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“Poverty Wages are not Fresh, Local, or Sustainable”:
Building Worker Power by Organizing Around (Re)production in Portland’s “Sustainable” Food
Industry

by
Amy Katherine Rose Coplen

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Urban Studies

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Portland State University
2019

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Abstract

Although conscious consumers flock to sustainability-branded restaurants and grocery stores to “vote with their forks” for environmental sustainability and vibrant local economies, workers in these industries face the same poverty wages, discrimination, and exploitative labor practices that plague the foodservice and retail industries at large. Despite rapid growth and labor degradation, low-wage workers in these industries have largely been left behind by the mainstream labor movement and the alternative food movement. Whereas in the past, progressive social movements worked to alter power relations between labor and capital through collective action, today’s mainstream labor movement focuses on servicing its dwindling membership and winning minimum wage increases through local ballot box measures and legislation. For its part, the alternative food movement focuses narrowly on achieving environmental sustainability through market-based mechanisms and consumption politics that do not adequately attend to the struggles of food chain workers. Through research conducted in partnership with the Burgerville Workers Union (BVWU) and the Industrial Workers of the World, I investigate three empirical research questions: 1) How do sustainability-branded institutions deploy values-based discourse and how does this relate to labor practices?, 2) How do worker-organizers understand and expose the contradictions of sustainability branding?, and 3) How do worker-organizers engage with social reproduction as a terrain of political struggle, and to what ends? I attend to these questions through activist scholarship aimed at informing my broad theoretical question: *How might social reproduction—as discourse and practice—be marshaled to generate more inclusive organizing strategies, forge more just conceptions of sustainability, and build worker power?* Drawing on over two years of

ethnographic research, content analysis, and interviews with 48 worker-organizers involved in four labor organizing campaigns, I examine their efforts to build worker power through mutual aid programs, political education, and coalition politics. My analysis reveals that these strategies embody an inclusionary intersectional politics that prioritizes the needs of women, parents, and people of color, but that worker-organizers also face significant challenges. I demonstrate that organizing against neoliberal policies and practices requires moving beyond consumption politics and single-issue campaigns and deploying what I term *(re)production politics*—which are fundamentally about how work is organized and how we care for society and the planet. Politicizing the labor, locations, and practices of social reproduction as landscapes of struggle, I conclude, offers an opportunity to build a broad class consciousness across interconnected issues and envision more liberatory ways of organizing social reproduction based on solidarity, mutuality, and interdependence.

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Introduction

On April 23, 2018, workers at a popular burger chain based in the Pacific Northwest made history by voting overwhelmingly to authorize the first federally recognized fast-food workers' union in the United States in nearly forty years.¹ The Burgerville Workers Union (BVWU) is organizing in a growing and fragmented industry that has long been considered “unorganizable” by the mainstream labor movement (Milkman, 2010). The BVWU's fight is also being waged against an employer hailed as a paragon of sustainable business practices. Burgerville—an iconic chain of 42 restaurants based in Oregon and Washington that was founded in 1961—has cultivated a reputation as an “eco-conscious” and socially responsible company that is deeply embedded in the local community. Burgerville's branding centers on sourcing seasonal ingredients from local producers, purchasing renewable energy credits, and fundraising for local community groups. The company's sustainability ethos is what sets it apart from its industrial fast-food counterparts, like McDonald's and Burger King, and customers are willing to pay the premium. When diners spend their money at Burgerville, they believe that they are “voting with their forks” for a vibrant local economy and a sustainable food system. Yet, Burgerville workers face the same poverty wages, discrimination, and exploitative labor practices that plague the foodservice industry at large. This phenomenon is not unique to Burgerville or to the city of Portland, Oregon, where the BVWU's story begins. Many of

¹ While media coverage proclaims that the BVWU is the first federally recognized fast-food workers' union in the U.S., this title in fact goes to Burger King workers in a Greyhound terminal in downtown Detroit who won their National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election on February 22, 1980 (Tait, 2016). See Chapter 1 for more details.

those who work in the “sustainable” food economy are struggling to sustain themselves and their families.

The foodservice industry alone employs 11 million people, is the fastest growing sector of the U.S. economy, and is a microcosm of structural inequality in the workplace (Food Chain Workers Alliance and Solidarity Research Cooperative, 2016). Women, Latinx, and non-citizen workers are overrepresented in Portland’s growing foodservice and retail sectors, which constitute nearly 69,000 jobs and 77% of employment in the city’s food economy (Green, Schrock, & Liu, 2015). In 2012, most of Portland’s foodservice and retail workers earned between \$9 and \$11 per hour and, compared to the overall workforce, were nearly twice as likely to live at or near the poverty level (ibid). Although the state of Oregon passed legislation that increased Portland’s minimum wage to \$9.75 in July 2016, with stepped increases to \$14.75 scheduled for 2022, this is not enough to bring workers out of poverty, especially in a city facing a housing crisis and a skyrocketing cost of living.

Despite rapid growth in foodservice and retail, workers in these industries have been largely left behind by mainstream progressive movements, including the labor movement and the alternative food movement. While the Service Employees International Union’s (SEIU) Fight for \$15 program—for which fast-food workers served as the symbolic face—helped achieve minimum wage increases for workers in cities across the country, SEIU did not follow through on its promise to fight for “\$15 *and a union*” for fast-food workers. For its part, the alternative food movement has prioritized strategies aimed at increasing the production and consumption of local, organic, and sustainable food rather than supporting food system workers’ struggles (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Allen, FitzSimmons, Goodman, & Warner, 2003). While alternative food activists have begun to

turn their attention to the plight of farmworkers (see, for example, Field & Bell, 2013), they have largely ignored the foodservice and retail workers with whom they come into contact on a daily basis (Coplen, 2018; K. P. Hunt, 2016). Whereas in the past, progressive social movements worked to alter power relations between labor and capital through collective action, today's mainstream labor movement primarily focuses on servicing its dwindling membership and winning minimum wage increases through local ballot box measures and legislation (McAlevey, 2016; Tilly & Tilly, 1998), and the alternative food movement aims to achieve environmental sustainability through market-based mechanisms (S. Brown & Getz, 2008; Jaffee, 2007, 2012; Jaffee & Howard, 2009).

The absence of foodservice and retail workers from these progressive movements is mirrored in the academic literature. Critical food studies has examined how exploitation exists even within alternative agricultural production (Alkon, 2012; Galt, 2013; Gray, 2014; Guthman, 2014; Shreck, Getz, & Feenstra, 2006), but there is very little work on the social relations of foodservice and retail. While the field of labor studies has detailed the organizing strategies of large business unions, and offers some emerging work on the Fight for \$15 and “Alt-labor” or “New Labor” organizing (Milkman & Ott, 2014; Rosenblum, 2017a), my review of this literature reveals that there is limited research on independent worker organizations like the BVWU, who are organizing in the foodservice industry.

My research attempts to fill these gaps by investigating the BVWU's efforts to organize in a growing industry that has been left behind by mainstream progressive movements. A project of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)—a radical all-volunteer organization without the resources of large business unions—the BVWU is engaging in creative organizing strategies aimed at prioritizing the needs of women,

parents, and people of color. In the years leading up to their historic 2018 National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election for labor union representation, the BVWU launched a boycott and engaged in other militant direct action, including frequent pickets, a three-day strike, and numerous marches on the boss.² They also deployed a strategy that is unique in the context of modern labor organizing drives: mutual aid programs. The BVWU designed these programs—including subsidized childcare, bus passes, and food boxes—to build power in a large and growing industry where many workers are unable to meet their basic needs.

As both the state and the employer withdraw responsibility from ensuring that society's basic needs are met (Katz, 2001; Luxton & Bezanson, 2006; Peck & Tickell, 2002), the BVWU's mutual aid programs offer an alternative way of organizing *social reproduction*—"the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis, and intergenerationally" (Laslett & Brenner, 1989, p. 382). In this dissertation, I use social reproduction as an analytical tool to explain what progressive movements are up against and how to begin envisioning and building alternative ways of caring for society. I posit social reproduction as a necessary terrain of political struggle for low-wage workers. Through empirical research, I demonstrate how workers are organizing around social reproduction and across intersecting issues in order to build their own power. I also investigate the significant barriers they face to building an inclusive and intersectional

² The NLRB is a federal agency responsible for enforcing U.S. labor law, including supervising elections in which employees vote on whether or not they want to be represented by a particular labor union.

movement, thereby generating a nuanced story of struggle that offers lessons for scholars, activists, and organizers.

The overarching theoretical question guiding my research is: *How might social reproduction—as discourse and practice—be marshaled to generate more inclusive organizing strategies, forge more just conceptions of sustainability, and build worker power?* I address this broad theoretical concern by investigating three empirical research questions:

- How do sustainability-branded institutions deploy values-based discourse and how does this relate to labor practices?
- How do worker-organizers understand and expose the contradictions of sustainability branding?
- How do worker-organizers engage with social reproduction as a terrain of political struggle, and to what ends?

I use the term “build power”—rather than “increase power” or “obtain power”—to discursively signal the agency and solidarity workers must cultivate in order to push back against employers, who benefit from unfair economic, political, legal, and ideological advantages in the workplace. In the following section, I draw on feminist political economy to uncover these power imbalances. I demonstrate how understanding the extent of capitalist exploitation beyond wage labor can help unite a broadly conceived working class—including not just traditional waged workers, but unpaid domestic workers, social welfare recipients, and workers in the “gig” and other informal economies. I argue that articulating this broad class consciousness is a first step towards building solidarity across seemingly disparate issues, pushing back against capitalist exploitation in its myriad forms, and envisioning alternative ways of caring for society. I further argue that this will require moving beyond consumption politics—which reinforce peoples’ identity as individual

consumers using their perceived purchasing power to affect change—and engaging what I term *(re)production politics*—which are fundamentally about how work is organized and how people care for one another and the planet. My term *(re)production politics* is different from the term “reproductive politics,” which emerged in the 1970s to conceptualize struggles over (predominantly white) women’s right to contraception and abortion. Recent scholarship, including that by Laura Briggs (2017), deploys a more expansive definition of “reproductive politics” that encompasses nonbiological public policy and accounts for reproductive labor and racial disparities. My concept of *(re)production politics* is distinct, however, because it signals a critique of consumption politics and an engagement with feminist political economy framings of production and social reproduction. Politicizing the labor, locations, and practices of social reproduction as landscapes of struggle, I argue, enables the working class to understand what it is up against and how to create more liberatory practices of care based on solidarity, mutuality, and interdependence.

