midwest local union] started unraveling and no one wanted to draw a line in the sand and they just started letting the contracts go and didn’t enforce anything. I went up there, I’m not claiming that I discovered it, but I’m the one who started yelling at it, and raising the issue that it went f___ing part time.

Although Institution Builders believed in using institutional power responsibly, in practice their decision and actions could justify a range of outcomes as these staff tended to accommodate rather than criticize bureaucratic interventions.

Social Activists

As mentioned previously, the JfJ attracted a disproportionate number of staff from outside the labor movement, including those with backgrounds in community activism, electoral politics, or the immigrant rights movement. These staff, whom I labeled Social Activists, typically harbored a broader perspective towards the JfJ and the labor movement, seeing them as vehicles for not only workers’ empowerment but also for changing societal power structures and for changes in policy and regulation. They regarded their stay in SEIU as a sojourn and placed effectuating social change well above serving organizations.

Similar to Movement Builders, Social Activists were uninterested in upward mobility within the SEIU. However, while Movement Builders showed a high level of commitment towards the SEIU, Social Activists were not a priori convinced that the SEIU was uniquely effective and never quite assimilated into the strong culture of the SEIU. Social Activists cross-fertilized union practices with knowledge and experience

from other fields and organizations. As indicated by the statement “I could see myself working here for a while” in the quote below, Activists typically saw their stay in one organization as temporary, bracketed by the skills and insight it allowed them to gain and the impact they were able to have:

Before I started working with labor directly I had a lot of experience with labor through coalition and alliance work so I already had a sense of the terminology, how processes work and all of that. [...] For me, I’m just a bit different cuz I’m involved in more than the janitors campaign and I can see this spiralling into so many things, not just the end of this campaign which hopefully will be over in the next couple of months. *I could see myself working here for a while.* (emphasis added)

Social Activists saw themselves as ‘bridge builders’ among organizations and fields. These staff built their expertise around a relevant field, such as community activism, politics, and trade unionism. Temporary sojourns in each organization then were spent acquiring portable skills that could be applied to other jobs in the chosen field. As one Social Activist stated:

I think that people who get the opportunity to move between those different worlds [labor and electoral politics] are really bridge builders. Additionally, I think you can contribute a lot to whatever place you’re in when you’ve had the experience in those other spheres of social economic justice work and so that’s what I’ve been wanting to do.

Switches and Exits

Although the personal projects described above were relatively stable in predicting role selection and associated behaviors, some staff had changed projects

during their stay at the SEIU and others had left the organization. Changing projects was associated with life cycle and career considerations, as well as realization of the negative effects of constant mobilizing, such as burnout and staff turnover. I identified eight instances of ‘switches’ in personal projects. All instances pertained to those who had previously adopted a Movement Builder project changing to that of Institution Builder, suggesting that Social Activism as a personal project embodied a distinctive category.

The movement building project—which focused on front line mobilizing roles in the union—proved hard to sustain for many people. Organizers in particular tended to throw themselves into their roles sacrificing sleep, personal life, and health, which is consistent with predictions of personal sacrifice in workers following a calling (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Organizing required moving from one campaign location to another in highly uncertain and stressful circumstances, often resulting in burnout (Erem, 2001; Rooks, 2004; Bunnage, 2014). Burned out Movement Builders usually left the union to re-chart their career. As one switcher pointed out, “Organizers are very young for the most part and it’s just that not many people can make a career out of it.”

While Movement Builders usually complied with normative pressures to sacrifice personal lives for the movement, costs to family and dependents were cited as reasons for reconsidering their choices. Wary of constant relocation to the next “frontier” of the movement, staff with family-based constraints, such as parents who wanted stability for growing children, sought out “desk” jobs. Furthermore, as in Nadia’s case, staff who started out as organizers in a particular location became invested in building the local SEIU branch and sometimes transitioned to managerial positions in the branch. For these staff, the reasons for changing their personal project

were associated with wanting to institutionalize the movement after having built power through growth.