I. Exploitation, (Re)production, and Resistance Under Neoliberal Capitalism

Mainstream labor unions and orthodox Marxists alike are guilty of treating waged labor as the only source of exploitation under capitalism. This productivist approach narrowly confines the extraction of value to the only formal economic relationship of labor for which there is a quantitative measure: the wage. However, capitalists have always extracted value in other ways and in other spheres that are deemed “non-economic” (Swidler, 2018b). Marx himself identified primitive accumulation and the reproduction of labor power as important sources of capitalist exploitation, and feminist Marxists have advanced critical theories that offer a more complete understanding of the myriad ways in

which value is extracted and of the corresponding uneven effects across race, ethnicity, gender, and citizenship status.

For Marx, primitive accumulation was the starting point of capitalist accumulation. It was the process by which peasants were forcibly removed from the land and proletarianized, becoming “free” in the double sense: free from the means of production and free to sell their labor power to the capitalist (Marx, 1992, p. 169). This “freeing up” of “productive” labor power required the separation of processes of production from reproduction, or the emergence of a “spatially distinct ensemble of social activities” required to restore and reproduce alienated laborers (Winders & Smith, 2018, p. 2). Through “social enclosure,” reproduction was desocialized and decollectivized; reproductive activities that were once performed communally in the public sphere became the responsibility of the family to secure in the home, or private sphere (Bakker, 2007; Federici, 2004). As “productive labor” was relocated outside of the household, the home became the private domain of “non-economic” activities. The colloquial distinction between “work” and “home” today, note Winders & Smith, “represents a sedimented outcome of these processes, reifying production and social reproduction as distinct spaces of daily life and normalizing the idea of separate gendered spheres (‘public’ and ‘private’)” (2018, p. 2).

While Marx theorized the reproduction of labor power, social reproduction is about much more; it encompasses “the intersecting complex of political-economic, socio-cultural, and material-environmental processes required to maintain everyday life and to sustain human cultures and communities on a daily basis and intergenerationally” (Di Chiro, 2008, p. 281). Feminist geographer Cindi Katz notes that “social reproduction is

secured through a shifting constellation of sources,” including the household, the state, capital, and civil society (2001, p. 711). This constellation varies across time and space, and struggles between these spheres shift responsibility for the provisioning of social reproduction among different actors. The state regulates social reproduction through both repressive control and through protective social welfare provisioning, which allows employers to externalize the costs of reproducing their workforce (Federici, 2004, 2012; Fortunati, 1995; Katz, 2001; Picchio, 1992).

In the early 20th century, Progressive Era reform in the U.S. shifted responsibility for social reproduction onto the state through public housing, health services, education, and social welfare programs. In the mid-20th century, organized labor forced some of the burden of social reproduction onto firms through wage increases and social benefits packages. However, the deregulation of capital, the decline of organized labor, and the retreat of the welfare state over the past 40 years reversed many of these shifts (Katz, 2001; Peck, 1996).

During the 1980s, social policy served to (re)criminalize poverty and normalize precarious work by “rolling back” the Keynesian welfare state and “rolling out” privatized and marketized forms of social provisioning, free market (re)regulation, and discourses emphasizing self-sufficiency and personal responsibility (Castree, 2010; McClintock, 2014; Peck & Tickell, 2002). As the state withdraws social protections, it externalizes the costs of social reproduction to individuals through labor market deregulation (Federici, 2004, 2012; Fortunati, 1995; Harvey, 1982; Katz, 2001; Picchio, 1992). The privatization of public services disproportionately affects poor households, who struggle to pay for the costs of social reproduction that were previously secured through the state or the employer

(Katz, 2001). Women and people of color are more likely to have to juggle multiple part-time jobs with irregular work schedules while still managing to arrange childcare and reproduce themselves and their families on poverty wages and dwindling social supports (Peck, 1996; Vosko, 2000).

In addition to these ongoing processes of primitive accumulation and attacks on social reproduction by the state and capital, the working class is facing new (and old) forms of exploitation. Indeed, this century is distinguished by a growing reliance on alternative methods of extracting surplus (Swidler, 2018b). Enclosures continue in a variety of forms and remain fundamental to the destruction of communal relations and the expansion of capitalism. Neoliberal ideology, discourse, and policies of privatization and market liberalization are mechanisms for opening up new venues for investment and opportunities for colonization. New forms of primitive accumulation, or accumulation by dispossession, have surfaced alongside the emergence of neoliberalism, including the creation and enforcement of intellectual property rights, the licensing of genetic material, the commodification of nature, cultural forms, and histories, and the privatization of public assets (De Angelis, 2004; Harvey, 2003). Beyond primitive accumulation, the capitalist class deploys multiple ways of extracting money from the working class: civil asset forfeiture, international debt, personal debt in its many forms (credit cards, student loans, interest, mortgages), and corporate subsidies and bailouts (Swidler, 2018a).

Even waged work—which orthodox Marxists have privileged as the sole form of exploitation under capitalism—deserves a closer examination under neoliberal capitalism. Uneven access to the wage has always been used to divide the working class, obscuring the non-waged laboring reality of others and pitting workers against one another (Federici,

2012). We see this in the labor movement, which has prioritized the formal workplace as the primary space of political struggle, the wage as the issue to be negotiated, and the waged worker as the (primarily symbolic) political subject. However, employers are reorganizing traditional wage work to squeeze labor in new ways, classifying more of the time they demand as “non-work” to justify not paying workers for it. Whereas workers were previously paid to be ready to spring into action, they are now increasingly forced to spend unpaid time “on-call” and must be constantly available for “just-in-time” scheduling and shifts that appear or disappear daily (Peck, 1996). Many workers are paid during busy weeks, but left without paid shifts during slow times and are required to do prep and clean-up work before clocking in and after clocking out. Home healthcare workers must fill out paperwork at home after their shifts, and white-collar workers are increasingly expected to respond to email outside of regular work hours. The time workers once spent pacing themselves and building community with their coworkers to ensure the workplace ran smoothly now must happen after hours, if at all. Consequently, workers are paid for less and less of their time, but their overall workload remains the same (Swidler, 2018b).

While new, flexible labor practices are degrading waged labor, seemingly archaic forms of labor exploitation are seeing a resurgence. Piecework and contract work—while always a staple in the global South—is making a comeback in the global North (Peck, 1996). As firms strive to make the production process ever more flexible, they outsource and subcontract to avoid paying workers for training, sick time, health insurance and other benefits (Miller & Bernstein, 2017). Independent contract work, freelance, consulting, self-employment, fixed-term adjunct teaching, Uber and Lyft driving, task piecework, day labor, casual work, and gig work are all stand-ins for “flexible” labor arrangements that

enable capitalists to avoid paying the full cost of reproducing their labor force (Martin, 2000; Milkman, 2014; Peck, 1996). Some work has been deemed unworthy of pay altogether—unpaid internships, prison labor, and workfare arrangements (Swidler, 2018b).³

Meanwhile, time spent paying bills, making phone calls, checking bank accounts—the “shadow work” (Illich, 1981) for which we do not get paid but upon which capitalism depends—is increasing as well. We now spend countless hours learning new technologies, installing software updates, researching and enrolling in health insurance, fighting fees and denied insurance claims, and the list goes on. Indeed, capitalism breeds an endless amount of shadow work and a host of accompanying apps and other technologies to supposedly cut down on the amount of labor we expend, which oftentimes has the opposite effect of further adding to our shadow burden.

Precarity and flexibilization are eroding and replacing conventional wage labor. By narrowly focusing on the wage relation in its conventional sense, scholars and organized labor leaders alike miss the full extent of capitalist exploitation and reproduce artificial divisions—between economics and politics, production and reproduction, public and private, formal and informal, and paid and unpaid work. These realms of exploitation are intimately intertwined—most people experience multiple forms of exploitation in their lifetimes, many in a given day. The ideological and cultural mechanisms through which

³ Workfare is marked by two key features: 1) a shift away from secure basic income based on needs toward provisioning conditional on participation in state-subsidized work and training programs and 2) the decentralization and devolution of regulation and institutional capacity to local governments and private sector organizations (Martin, 2000, p. 469). Workfare embodies the neoliberal logic of free market principles, including economic rationalism, competition, individual responsibility, entrepreneurialism, and independence, and a move away from state responsibility for social provisioning (McDowell, 2004).

various types of reproductive, subsistence, shadow, and unpaid and underpaid work are positioned as “non-work” obscure the extent of capitalist exploitation and the ways in which production and reproduction blur into a singular space-time of work (Ettlinger, 2007; Meehan & Strauss, 2015; Mitchell, Marston, & Katz, 2004).

These ideological mechanisms go hand in hand with neoliberal policies and practices that individualize responsibility for social reproduction, positioning individuals culturally and materially as neoliberal subjects entirely responsible for their own fate (Meehan & Strauss, 2015; Winders & Smith, 2018). As neoliberal policies are imposed from above, neoliberal social and cultural processes also change the ways people relate to others, to their sense of self, and their communities, eroding previous forms of working-class organization, spaces of resistance, and solidarities (McNally, 2011). Although Swidler (2018b) argues that people don’t see the myriad ways in which capitalism extracts value outside of the wage mechanism, they certainly feel them.

Understanding the extent of capitalist exploitation not only helps the working class see what it is up against, it helps strategize on how to push back. When viewed through a feminist political economy lens, it’s not just waged workers, but also homemakers, subsistence farmers, students, public assistance recipients, and those laboring in informal economies who become political subjects, while their homes, farms, schools, prisons, and all manner of public and private spaces become critical sites of resistance (Caffentzis, 2002; Mitchell et al., 2004). To build an effective movement against widespread and varied forms of exploitation, argues Swidler, the working class—waged and unwaged alike—must unite around the common reality of the extraction of their surplus labor (2018a).

A more comprehensive understanding of labor, exploitation, and value production offers a “theoretical platform for building solidarity among seemingly disparate movements and constituencies” and opens up “different political ways forward, a newly energized anti-capitalist movement” (Swidler, 2018b, pp. 43; 45). But how does the working class break free of the neoliberal subjectivity of competitive individualism that deems them valuable citizens only if they are fully participating in the labor market? How does the working class build what Linda McDowell refers to as “a more socialist ideal of solidarity and mutuality”? (2004, p. 156). McDowell asks, “[W]hat might a system that encouraged mutual support and an ethic of caring for others look like and how might it alter everyday forms of interactions in the different spaces of a modern nation state?” (ibid. pp. 155–156). Similarly, Victoria Lawson asks how an ethic of care can contribute to “new forms of relationships, institutions, and action that enhance mutuality and wellbeing”? (2007, p. 1).

In this dissertation, I take up these questions by using social reproduction as an analytical tool to explain what progressive movements are up against and how they can fight back. Politicizing the labor, locations, and practices of social reproduction as landscapes of struggle, I argue, is a first step toward envisioning and creating more liberatory systems of care based on solidarity, mutuality, and interdependence. Because social reproduction is about how people care for themselves and for one another, it is fundamentally about how humans sustain life on this planet. However, sustainability discourse often neglects to account for the wellbeing of workers and their capacity to sustain themselves and their families. Articulating a more justice-oriented conception of

sustainability that recognizes the welfare of workers requires elucidating the relationship between social reproduction and sustainability.

II. The Nexus between Sustainability and Social Reproduction

Neoliberal policies have not only degraded our jobs and eviscerated our social safety nets, they have also contributed to environmental destruction that threatens our ability to reproduce ourselves on this planet. While a productivist view of labor maintains the false division between production and social reproduction, a Western worldview maintains the separation of humans and nature (Coplen, 2018; N. Smith, 2008; Wachsmuth, 2012). Mainstream progressive social movements reify these dichotomies in their “boundary work” (Gieryn, 1999; Jasanoff, 2005) by drawing lines between “social” issues—jobs, housing, transportation, inequality, discrimination, violence, reproductive freedom—and those that are “environmental”—climate change, pollution, conservation and preservation, overpopulation. The result is weak and siloed progressive movements fighting separate battles, rather than a dynamic and broad-based social movement.

A dialectical conception of social reproduction should account for the relationship not only between production and reproduction, but between humans and nature as well. Giovanna Di Chiro’s articulation of social reproduction—“the intersecting complex of political-economic, socio-cultural, and material-environmental processes required to maintain everyday life and to sustain human cultures and communities on a daily basis and intergenerationally”—achieves this (2008, p. 281). Mobilizing a dialectical conception of social reproduction, argues Di Chiro, enables movements to “jump scales” (N. Smith, 1992) to examine how the capitalist mode of production threatens the “survivability of

individual bodies, particular communities, national cultures, and the earth itself’ (2008, p. 280). Through a dialectical lens, achieving “sustainability” becomes about ensuring the wellbeing of all humans and non-human nature at these interconnected scales.

Mainstream progressive movements have failed to adequately understand the relationship between sustainability and social reproduction (Merchant, 1996; Mies & Shiva, 1993; Silliman & King, 1999). When the concept of “sustainability” became institutionalized in the 1990s, it had the potential to become the environmental movement’s counterpart to “social reproduction.” Instead, governments and international environmental NGOs used it to repress the reproductive rights of women in the global South and fuel further economic development in the global North (Agyeman, Bullard, & Evans, 2003). Efforts to curb “overpopulation” in the global South have included coercive population control mechanisms that endanger women’s health and reinforce anti-immigrant and misogynistic rhetoric, while ignoring the far higher impacts of consumption in wealthy nations (Di Chiro, 2008). Meanwhile, governments and corporations use the discourse of “sustainable development” to reinforce unbounded economic growth rather than challenging it (Campbell, 1996; Gunder, 2006). The environmental movement has leaned into market-based strategies like carbon taxes and credits, which have done little to curb global emissions, and in fact, offer new paths for capital accumulation (Foster, Clark, & York, 2010; Harvey, 2003).

The alternative food movement mirrors the broader sustainability paradigm adopted by the mainstream environmental movement, privileging market-based mechanism for change, while ignoring the underlying structural inequalities that pervade the food system. Beginning in the 1970s, alternative food initiatives shifted away from

labor organizing, which had been a hallmark of food system organizing in the 1960s and 1970s, toward efforts to increase the production and consumption of local, organic, and sustainable food (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Allen et al., 2003). Scholars and food justice activists alike have critiqued these efforts to educate others about “healthy eating” and “good food” and to convince consumers to “pay the full cost” of food (Alkon, 2012; Slocum, 2006). Much of the logic underpinning many alternative food initiatives reduces structural inequality to poor education, enrolling colorblindness, ignoring white privilege, and universalizing white values and consumption practices as normative and superior (Guthman, 2011).

By organizing around consumption politics, alternative food practices might generate “healthy” alternatives for consumers who are willing and able to pay a premium price for local and organic food, but do little to transform inequitable relations of food production and consumption. For its part, the mainstream labor movement is engaged in its own form of consumption politics—focusing narrowly on winning higher wages so that workers can have more purchasing power to buy the things they need to socially reproduce themselves. The main premise of these approaches is that people can shop their way to environmental sustainability and economic security, respectively. Consumption politics, I demonstrate throughout the dissertation, also reinforce people’s identity as individual consumers rather than challenging them to identify collectively as workers.

The fundamental problems of our food system and our economy writ large, I argue, stem not from what people buy, but from how production and reproduction are organized. Addressing this requires a fundamental shift away from consumption politics towards *(re)production politics*, which at their core are about how work—both paid and unpaid—

is organized and consequently, who benefits, who loses, and through what mechanisms. Progressive movements, I conclude, should focus, not narrowly on wages or consumption, but on building the capacity of the working class to determine how production and social reproduction are organized. Building working class power is central to achieving a truly sustainable society, because it is a prerequisite to organizing social reproduction in a way that is sustainable and equitable.

In this dissertation, I argue that building effective and broad-based progressive movements requires addressing economic, social, and environmental issues relationally. Through empirical research, I examine what organizing around social reproduction and across intersecting issues means for the on-the-ground work of a particular small social movement group. In the next section, I explain how I came to this project, discuss how I operationalize social reproduction, and outline my research design and methods.

III. The Study

A. The Politics of Scholar Activism: My Relationship to this Project

This dissertation project was inspired by the Fight for \$15 program that was burgeoning in 2012 and 2013. Much like the Occupy Wall Street movement changed the national discourse around income inequality, Fight for \$15 shifted the public narrative around low-wage work by drawing attention to the poverty, food insecurity, sexual harassment, and overall precarity that fast-food workers face. I was excited that a major labor union was finally dedicating resources to organizing foodservice workers. I tuned in with excitement as the living wage movement spread to cities across the U.S. and news

articles featured fast-food workers on strike in Seattle, San Francisco, and New York. However, when I showed up to a McDonald's restaurant in a Portland suburb on a day of action organized by SEIU in summer 2013, I joined a handful of people holding 8½ x 11-inch signs in support of striking workers, who were not in fact on strike. After a little digging, I learned that the SEIU locals in Portland and Oregon were not dedicating resources to organizing fast-food workers, but were instead continuing long-term organizing projects with janitorial and home healthcare workers.

As Fight for \$15 continued to build momentum elsewhere, spawning local campaigns across the country and winning raises for tens of thousands of workers through local ballot and legislative measures, it became clear that SEIU was abandoning efforts to fulfill the second half of its promise to fight for “\$15 *and a union*.” Fast-food workers, who appeared to be on the front lines of this struggle, in fact served primarily as its symbolic face (Juravich, 2017). It seemed, at least for now, that the labor movement was still not up to the task of organizing unions of fast-food workers.

In February 2015, I was organizing a public event titled “Working for Food Justice: An Afternoon with Local Food Labor Organizers,” which was the culmination of an undergraduate class I was teaching on food systems labor. I mentioned to my students that I was struggling to find local organizers involved in foodservice—a problem that I attributed to the labor movement's conceptions about the “organizability” of the industry. One of my students approached me after class to confide that she had a friend who was indeed organizing in a local fast-food restaurant, and that although the campaign was underground, she could connect me. A few days later I was on the phone with a Wobbly—a member of the IWW—who was organizing in a “sandwich shop” in the Portland

International Airport. While he couldn't share many details, he agreed to speak at my event under a pseudonym.

Three weeks later I attended an "Introduction to the IWW" class in an old house that had been converted to a union hall to learn more about an organization that I thought had been consigned to history (see Chapter 1 for a brief history of the IWW). What I found was a small, but active and scrappy anti-capitalist organization dedicated to equipping workers with tools to organize themselves no matter what industry they work in. During our two-hour class, Wobbly facilitators critiqued other unions for operating like bureaucratic dues-collecting businesses, spending members' money on political lobbying, and paying staff to negotiate contracts and file grievances on behalf of workers. Wobblies portrayed the IWW as an alternative to business unionism as usual, emphasizing that the organization steers clear of electoral politics and instead focuses on direct-action tactics to build worker power. Even more striking, while business trade unions have a deep history of excluding semi- and unskilled workers, women, and workers of color, the facilitators boasted that the IWW has always been open to all workers regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, citizenship status, or occupation. Active IWW branches welcome anyone (except police officers and bosses and managers with the power to hire or fire) who is seeking education and training on how to organize with coworkers or file unfair labor practices against their employer. I also learned that the Portland Branch of the IWW—referred to interchangeably as the "Portland IWW" or the "Branch" in this dissertation—had been actively organizing in restaurants and food retail establishments for decades. I had finally found a union that was not afraid to organize in an industry considered

“unorganizeable” by the mainstream labor movement, in part because many IWW members are foodservice workers themselves.

In April 2015 I “took out a red card,” becoming a dues-paying member of the IWW. I immediately joined the “High \$5” committee, which was originally inspired by the Fight for \$15, and was designed to be a gathering place for low-wage workers to come together and strategize about how to win a \$5 per hour raise and build power in their workplaces. By the time I attended my first meeting, the committee had narrowed its efforts to take on the iconic local favorite Burgerville—a chain hailed by the local business community as a pioneer of local organic sourcing and sustainable business practices. The High \$5 campaign would eventually become the Burgerville Workers Union (BVWU), the main focus of my dissertation research.

While I originally intended to play a peripheral role in the BVWU campaign, I quickly became more integral to the organizing efforts, in large part due to a lack of resources and organizers available to support the campaign, particularly in the early months. My role included building relationships with potential community and labor allies, conducting research on Burgerville, fundraising for a hardship fund for workers, helping plan events and actions, and periodically serving as a facilitator or notetaker for weekly meetings. I also got involved in other Branch projects and programs, including organizing and co-teaching “Intro to the IWW” classes and periodic organizer trainings, serving as a coordinator and volunteer for the Branch’s “Junior Wobblies” child supervision program, and attending countless meetings and social events. Through this experience, I built relationships with both new and longtime members of the Branch.

My deep engagement in the campaign meant that I did not simply observe conversations as they unfolded, but I actively contributed to strategy, planning, and implementation. This “intervention” offered me access to participants’ lives (Burawoy, 2009), but it also meant that I shaped their world and they shaped mine. My positionality as a thirty-something, educated, and politically progressive graduate student helped me earn the initial trust of Wobblies, many of whom eventually became my close friends. When I joined the IWW I had recently become involved in efforts to organize with my fellow graduate teaching and research assistants at Portland State University. Wobblies actively influenced the way I organized in my own workplace, offering formative training and mentorship.