Personal projects interacted with organizational practice in consequential ways, explaining why and how some staff opted to stay with the SEIU while some decided to leave. As previously discussed, the SEIU's strategies for rapid expansion and its preference for centralized command over standardized operations generated tensions with union members who desired better representation as well as with some members of staff (Voss & Sherman, 2000: 340; Yu, 2008). I identified three areas of union practice where conflicting goals came head-to-head, highlighting the need to reconcile the ideals of inclusiveness with building power across geographic markets. The first of these concerned inter-organizational collaboration. Especially for Social Activists, the union's instrumental treatment of smaller organizations in the movement was seen as problematic. Centralization of organizational structures also challenged staff who believed in grassroots union democracy. To complement 'strategic organizing', which the union defined as rapid industry-wide mobilization in markets selected for mobilization potential, the union proposed merging smaller local unions into "mega" locals that could wield greater power in negotiations with employers (SEIU Organizing Department collection, 1986 - 1992). Staff who prioritized workers' participation in union democracy as much as their economic empowerment viewed these moves as diminishing worker voice in a union increasingly led by outside professionals (McAlevey, 2016; Erem, 2001). Lastly, organizing practices provided another point of tension. The need to rapidly expand the movement begot standardized processes driven by how-to manuals developed by researchers at the national union that left little room for engaging local workers and

their communities, and sometimes even local staff. Some staff protested that “heart” and “passion” were no longer part of the way the SEIU operated:

You can take the campaign plan and try to implement it, but without genuine interest of the community or people who believe in it and who believe it’ll make a difference in the community, without the heart and the passion, then there’s a big missing component of it.

While Movement Builders avoided becoming engaged in union administration and Institution Builders developed their own ways of dealing with members’ discontent as previously outlined, Social Activists considered prioritizing growth and economic gains over representation of union members as a violation of expectation (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). These staff were also critical of values, meanings, and symbols promoted by the union, including campaign imagery: “One of the things that to me was sort of interesting was the image of the JfJ [Justice for Janitors]. I think it’s a very patronizing image of who immigrants, and Latinos and low-income workers are.” Eight staff—all of whom held the social activism project—had left the union by the time they were interviewed for this research or soon thereafter.

DISCUSSION

This article has examined how union staff come to harbor different personal projects for social change and how these projects interact with organizational practice in unions. It has found that personal projects vary in terms of the way that staff construct role boundaries in their jobs to invest more in certain roles than others which also affected their investment in skills development. These strategies have theoretical implications for understanding the nexus between staff careers and

organizational outcomes in unions in particular and in ‘social movement organizations’ (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) more generally. Results also have practical implications for how unions can motivate and retain progressive staff and how they might deal with multiple and competing goals.

As seen in this study, ‘core identities’ (Hall, 1986) influence the types of personal projects that staff brought into unions and shape one’s outlook on the labor movement. I showed how senses of injustice formed early in life inspired movement building projects, and epiphanies about the need to build community motivated institution building projects, while one’s background in non-labor social movements explained broader social activism projects. Importantly, and reflecting the background of many of the staff in my sample (see Table 1), cutting across these different types of personal projects was the unequivocal imprint of the immigrant experience that increasingly shapes second generation immigrants’ motivations for dedicating themselves to campaigns such as the JfJ (Piore, 1979).

Not only do staff strategies have career implications for the individual, they matter for skills development and knowledge transfers within and across organizations as well as for union capacities to deal with competing goals (Hyman, 1979; Milkman, 2006). Given Movement Builders’ exclusive focus on roles that have immediate relevance to personal projects, those following this strategy are likely to invest in organization-specific skills. Hence, the movement building project lends itself to knowledge accumulation over time in a focused area of expertise in one organization. On the other hand, the institution building project lends itself to skills in conflict resolution and reconciling organizational goals with social causes. Like tempered radicals, whom Meyerson and Scully (1995) described as employees who sought to introduce opportunities for enacting social justice in their workplace, these

employees seek to integrate ideological progressivism with economic rationality. Institutional Builders thus transfer knowledge within the organizational hierarchy, promoting understanding across levels. Lastly, Social Activists are likely to value learning that can be applied across multiple organizations in service of social change; therefore, as seen here, Social Activists are likely to invest in developing general and portable skills in lieu of organization-specific skills. Those workers who exit the organization due to ideological conflict may broker and disseminate knowledge and practices across a variety of organizations, thereby contributing to field-level innovation (Hargadon & Sutton, 1997). These individuals may function as ‘gurus’, translating protocols and practices across different domains and legitimating them (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2001: 938).