During that time, I was also helping my partner to open his own pizzeria. Even though Scottie was (and is) striving to be a beneficent employer (while also sourcing local, organic, and sustainable ingredients!), my IWW delegate (the person who signed me up as a member) was quick to remind me of my partner’s class interests. While Scottie is now a member of the “petite bourgeoisie” in classical Marxist terms, he also self-exploited to get his business off of the ground.⁴ His commitment to paying workers a living wage meant that he went without one for several months, fueled by a commitment not to reproduce the exploitative labor practices that he had encountered working in Portland’s foodservice industry. I had not previously worked in foodservice myself, but in the first year of the

⁴ Marx used the term “petite bourgeoisie” to denote a class of small-scale capitalists distinct from both the proletariat and the “haute bourgeoisie” capitalist class. Although the petite bourgeoisie can employ others, they often work alongside their employees, unlike the “haute bourgeoisie” (Marx, 1992). Feminist political economists have challenged these classical Marxian terms, often mobilizing social reproduction to offer more nuanced analyses of how people occupy multiple class positions at once. For example, see J.K. Gibson-Graham’s chart on diverse forms of labor and compensation (2006, p. 63).

business I spent countless unpaid hours washing dishes, sweeping, serving, and even delivering pizzas. I also funneled my privilege as the spouse of a petty capitalist—in the form of pizza—to various labor and social justice organizing campaigns (by far my favorite part of the unpaid job).

I was drawn to the BVWU campaign and the organizing work that the Portland IWW is doing because I care about the wellbeing of workers in our food system and am concerned about their (in)ability to thrive. My personal feelings, political leanings, background, and identity all influenced the research questions I asked, how I designed my project, and how I interpreted the data. Over the course of my research, I came to better understand that my identities and experiences as a researcher, organizer, and worker are intimately intertwined. I influenced the BVWU campaign and worker-organizers in complicated ways that required continual reflection and analysis. From day one of my involvement, I was transparent about my interest in using the Branch's organizing work for my dissertation research. I continued to remind organizers of my ongoing project, and we regularly discussed issues related to the dissertation process, including how to maintain the security of an underground campaign and how to engage in research that is simultaneously ethical and critical.

I deploy Burawoy's reflexive approach to research (*ibid.*), and situate my project in the tradition of radical, politically engaged, activist scholarship. Activist scholarship that "is predicated on alignment with a group of people organized in struggle," notes Charles Hale, "and on collaborative relations of knowledge production with members of that group, has the potential to yield privileged insight, analysis, and theoretical innovation that otherwise would be impossible to achieve" (2008, p. 20). Counter to positivist science,

Hale and the contributors to his edited volume demonstrate that activist scholarship has the potential to be *more* objective, by virtue of deploying “situated knowledges” (Haraway, 1988)—or “positioned objectivities” that are more insightful, complete, and accountable, than research that purports to be detached and purely objective (Hale, 2008). Further, Hale argues that by engaging in a deeper and more sustained analysis of sociopolitical conditions framing the research questions and process, activist scholarship offers greater methodological rigor.

Like Sunera Thobani, I reject the “politics of academic elitism which insist that academics should remain above the fray of political activism and use only disembodied, objectified language and a ‘properly’ dispassionate professorial demeanor to establish our intellectual credentials” (2019, p. 290). My identities as an organizer with the IWW and as a scholar are intimately connected and in service to social movement building. These identities collide in both generative and discordant ways. On the one hand, I’ve struggled not to romanticize an anti-capitalist social movement group that is making history. On the other, I’m wary of being overly critical of a scrappy, low-resourced group of radicals who sometimes reproduce the very oppressions they (we) are struggling against.⁵ “Building movements,” writes Choudry, “requires reflexivity and a willingness to analyze, critique, and unsettle activist practices that we may be invested and implicated in” (2015, p. 40). As a scholar with the time and energy to devote to analyzing, critiquing, and unsettling an organizing project that I sometimes believed in deeply and other times felt was a losing battle, this became my job and my passion.

⁵ While writing this dissertation, I experienced ambivalence regarding whether to use “we” or “they” when referring to BVWU organizers. This tension stems from my shifting involvement over time and space. In general, I use “they,” but occasionally, when my positionality is particularly relevant to highlight, I use “we.”

These contradictions and political struggles served as generative sources of knowledge throughout the research process as I organized alongside the BVWU. More specifically, I was drawn to understanding the ways in which our small social movement group was developing radical anti-capitalist visions of change, how we were strategizing to live them out, and the challenges and tensions we faced along the way. When we began organizing to materially address workers' struggles with housing, food insecurity, and childcare, I identified these strategies as innovative in the context of a modern workplace organizing campaign, which led me to consider the role that social reproduction plays in building worker power.

B. Research Design and Methods

The overarching theoretical question driving my research is: *How might social reproduction—as discourse and practice—be marshaled to generate more inclusive organizing strategies, forge more just conceptions of sustainability, and build worker power?* I address this broad theoretical concern by investigating three empirical research questions:

- How do sustainability-branded institutions deploy values-based discourse and how does this relate to labor practices?
- How do worker-organizers understand and expose the contradictions of sustainability branding?
- How do worker-organizers engage with social reproduction as a terrain of political struggle, and to what ends?

My research design emerged from two years of preliminary research and informal conversations with foodservice and retail workers, Wobblies, and other labor and community activists in Portland and beyond. These conversations led me to examine three past and one ongoing organizing campaign coordinated by the IWW in four of Portland's

sustainability-branded food institutions: 1) the “natural” grocery chain New Seasons Market; 2) the vegan restaurant and bar Portobello; 3) the deli, café, and retail chain Grand Central Bakery; and 4) the “eco-conscious” quick-service restaurant chain Burgerville. These campaigns serve as my empirical foci for investigating work, organizing, and ethical-branding in the foodservice industries that distribute, prepare, and serve local, organic, and sustainable food. However, because the BVWU campaign was (and is) ongoing, it inevitably captivated the majority of my attention and took a more prominent role in my research than did the three past campaigns.

My data collection included participant observation in the ongoing BVWU campaign, semi-structured interviews with worker-organizers involved in the four campaigns, qualitative content analysis of marketing materials generated by the four institutions, and qualitative content analysis of organizing materials generated by the four campaigns. My data analysis varied across the campaigns. For example, participant observation gave me unique insight into the ongoing BVWU campaign, whereas I relied solely on content analysis and interviews for the other three campaigns. Additionally, I had access to an extensive set of organizing materials for the Grand Central campaign, but not as many for the Portobello and New Seasons campaigns, and I was witness to the creation of, and in some cases helped create, these materials for the BVWU campaign. Further, the other three campaigns took place in the past (and the New Seasons campaign had stretched on for a decade), increasing the potential for fading memories to color my interviewees’ historical accounts. However, using multiple methods enabled me to triangulate key findings.

I apply Burawoy's extended case method, an ethnographic approach defined by its four extensions: (1) the extension of observer into the lives of participants under study, (2) the extension of observations over time and space, (3) the extension from micro-processes to macro-forces, and (4) the extension of theory (Burawoy, 1998, p. xv). From the micro-worlds of foodservice worker-organizers and the particular context within which this organizing takes place, I extend my observations to investigate how sustainability discourse is used to mask exploitative labor relations, to connect processes of production and reproduction over space and time, and to draw on and contribute to theories of social reproduction and social movements. The extended case method enables me to locate the everyday experiences and multifaceted identities of worker-organizers within a broader social, political-economic, and spatial context and to deconstruct political binaries—in this case production and reproduction; work and life; humans and the environment.

While not all of the participants I organized with and interviewed would identify as “organizers,” presumably because they don't consider themselves experts on organizing, I use the term “worker-organizer” throughout my dissertation for two reasons. First, “worker-organizer” accounts for the overlapping and sometimes emerging identities that workers who are organizing in their workplaces inhabit, whether those workers have a great deal of organizing experience, or are novices. Second, while many workers do not have the confidence to claim the identity of “organizer,” I witnessed some of them grow into the role and even become leaders and public speakers on behalf of their union. Regardless of whether or not worker-organizers identify as “organizers,” they are doing the work or organizing, and I believe it is respectful to identify them as such.

1. Participant Observation

From April 2015 to June 2017, I conducted participant observation while organizing with the BVWU. I participated in and sometimes facilitated weekly meetings of the BVWU's "solidarity committee," which was made up of both union members and external supporters like myself who met weekly to strategize, plan public actions and events, and build community support for the union. In the early stages of the campaign, I conducted corporate and industry research and met with IWW members to strategize about how the Branch could support the campaign organizationally and administratively. I also canvassed transit stops to solicit public support for fast-food workers and conducted house visits to help recruit Burgerville workers onto shop organizing committees. In the months before and after the campaign went public on April 26, 2016, I planned and participated in pickets and other public actions and events. I also helped workers organize and execute shop-floor actions, in some cases standing with workers as they delivered petitions to management. In addition to fieldwork directly related to the BVWU campaign, I also attended, helped plan and/or taught "Introduction to the IWW" classes, weekend-long organizer trainings, and other orientations and trainings for the Branch. While the bulk of my participant observation was conducted in-person, I also analyzed dialog and interaction that took place over email and telephone. Participant observation allowed me to reach the "nondiscursive" or tacit knowledge that pulses through social interaction (ibid. p. 15). By drawing on my insider positionality, I moved and acted with participants in space and time in order to unpack situational experiences (ibid. p. 14). Participant observation facilitated the aggregation of worker-organizers' multiple, situated knowledges into social process

and enabled me to locate their efforts within a broader political economic context (ibid. pp. 15; 6).

2. Semi-structured Interviews

From September 2016 to March 2018, I conducted 48 semi-structured in-depth interviews with worker-organizers involved in campaigns at the four foodservice and retail workplaces listed above. The bulk of my interviews (27) were conducted with members of the BVWU. Interviews ranged in length from 30 minutes to two and a half hours. I interviewed some interviewees more than once, because our allocated time was not sufficient to cover their rich stories in one sitting (as was the case with two New Seasons worker-organizers), or because I was interested in capturing their perspective on the evolution of the campaign over time (as was the case with two BVWU worker-organizers). Several of my interviewees had been involved in, or had some knowledge of, more than one of the four organizing campaigns, and therefore offered perspectives beyond just a single workplace and campaign.

Interviewees represented a range of racial, ethnic, and gender identities, and had varying educational backgrounds. My sample included a mix of IWW members and non-members in order to capture perspectives from worker-organizers situated both inside and outside of the Branch. Wobbly interviewees were either members of the IWW before, or became members during or after, the campaigns I studied. Other worker-organizers were involved in the campaigns in their shops, but did not join or have not yet joined the IWW as dues-paying members. Approximately one-fifth of the organizers I interviewed had “salted”—that is, they applied to the workplace with the explicit intention of organizing, a common strategy used by unions in active organizing campaigns. Interviews not only

allowed me to get at participants' narratives, or the "discursive dimension" (Burawoy, 2009), but the interview process itself offered an important opportunity for organizers to reflect on their practice and articulate what it is they do and how. Based on feedback from my interviewees, this venue for critical reflection helped organizers create greater awareness of how their organizing project related to other struggles and how it was situated within the broader political economy (Choudry, 2015).

3. *Qualitative Content Analysis*

Finally, to complement my participant observation and interviews, I analyzed company marketing materials, including advertising campaigns, news articles, and social media posts to examine how employers frame and communicate their sustainability practices and labor practices. I also analyzed organizing materials, including meeting minutes, posters, flyers, petitions, and websites from past and current campaigns, to investigate how worker-organizers frame their own narratives around sustainability, intersectionality, de-colonialism, anti-racism, anti-capitalism, and other issues.

IV. Chapter Overview

In Chapter 1, "The Politics of Production in the U.S. Labor Movement: Business Unions, Poor Workers' Unions, and the Industrial Workers of the World," I trace the rise and fall of the mainstream labor movement in the U.S., focusing on how the movement's tactics have evolved (and not evolved) over time. I highlight the role that unions played in shifting the burden of social reproduction to the state and employers in the mid-20th century. I examine how the labor movement has since split from other progressive movements, turning inward to "service" their members and focusing on a narrowly

conceived class identity and “bread-and-butter” single issues, primarily the wage. I discuss how the labor movement has struggled under increasingly anti-worker labor law and has largely failed to adapt to (and push back against) the economic restructuring and spatial reorganization of employment that began in the 1970s. Rather than becoming part of a broad-scale, progressive movement for change, the labor movement’s insularity has further weakened its ability to build working-class power.

However, an undercurrent of “poor workers’ unions,” which emerged in the 1930s and took their present form in the 1970s as part of the civil rights movement, offers important insight into how low-income immigrants, people of color, and women have organized to build their own power. I briefly review the poor workers’ movement, which helped change the narrative around poverty and took shape as a number of economic justice organizations, community-based unions, independent worker centers, and workfare unions. I then turn my attention to today’s alternative labor movement, which continues the legacy of poor workers’ unions by organizing the growing ranks of precarious workers who have been left behind by the mainstream labor movement. “Alt-labor” and/or “New Labor” includes over 200 worker centers, community-based worker advocacy organizations, and innovative programs that are drawing upon diverse tactics to organize at the intersection of labor, racial, and gender justice issues (Tapia & Turner, 2018). I highlight how the Alt-labor movement is engaging in community-based organizing strategies and cultivating partnerships with other social movements to transcend the mainstream labor movement’s narrow focus on class identity and single issues. Finally, I contextualize the Portland IWW’s efforts to build power in a sector that has long been considered “unorganizable”

by the mainstream labor movement, positioning the IWW as part of an Alt-labor movement fighting for justice.

After offering this brief history and broad overview of the labor movement, I turn to my empirical research on sustainability discourse, labor exploitation, and worker organizing in the restaurants and grocery stores that prepare, serve, and distribute local and organic food. Portland—a city renowned for its local food scene and commitment to sustainable development—offers an ideal setting for investigating the contradictions of sustainability discourse in the sustainability-branded foodservice and retail industries. In Chapter 2, ““Poverty Wages are not Fresh, Local, or Sustainable”: Exposing the Contradictions of Conscious Consumption Under Capitalism,” I investigate how four Portland-based institutions have built their brands around their purported commitment to environmental sustainability, animal rights, and local and organic sourcing. I mine worker-organizers’ experiences to demonstrate how the values-based discourse of sustainability masks the exploitative labor practices that make it difficult for workers to reproduce themselves. In doing so, I extend conversations about the social relations of local, fair trade, and organic agriculture (Born & Purcell, 2006; S. Brown & Getz, 2008; DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; Guthman, 2011b, 2014; Jaffee, 2007) further down the food chain to examine the exploitative, racist, and patriarchal labor relations of the sustainability-branded foodservice and retail industries. I demonstrate how sustainability-branded institutions appeal to (and reinforce the identity of) white, middle-class consumers by valorizing the labor of predominantly white, male farmers and chefs, and erasing the labor of the women and workers of color who grow, harvest, process, stock, prepare, and serve local, organic, and sustainable food. My analysis reveals not only that worker wellbeing is

missing from the ethical commitments of employers, but that sustainability practices often come at the expense of workers' health and wellbeing.

In the final section of the chapter, I focus my analysis on Portland IWW-supported organizing campaigns in each of the four profiled institutions to demonstrate how workers are pushing back against ethical-branding. By investigating these struggles over sustainability discourse, I identify how worker-led unions like the BVWU are chipping away at the green veneer of sustainability-branded capitalism. I argue that the alternative food movement has much to learn from these workers' struggles, not only about how individual market-based strategies reinforce faux sustainability, but about how to engage in collective action aimed at building worker power, and ultimately more just and sustainable food systems. Shifting away from individualistic consumption politics, I conclude, will require cultivating food systems activists' and supporters' identity as *workers* (rather than consumers) standing in solidarity with other workers.

In Chapter 3, "Survival Pending Revolution: Organizing Around Social Reproduction and Building Fast-Food Worker Power Through Mutual Aid," I offer a more detailed analysis of how poverty wages, erratic scheduling, and the erosion of employer-sponsored benefits strain workers' ability to reproduce themselves, thereby creating challenges (and opportunities) for organizing. I focus my analysis on the ongoing efforts of BVWU organizers, who are deploying creative strategies to organize their precarious coworkers. Inspired by the Black Panther Party's social programs and No One Is Illegal's direct support and direct-action work, the BVWU organizes mutual aid programs, including childcare, food boxes, Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED) tutoring, and other resources. I demonstrate how the BVWU's organizing around social reproduction

embodies an inclusionary and intersectional politics that prioritizes the needs of women, parents, and people of color. Although an uncommon labor organizing tool today, mutual aid played an integral role in the 19th century labor movement, when union members delivered social services to fellow workers in need, thereby fulfilling what was considered a shared responsibility for ensuring basic welfare. Within the context of the rollback of the welfare state and without the resources of larger, more traditional unions, I demonstrate how the BVWU's organizing around social reproduction signals an engagement with the timeless battle over who—the state, the employer, the community, or the individual—is ultimately responsible for social reproduction. My investigation reveals that the BVWU faces significant challenges to building and maintaining collective systems of social reproduction. These tensions signal the need for a longer-term vision of robust mutual aid structures that are liberated from racialized and gendered divisions of care labor. My analysis presents an opportunity to consider the possibilities and pitfalls of mutual aid as an organizing strategy for today's progressive movements.

In Chapter 4, “An Injury to One is an Injury to All: Building Solidarity Across Struggles Over (Re)production,” I turn my analysis from the BVWU's internal focus on caring for their coworkers to its outward focus on organizing across issues and building cross-movement solidarity. I examine its efforts to ally with decolonial, immigrants' rights, tenants' rights, and environmental justice organizations as a budding *coalition politics* (Di Chiro, 2008) that embodies a more intersectional approach to movement building than offered by the mainstream labor, environmental, and reproductive rights movements. I also demonstrate how the BVWU's approach to political education is fundamentally rooted in critical revolutionary praxis—the unity of radical thought and action (Choudry, 2015;

Freire, 2000; Gramsci, 1971). I identify three threads/themes that articulate across the BVWU's critical revolutionary praxis: 1) the interconnectedness of issues facing workers and other exploited groups, 2) a decolonial analysis that emphasizes the role of white supremacy in perpetuating violence against Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, and 3) an anti-capitalist framework that unmasks the collusion between the state and capital.

Analyzing the efforts of the BVWU through the frameworks of coalition politics and critical revolutionary praxis, I demonstrate how the union is transforming worker-organizers' consciousness and addressing economic, racial, and environmental justice issues relationally. In this final empirical chapter—and in the dissertation as a whole—I argue that organizing against the neoliberal agenda of privatization, deregulation, and oppressive control over social reproduction requires building an intersectional social movement that recognizes the interconnected nature of crises. I uncover lines of shared struggle that can be harnessed to challenge unsustainable systems of production and social reproduction and open new pathways towards a more just sustainability. I conclude that, by focusing not on the politics of consumption—which reinforce people's identity as individual consumers—but instead on the politics of (re)production—which challenge people to take collective action as workers—social movements can better target structural inequality and begin to create more liberatory practices of care based on solidarity, mutuality, and interdependence (Lawson, 2007; McDowell, 2004). My investigation reveals lessons and opportunities for critical reflection by social movement scholars and activists.

Chapter 1: The Politics of Production in the U.S. Labor Movement: Business Unions, Poor Workers' Unions, and the Industrial Workers of the World

On November 29, 2012, fast-food workers in New York City walked off the job, demanding \$15 per hour and a union. In the following months, strikes spread to other major cities and supporters joined in demonstrations to protest poverty wages. The Service Employees International Union's (SEIU) Fight for \$15 program made fast-food workers the face of local minimum wage campaigns in Seattle, San Francisco, Chicago, and other cities. The program drew attention to the struggles facing the 11 million people employed in the U.S. foodservice industry, where women, people of color, and immigrants disproportionately occupy part-time and low-wage positions (Food Chain Workers Alliance and Solidarity Research Cooperative, 2016). In the same way that the Occupy Wall Street Movement changed the national discourse around inequality in 2011, Fight for \$15 dramatically shifted the public perception of low-wage work—convincing many people that those who work to put food on our plates should be able to afford to feed themselves. The program fueled successful efforts to pass “living wage” legislation in 51 states and cities across the U.S., winning minimum wage increases for nearly 15 million workers (National Employment Law Project, 2016). SEIU did not, however, follow through on the second half of their promise to fight for “\$15 *and a union*” for fast-food workers.

The foodservice sector has long been considered “unorganizable” by the mainstream labor movement, due primarily to its low wages, “low-skilled” jobs, high turnover, and spatial fragmentation (Milkman, 2010). While unions were adept at

organizing large workplaces in the manufacturing sector during the Fordist Era, they have largely failed to adapt to the economic restructuring and the spatial reorganization of employment that began in the 1970s.⁶ Union membership in the U.S. has fallen by more than two-thirds over the past half century, from 35% in 1955 to 11.7% in 2018 (Hirsch & Macpherson, 2004, 2018).