The skill that these staff bring to the union and their dedication to fostering diversity in the union suggests that the ability to recruit and retain staff with personal projects is a key to inclusive unionism. By virtue of having recruited these staff into the union, the SEIU has gone farther than most unions in adopting inclusiveness. However, current findings also suggest further steps that could be taken towards deepening inclusiveness and dealing with ongoing challenges to it. Below I discuss implications of the current study for union strategies to enhance inclusiveness (Nishii, 2013; Boehm et al., 2013), focusing on two aspects: fostering learning from diversity and integrating personal projects into union practice.

Given the diversity in backgrounds and values as well as skills represented across the three types of personal projects studied here, inclusive unions may face a challenge in ensuring that diversity leads to enhanced mutual learning rather than increased conflict (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Nishii, 2013). One implication rising from the current findings is that learning may be induced in unions not only when personal

projects are matched to appropriate union roles, but also when persons holding diverse personal projects work together in an environment supportive of diversity. Thus, one can expect synergies in bringing together the perspective and skills of a person experienced in building the union movement with those of an Institution Builder who would build a community out of the movement and those of a Social Activist who would connect the union campaign with other social movements and communities. Findings suggest that bringing together and fostering learning among individuals following different personal projects may help unions to reconcile the competing goals of organizing versus representation and idealism versus economic rationality (Hyman, 1979; Milkman, 2006) and thereby increase the chances for union revitalization (Bunnage, 2014). As commentators have pointed out, traditional face-to-face organizing is becoming increasingly unrealistic in today's era of fragmented workplaces and part-time jobs (Ferguson, 2008; Yeselson, 2017), whereas petition-based movements such as the recent campaign to achieve a \$15 minimum wage are equally limited in achieving worker empowerment (Rolf, 2016). Pluralistic unionism, such as the model that the SEIU aspires to, represents a realistic medium.

The SEIU, and other unions, could do more to integrate personal projects into union practice. Findings suggest that even in an innovative union such as the SEIU (Piore, 1994), staff struggle with a high workload as well as the emotional strains of constant organizing (Rooks, 2004; Erem, 2001; Bunnage, 2014). Moreover, relatively few opportunities exist for development and training that would help staff resolve conflict arising from reconciling different goals in the union. This confirms that the “sink or swim approach” that Eaton (1995) found in unions two decades ago still applies to some roles in the union. The tensions that staff were managing on a daily basis, with little guidance or recognition, originated from the relatively top-down and

centralized approaches that the SEIU has been criticized for (Moody, 2007; Early, 2009: 229-230; Clawson, 2003). Instead of understanding and addressing the concerns of Social Activists who left the union, it was more common to see them referred to as ‘deserters’. Explicitly articulating the work needed to balance growth with internal democracy and empowering the staff doing that work with resources and processes may be steps that unions can take towards inclusiveness.

Although scholarly commentaries referred to the important role played by union staff in the resurgence of ‘social movement unionism’ in the US (e.g. Fantasia & Voss, 2004), we lacked a detailed analysis of the motivations and actions of union staff in reformed unions. This study has argued that staff and their commitment to social change are crucial to building inclusive unionism. Supporting staff in their personal projects would include designing organizational practices and cultures to embrace and allow for core identities of staff from diverse backgrounds to be integrated into union practices. It would also entail promoting an understanding of different staff motivations for skills development in the union as discussed above and facilitating knowledge transfers within the union and with other organizations.

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Table 1 Interviewee characteristics

Gender			Education			Race			Ever a member?			Immigrant family?		
M	45	58%	Graduate degree	15	19%	White	32	42%	No	64	87%	No	41	53%
F	32	42%	College	42	55%	Latino	34	44%	Yes	13	13%	1 st Gen.	19	25%
			Some College	1	1%	Black	10	13%				2 nd Gen.	17	22%
			High school	14	18%	Asian	1	1%						
			N/A	5	6%									

Total number of staff in sample: 77