In this chapter, I offer a brief history of the rise and fall of the mainstream U.S. labor movement. I argue that by forging a “productivist” path—or focusing narrowly on class identity, the wage, and the workplace as the primary terrain of struggle—the labor movement has isolated itself from other progressive movements, limiting its potential to appeal to a broad-based working class that faces numerous struggles beyond traditional waged labor. I then turn my attention to “poor workers’ unions,” which played an integral role in the civil rights movement during the 1970s. Taking shape as economic justice organizations, community-based unions, independent worker centers, and workfare unions, poor workers’ unions offer inspiring lessons on how marginalized workers built their own power by eschewing the mainstream labor movement’s productivist approach. I then examine how a growing alternative labor movement is applying these lessons today, organizing the growing ranks of precarious workers who have been left behind by mainstream unions. “Alt-labor” and/or “New Labor” includes over 200 worker centers, community-based worker advocacy organizations, and innovative programs that are drawing upon diverse tactics to organize at the intersection of labor, racial, and gender

⁶ “Fordism” is most commonly used to describe a post-World War II regime of mass production and consumption maintained in part by a Keynesian welfare state working to sustain full employment at male breadwinner wages while providing social welfare protections and ensuring macroeconomic stability (Peck, 2000). “Post-Fordism” is a more hotly debated designation, some preferring to use the term “after-Fordism” to signify an ongoing period of instability in the wake of the decline of Fordism (Martin, 2000).

justice issues. I highlight how this Alt-labor movement is engaging community-based organizing strategies and cultivating partnerships with other social movements to transcend the mainstream labor movement's narrow focus on class identity and single issues.

I conclude by situating the IWW, and the Portland Branch in particular, as an active part of a growing Alt-labor movement fighting for justice, broadly defined. I demonstrate how the IWW and the BVWU have taken up the second half of SEIU's promise to fight for "\$15 *and a union*," thereby offering lessons and opportunities for critical reflection by labor scholars and activists on how to build worker power in a sector that has long been considered "unorganizable."

I. The Rise and Fall of the Mainstream Labor Movement in the U.S.

Up until the 1930s, unions engaged heavily in direct-action tactics—including strikes and pickets—to build worker power. They also drew on social ties to mobilize workers in and through their communities, establishing partnerships with other progressive movements and promoting participation and leadership of rank-and-file members (Milkman, 2013; Savage, 2006). However, many unions changed course when Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (NLRA), which guaranteed workers' right to union representation and collective bargaining, albeit with the exclusion of farmworkers and domestic workers. The NLRA established the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to prosecute violations and oversee union representation elections, and the labor movement began orienting its institutional strategy around this new legal apparatus, abandoning more radical direct-action approaches.

As unions grew in the early and mid 20th century, they played an active role in shifting the burden of social reproduction onto firms and the welfare state. They pressured employers to offer benefits packages with health insurance and pensions, and they helped shape Progressive Era reforms that resulted in public housing, health services, education, and other social welfare programs (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Sonnenstuhl, 2001; Katz, 2001; Peck, 1996). During the post-World War II Fordist Era, a strong manufacturing industry created living wage union jobs and a Keynesian welfare state worked to sustain full employment at male breadwinner wages, while providing social welfare protections and ensuring macroeconomic stability (Martin, 2000; Peck, 2000).

In the 1940s and 1950s, unions purged left-wing labor activists from the membership, which consequently divided institutionalized labor from other progressive social movements (McAlevey, 2016; Tilly & Tilly, 1998). Rather than organizing around a broad-based politics that acknowledged workers' overlapping identities, the mainstream labor movement instead focused narrowly on building solidarity around class identity and organizing around "bread-and-butter" single issues, primarily the wage (Tapia, Lee, & Filipovitch, 2017). During this time, labor policies further eroded workers' organizing power. The 1947 Taft-Hartley Act, for example, outlawed solidarity strikes, forced union leaders and members to sign affidavits that they were not Communists or affiliated with the left, and permitted states to enact "right-to-work" laws that permitted workers to opt out of paying dues (Andrias, 2016).

After WWII, most unions turned inward to "service" their members, hiring staff to manage workers' grievances through legal means. Unions focused fewer resources on organizing unrepresented workers and relied even less on the direct-action tactics—strikes,

boycotts, and demonstrations—that the labor movement had pioneered (McAlevey, 2016; Tilly & Tilly, 1998).⁷ As consumer capitalism burgeoned in the 1950s and ‘60s, “business unionism”—managing a union like a business—came to dominate the mainstream labor movement. Economic expansion benefitted millions of workers at the cost of a democratic and militant labor left, which was rendered powerless when the postwar boom ended in the ‘70s. During this time, corporations began hiring sophisticated anti-union consultants to intimidate and fire worker-organizers (Tait, 2016). The mainstream labor movement also limited itself to organizing primarily in large workplaces (e.g., factories) and building white working-class identity at the expense of women and workers of color. Rather than serving as a broader social movement to represent the interests of all workers, unions instead focused inward on protecting the interests of an organized few (McAlevey, 2016).

Union membership has declined significantly over the past 40 years as processes of globalization and the proliferation of neoliberal economic policies have significantly reconfigured the spatial organization of labor in the U.S. Deregulation allows employers to move capital across borders, and governments are unable and/or unwilling to regulate labor markets to mitigate uneven access to employment, income, and welfare. The current “post-Fordist” Era is characterized by increasing economic instability, the decline of the manufacturing sector, and the growth of “flexible” labor market practices—including subcontracting, independent contracting, and franchising—that are contributing to rising inequality. As I discussed in the introduction, flexibility allows employers greater freedom to hire and fire, to employ part-time, casual, and temporary workers for performing

⁷ Even up until the 1990s, most AFL-CIO unions spent less than three percent of their budgets on organizing (Tait, 2016, p. 6).

multiple tasks and functions, and to shirk responsibility for reproducing their workforce (Martin, 2000; Milkman, 2014; Peck, 1996).

Unions have failed to formulate appropriate tactical responses to the political and economic forces bearing down on them over the past century. Spatial fragmentation poses a particularly significant challenge for the mainstream labor movement. The geographically consolidated industries and large worksites in the U.S. North that business unions were adept at organizing steadily shifted to the U.S. South, and then to the Global South, where trade unions have even less of a foothold (Tilly, 1995). The decline of traditionally unionized sectors (e.g., manufacturing) and the rise of traditionally non-unionized sectors (e.g., service, hospitality, and care) also contributed to the erosion of union membership (Farber & Western, 2001). The strategies unions used to organize predominantly white male workers in the manufacturing sector during the Fordist Era (i.e., contract campaigns in large geographically consolidated workplaces and bureaucratic structures to enforce contracts) have had some success in hospitals, hotels, and grocery stores. However, these tools are generally ill-fitting for the growing fragmented service industry (Tait, 2016).

There are many barriers to organizing in the fast-food industry in particular, including high turnover and the spatial and structural fragmentation of labor (Hannah, 2016). The franchise model is a prolific form of “workplace fissuring” (Weil, 2014)—a practice that enables corporations to shift responsibility for working conditions to franchisees who operate individual restaurants, creating significant barriers to enforcing labor law. Under federal law, corporations do not have a formal employment relationship with workers at a given franchise location, shielding them from wage and hour violations

and class-action employment discrimination and harassment claims. Rather than evolving to better protect workers and their right to organize across an increasingly fragmented workplace geography, labor law has created more disadvantages for workers that further tip the power balance in favor of employers. Every restaurant under a different franchisee employer requires its own union, necessitating separate organizing drives on an employer-by-employer basis. This splintering of potential bargaining units, coupled with high turnover rates, makes unionizing especially difficult (Franco, 2017; Fraser, 2015; Hannah, 2016).

Franchising puts downward pressure on wages and benefits, rippling through the entire industry and degrading working conditions across franchise and non-franchise fast-food restaurants alike. Franchising and other flexible labor strategies are contributing to a reserve of contingent, marginalized workers with little collective bargaining power, thereby playing a role in the decline of organized labor. The membership base of labor unions is also rapidly aging and concentrated in the shrinking sectors where non-flexible stable jobs still dominate (Simms, Eversberg, Dupuy, & Hipp, 2018). Although young workers generally have good opinions of unions, their union membership rates are low because they are disproportionately employed in industries where unions have not established a foothold (Tapia & Turner, 2018).

Continuing to turn inward, the mainstream labor movement has further isolated itself from other progressive movements. By taking a “productivist perspective”—narrowly defining work as the production of goods and viewing the workplace as the primary arena of action—both labor leaders and labor scholars have overlooked the activism and class consciousness not only of marginalized waged workers, but of women

who labor in the home (their own or that of others), workers in the informal economy, and workfare and welfare recipients (Tait, 2016). In the next section, I examine an undercurrent of poor workers who have understood that the workplace is not the only site of class-based mobilization, and have built power by organizing across the false bifurcation between “work” and “home.”

II. Poor Workers’ Unions

“Poor workers’ unions” emerged in the 1930s but took their present shape in the 1960s, drawing on the militant tactics of civil disobedience that were core to the civil rights movement. Plagued with entrenched racism, sexism, and bureaucracy, most trade unions were not interested in organizing low-wage workers during this time. Consequently, other social movement organizations, particularly civil rights groups, became the “de facto bargaining agents for job access and equity for communities of color” (ibid. p. 1). The civil rights movement made nondiscrimination and fair wages central economic justice demands. While the mainstream labor movement championed the “family wage,” thereby devaluing women’s work in relation to men’s, socialist feminists articulated the “double shift” that women worked at home and in the workplace. Welfare organizers were also changing the public narrative around poverty, convincing the public that poor workers and the unemployed should be entitled to income and benefits (Piven & Cloward, 1977).⁸

As poor people and people of color suffered from deindustrialization and capital flight in the 1960s, suburbanization produced a predominantly white, propertied proletariat

⁸ In 1966, 75 welfare rights groups formed the National Welfare Rights Organization and organized demonstrations, pickets, and sit-ins demanding a just welfare system and a guaranteed minimum national income (Piven & Cloward, 1977).

that was geographically separate from poor, inner-city, working class people of color (Squires, 1994). From this geographic, racial, and economic split emerged new forms of resistance as people articulated their everyday economic struggles, demanded capital investment and access to local jobs, organized for tenants' rights, and advocated for quality healthcare and education. Poor workers mobilized around the "politics of place," organizing not only around jobs and social welfare, but housing, neighborhood preservation, and redlining (Davis, Hiatt, Kennedy, Ruddick, & Sprinker, 1990). While trade unions turned a blind eye to the struggles of poor workers, community-based groups took up the cause and dipped their toes into labor organizing projects. Poor workers' unions took shape as economic justice organizations, community-based unions, independent worker centers, and workfare unions (Tait, 2016).

In Detroit, a city hit hard by deindustrialization, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) launched their United Labor Unions (ULU) arm. ULU experimented with models of labor organizing that emphasized direct-action tactics and worker-community linkages. In 1979, ULU targeted Detroit's fast-food industry, where African American teens were disproportionately employed in minimum wage jobs with no benefits. Within three months, ULU was hosting city-wide meetings with workers across the industry. ULU signed up members—many of whom were children of the United Auto Workers members and drew on a strong family history of union membership—and organized committees, pickets, and demonstrations. Detroit's pro-labor culture buoyed ULU's efforts; religious, community, and labor leaders signed an open letter of support, and the public largely respected boycotts (ibid.).

On February 22, 1980, Burger King workers in a Greyhound terminal in downtown Detroit voted for union representation in a NLRB election.⁹ The following year, ULU successfully lobbied to defeat a bill that would allow employers to pay teens—who made up 16% of the city’s fast-food workforce—75% of the minimum wage for their first six months of employment. However, the multinational fast-food giants spared no expense fighting unionization, hiring union-busting consultants to squash organizing and convince workers to vote “no” at three McDonald’s and two other Burger King outlets. The Greyhound Burger King franchise owner delayed bargaining for over three years, but workers eventually succeeded in negotiating the first fast-food worker contract in U.S. history (*ibid.*).¹⁰

Forty years later, there are 11 million workers in the foodservice industry, and only 1.6% are members of unions (Food Chain Workers Alliance and Solidarity Research Cooperative, 2016). In 2013, 29% of the U.S. workforce held what are considered low-wage jobs, earning less than \$12.49 per hour, and 39% earned more than the \$15 popular benchmark (Bernhardt & Osterman, 2017). These statistics reveal the urgency of building power for the growing ranks of low-wage workers. The legacy of poor workers’ unions stretches into the present, and the cause of organizing precarious workers who have been left behind by the mainstream labor movement is being taken up by “Alternative Labor” and “New Labor” organizations.

⁹ The NLRB is a federal agency responsible for enforcing U.S. labor law, including supervising elections in which employees vote on whether or not they want to be represented by a particular labor union.

¹⁰ Research on this union is limited, and it is unclear how long it lasted before the Burger King was closed or the union was de-certified.

III. “Alt-labor” and “New Labor”

“Alt-labor” and “New Labor” are mobilizing intersectionally to advance labor, racial, and gender justice for marginalized workers. Alt-labor/New Labor includes over 200 worker centers, community-based worker advocacy organizations, and innovative programs supported by traditional unions, that are drawing upon grassroots organizing tactics located at the intersection of labor, racial, and gender justice issues (Tapia & Turner, 2018). Some scholars identify the movement as a reaction to the harsh regulatory constraints put on organized labor in the U.S. (Simms et al., 2018). Indeed, the majority of these projects and organizations are designed to build power for workers outside of traditional collective bargaining relationships (Milkman, 2014). Worker centers are particularly well suited for today’s regulatory landscape; they do not serve as the primary bargaining agent or represent employees in bargaining agreements, and are therefore not subject to the same labor and strike restrictions as unions (Hannah, 2016). Some argue that worker centers fill the void left by states and municipalities who have abdicated responsibility for protecting certain segments of workers, including undocumented and unregularized workers (Juravich, 2018; McAleve, 2016; Milkman, 2011). Consequently, worker centers and other Alt-labor organizations have taken on an increasingly central role as intermediaries, advocates, and policy makers with and for low-wage workers inside and outside of the workplace (Milkman, 2010; Tapia et al., 2017).

While the terms “Alt-labor” and “New Labor” are sometimes used interchangeably, there is an important distinction to be made between independent organizations (which I would classify as “Alt-labor”) and organizations or projects of mainstream labor unions (which I would classify as “New Labor”). New Labor, sometimes called “New Union,”

projects are strategies that unions like SEIU and UNITE HERE are experimenting with in an attempt to grow their ranks by targeting geographically dispersed workers in the service and healthcare industries (McAlevey, 2016). Restaurant Opportunity Centers United (ROC), for example, initially emerged as a project of UNITE HERE, which represents foodservice workers in institutional settings. ROC targets non-institutional foodservice restaurants and takes a strategic three-pronged approach: workplace organizing campaigns, partnerships with “high-road” employers, and policy work to raise industry standards (Jayaraman, 2013; Tapia et al., 2017).¹¹ ROC operates outside of the conventional framework of U.S. industrial relations and focuses on engaging members in training and education (Brady, 2014).

Fight for \$15 is perhaps the most famous New Labor program, one that came out of the SEIU’s Fight for a Fair Economy (FFE), a \$60 million grassroots campaign launched in 2011 in 17 cities across the U.S. FFE deployed 1,500 organizers to shift the public debate about low-wage work and corporate greed, and to organize private-sector service workers into unions. In Seattle, FFE supported the Sea-Tac Airport workers’ organizing campaign, which eventually led to a successful campaign for a \$15 per hour minimum wage for the entire city of Sea-Tac. In New York and other cities, FFE galvanized fast-food workers around the call for “\$15 and a union,” launching what became the national Fight for \$15 campaign (Rosenblum, 2017b, 2017a).

Fight for \$15 was a dramatic strategic shift for SEIU, and for the labor movement more broadly. Rather than organizing a single firm, Fight for \$15 campaigns instead

¹¹ Joann Lo and Ariel Jacobson (2011) define “high-road” employers as those who treat workers well in order to lower turnover, improve customer service, and ultimately increase profit.

targeted the entire fast-food sector city-wide. This spatial shift from the workplace to the city scale was a long overdue response to the reorganization of labor that began in the 1970s and rendered approaches to solidarity-building within discrete workplaces less viable. Drawing on extensive research of Fight for \$15, Megan Brown (2017b) argues that the program's spatial reconfiguration involves broader social, political, and economic geographies and community campaigns that engage with the city and with city politics and policies in novel ways. Fight for \$15 campaigns made demands on the state and positioned local governments as co-negotiators in determining workers' material conditions (Andrias, 2016). This new approach, argues Brown, is "more chaotic, more dispersed, and more amorphous" than traditional campaigns situated within the confines of the collective bargaining system (2017b, p. 29).

An important common denominator across New Labor and/or Alt-labor organizing is the prioritization of workers who have been marginalized by their race, gender, and/or citizenship status. Many worker centers have intentionally emphasized workers' intersecting identities—such as race, ethnicity, national origin, or gender—as they create space for workers to come together, create bonds, and organize (Tapia et al., 2017). While worker centers are often focused on organizing a specific ethnic group, New Labor campaigns like Fight for \$15 have been heralded for their commitment to an "anti-essentialist approach to class politics" (Wills, 2008, p. 309) and their ability to reach across racial, ethnic, and religious identities, workplaces, and sectors (M. Brown, 2017a). The Fight for \$15 discourse embedded in protests and actions explicitly links economic, racial, and immigrant justice. For example, SEIU partnered with Black Lives Matter in many cities to jointly organize protests and strikes. At a demonstration held on the 45th

anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., workers held up signs reading, “I AM A MAN” and “I AM A WOMAN,” referencing the 1968 Black sanitation workers’ strike in Memphis, and continuing a legacy of the interconnected struggle for economic and racial justice. In 2016, Fight for \$15 broadened its coalition to include immigrants’ rights groups and demanded an end to ICE raids and deportations (Tapia et al., 2017).

Alt-labor and New Labor have made important strides to connect across issues and constituencies. The strategic decision to foster intersectional solidarity that challenges the amplified discrimination workers face based on their gender, race, citizenship status, and more, is a departure from traditional union organizing models that ignore these differences in an attempt to build “purely economic frames of solidarity” (ibid. p. 491). By acknowledging the simultaneous and overlapping identities of workers and articulating the connections between labor exploitation and race, gender, and immigration status, Alt-labor and New Labor have the potential to transcend the narrowly defined battle over union recognition, wages, and benefits and (re)connect the labor movement to broader struggles for racial and economic justice.

New Labor efforts like worker centers and Fight for \$15 have also been successful in part due to their strategic approach to organizing around the issues that workers face not only in the workplace, but outside of it. In campaigns indicative of New Labor organizing, the number of issues being addressed is larger—including affordable housing, immigrants’ rights, and health care in addition to workplace issues—thereby encouraging a wider constituency of people to get involved (M. Brown, 2017b).

However, many Alt-labor and New Labor strategies are limited in their potential to build worker power. Many of these organizations are dependent on funding from business

unions and foundations and are largely staff- rather than membership-driven (Juravich, 2018). Some scholars and activists criticize worker centers for focusing largely on enforcing weak labor laws (e.g., by filling wage theft claims for workers) and thereby doing the work of the state rather than making new gains for workers (Tzintzún, 2006). Additionally, while Fight for \$15 won minimum wage increases for tens of thousands of workers and put pressure on progressive politicians, its narrow focus on the wage, I argue, also reproduces the mainstream labor movement's narrow-sighted "productivist" vision. Further, Fight for \$15's one-day fast-food strikes were mainly symbolic and did not necessarily prepare workers to take on their bosses and build power to improve their working conditions (Juravich, 2018; McAleve, 2016). In the next section, I highlight how the Burgerville Workers Union (BVWU) has attempted to pick up where the Fight for \$15 left off by building power for workers in the fast-food industry.

IV. The Industrial Workers of the World and the Burgerville Workers Union

The BVWU is a project of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), an international labor union founded in Chicago in 1905. While a comprehensive history is beyond the scope of my dissertation project, it is important to highlight the ways in which the IWW is distinct from other unions and the ideology that underpins the union's approach to organizing.¹² Although its membership was never as large as mainstream labor unions, from 1905 through the 1920s the IWW played a critical role in the global upsurge of

¹² For detailed histories on the IWW, see Salerno's (1989) *Red November/Black November: Culture and Community in the IWW*, Hall's (2001) *Harvest Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World and Agricultural Labourers in the American West, 1905-1930*, Rosemont's (2003) *Joe Hill: the IWW and the Making of a Revolutionary Working Class Counterculture*, and Buhle and Schulman (eds) (2005) *Wobblies! A Graphic History of the Industrial Workers of the World*.

syndicalism—a social movement and ideology that envisioned a powerful labor movement seizing the means of production and replacing capitalism with a worker-controlled socialist economy. Unlike most socialist organizations of the time, the IWW’s variety of syndicalism—“revolutionary industrial unionism”—eschewed political parties, and instead envisioned massive industrial unions, direct action, and strikes as the means for achieving socialist revolution (Cole, Struthers, & Zimmer, 2017).

The IWW’s revolutionary industrial unionism served as a radical alternative not only to other socialist organizations, but to the narrow craft or trade unionism of the American Federation of Labor (AFL)—which dominated the labor movement in the early 1900s. Whereas the AFL refused immigrants, women, and people of color, the IWW—from its inception—declared that “No workingman or woman shall be excluded from membership in local unions because of creed or color.”¹³ Wobblies, in fact, grew their membership by organizing semi-skilled and unskilled workers, women, immigrants, migrant workers, and workers of color. In 1912, for example, Wobblies organized the “Bread and Roses” textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, which was largely led by Italian women, but included immigrant women and children from over 20 countries, each of whom had representation on strike and relief committees and access to literature in many languages. The IWW also organized in the “unorganizable” U.S. rural South, overcoming entrenched racism to unite Black and white workers under the Brotherhood of Timber Workers, a union that dominated the industry from the 1910s well into the 1920s. Wobblies also organized another workforce considered “unorganizable” by the AFL: migrant farmworkers who spoke dozens of languages (*ibid.*). In 1915, they founded the Agricultural

¹³ Article 1, Section 1 of the IWW Constitution’s By-Laws.

Workers Organization (AWO), which drew around 20,000 members in the Midwest and Great Plains and dramatically increased IWW membership (Hall, 2001). In Portland, Wobblies helped organize women and children cannery workers, who faced police violence when they struck for higher wages, shorter hours, and safer working conditions in the summer of 1913 (Hall, 2015).

Throughout its early history, the IWW faced some of the most violent state repression of any socialist and communist organization. Army troops were deployed to break strikes, and Wobblies were regularly beaten, deported, imprisoned, and murdered. In 1917, state and federal governments imprisoned hundreds of Wobblies and criminalized syndicalism and even union membership. That same year, under President Woodrow Wilson, law enforcement rounded up 1,200 striking IWW copper miners and their family members in Arizona and imprisoned them in a U.S. Army camp in New Mexico. Federal agents also raided IWW offices across the country, arresting hundreds of Wobblies and trying them for espionage (Cole et al., 2017).

Despite this devastating repression, the IWW continued to organize and grow. At its peak in 1923, it had members and branches in dozens of countries, and Wobblies traveled around the world to work, agitate, educate, and organize. Although a complicated schism—orchestrated in part by the federal government—all but decimated the IWW in 1924, small pockets of Wobblies persisted (*ibid.*). Even though membership declined significantly along with the overall decline of unions beginning in the 1950s, the IWW remained active within leftist social movements and heavily influenced the student movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Buhle & Schulman, 2005; Thompson & Bekken, 2006). In fact, the Wobbly project—to transform society—has always been much broader

than that of typical trade unions, leading some scholars to classify the IWW as a social movement rather than a labor union (Christiansen, 2009; Salerno, 1989).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the IWW saw a resurgence (Ince, 2012). The most recent high-profile Wobbly campaigns have been in foodservice establishments. In 2007, for example, workers began to organize at a Starbucks store in Manhattan and turned to the IWW for support. The company launched an expensive anti-union campaign, hiring a union avoidance law firm, bribing workers with pizza, gym passes, and baseball tickets to denounce the union, and retaliated against organizers by threatening to fire them, cutting their hours, and writing them up for petty violations. Two workers were reinstated and paid back wages after the NLRB determined that they had been unjustly fired. Although workers did not hold an NLRB election (the NLRB determined that the bargaining unit would have to include all Starbucks workers across Manhattan, an organizing feat beyond the capacity of the IWW), the Starbucks Workers Union did inspire Starbucks workers in other cities—mainly Chicago and Grand Rapids—to organize in their workplaces (Simon, 2008).

While NLRB elections are a staple of business unionism, IWW organizers tend to see elections more as a means to building worker power, rather than as ends in themselves. In some instances, workers decide to file for NLRB elections to obtain federal recognition. However, because workplace power is skewed so heavily in favor of employers—who often have resources to deploy tough anti-union campaigns that intimidate workers into voting “no”—union elections are rarely successful. Even when workers win elections, they remain in an inferior position at the bargaining table. Contracts require periodic re-negotiation and are challenging to enforce, as employers don’t face substantial penalties for breaking them. The IWW’s status as a volunteer-run union with few financial resources

(members pay dues on a sliding scale from \$11 to \$33 per month) further compounds the difficulties of building power and improving working conditions through a formal union contract. Also in contrast to business unions, the IWW is an apolitical organization and does not formally endorse political candidates, weigh in on political campaigns, or spend money on political lobbying. Keeping with the union's historical roots, most members of the IWW identify as Marxists, socialists, anarcho-communists, or anarcho-syndicalists, and many have a deep distrust of the state.

The Portland, Oregon general membership branch (referred to interchangeably as the "Portland IWW" or the "Branch" in this dissertation) has been one of the most active IWW branches in recent years. The bulk of the Branch's organizing work focuses on the foodservice and retail industries, where few unions are willing to invest organizing resources, but where many workers are struggling at the bottom of Portland's growing food economy. In some ways, the Portland Branch is characteristic of the Alt-labor movement. The Branch operates like some independent worker centers, welcoming anyone who is struggling in their workplace and offering education and training on how to organize with coworkers and/or navigate unfair labor practices against their employer (e.g., wage theft violations). However, unlike Alt-labor organizations, the IWW is subject to the same restrictive labor laws as business unions.

The Portland IWW's High \$5 committee was a precursor to the BVWU campaign and was inspired by the fast-food sector strikes organized by SEIU beginning in 2012. Organizers designed High \$5 to be a gathering place for low-wage workers to come together and strategize about how to win a \$5 per hour raise and build power in their workplaces. By the time I joined the High \$5 committee in May 2015, the group had

narrowed its focus to organizing workers at Burgerville, a popular chain hailed by the media, the local business community, and national restaurant industry as a pioneer of local, organic sourcing and sustainable business practices. Over the next year, more workers “salted” into Burgerville shops, and on April 26, 2016 the BVWU “went public” with a rally, march, and picket.¹⁴ On that day, members and supporters of the BVWU delivered a letter—both to corporate headquarters and to management at the store where the picket was held—demanding that the company meet and negotiate with workers.

The BVWU’s organizing strategy did not initially include plans to file for NLRB elections. Instead, the union hoped to convince Burgerville to voluntarily negotiate with workers by putting pressure on the company through direct action. However, after two years of impasse, the union decided to file for NLRB elections in individual shops where the majority of workers strongly supported the union and had signed up as members. In March 2018, workers at two shops (one in Portland and one in Gladstone, Oregon) filed for NLRB elections. The elections were held in April and workers overwhelmingly voted in favor of union representation, becoming the first fast-food workers to do so in over 40 years. With Burgerville executives now legally obligated to sit down and negotiate with workers, the two sides began bargaining a contract. Since then, workers at three more shops in Portland filed for and won union representation and have joined their fellow workers at the bargaining table. Although the BVWU is negotiating a contract that will only represent workers at the five NLRB-certified shops, the union continues to advocate on behalf of all

¹⁴ Salts are workers who applied to the workplace with the explicit intention of organizing, which is a common strategy used by unions in active organizing campaigns. The BVWU has asked me not to reveal particular details about organizing, including the number of salts working at Burgerville.

BVWU members and hopes to influence corporate-wide policy that will benefit all hourly Burgerville workers.

Like Fight for \$15, which targeted the fast-food sector of entire cities, the BVWU is the first of what the Portland IWW hopes will be many fast-food shops across Portland uniting under one industry-wide union. In fact, in March 2019, workers at Little Big Burger, another Portland-based burger chain, went public with the Little Big Union, also an IWW-supported project. While it is unclear whether these workers will also decide to file for elections to become recognized by the NLRB, they are working closely with the BVWU, whose members are offering crucial support.

As this brief history demonstrates, the IWW, the Portland Branch of the IWW, and the BVWU have complicated and antagonistic relationships to the state. This undoubtedly has to do with the IWW's early history of facing violent state repression, as well as the fact that modern day labor law, including the NLRB apparatus for federal union recognition, is stacked so heavily against workers. Ideologically, the IWW—recognizing that the state is primarily designed to maintain the power of employers—aims to build autonomous power for workers beyond the state and capitalism. However, strategically, the BVWU engages with existing power structures as a means to improve workers' lives. According to one longtime Wobbly and BVWU worker-organizer, “only power that's independent from the state can be the foundation of the more radical possibilities that I see the union opening up.” However, organizers seek to build this autonomous power through a multi-pronged strategy that puts direct action first and sometimes includes pressuring the government to come down on employers by enforcing labor law. This strategic position is distinct from that of business unions, which, when they endorse political candidates or minimum wage

legislation, become indebted to political parties and thereby further entrench the power structures of the state and capitalism. Of course, worker-organizers come to the campaign with their own perspectives and political agendas, which collide in discordant and productive ways, forcing the BVWU to constantly renegotiate how it will engage with the state at any given moment.

V. Conclusion: The Tensions of Feminist and Anti-racist Organizing

As I have shown in this chapter, by forging a “productivist” path—or focusing narrowly on class identity, the wage, and the workplace as the primary terrain of struggle—the labor movement has isolated itself from other progressive movements, limiting its potential to appeal to a broad-based working class that faces numerous struggles beyond traditional waged labor. However, continuing the legacy of the poor workers’ unions that played an important role in the civil rights movement, a growing alternative labor movement is building power for precarious workers by transcending the narrow focus on class identity and single issues. I have situated the IWW and the BVWU as a critical part of this alternative labor movement, which is organizing at the intersection of labor, racial, and gender justice issues. However, as the BVWU organizes to build power in a sector that has long been considered “unorganizable” by the mainstream labor movement, it faces challenges to organizing across race, gender, and the multiple intersecting issues facing low-wage workers. I examine these challenges in detail throughout the dissertation, but here I note a few of the tensions that arise from the racial, ethnic, and gender composition of the IWW and BVWU.

At the time of writing, the BVWU has approximately 95 members across seven Burgerville locations, all of which are located in the Portland metropolitan area. Some BVWU members are salts, most of whom were Wobblies or signed up as members after beginning organizing with the BVWU. Salts are predominantly young, white, and college-educated, and are not parents or primary caretakers. They have greater access to employment than many of their coworkers, and so for them, Burgerville is principally an organizing project, whereas for their coworkers it is a job first and foremost. While their goal is to engage other Burgerville workers as active participants in the union, their education and class privilege afford them time and resources that many of their coworkers do not have. This contributes to meeting culture and power dynamics that are sometimes uncomfortable for workers.

These issues and dynamics, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, also extend to the larger Portland IWW Branch. Although the IWW has a long history of organizing across gender, ethnic, and racial divides, its political commitment to building “One Big Union” for all workers has not translated into a diverse and inclusive union. In fact, Portland Wobblies generally express concern over the largely white, male membership of the Branch and a desire to recruit and engage more women, parents, and people of color. However, in recent years, more women (including myself), LGBTQ identifying members, and members of color have joined the Branch, in part because we were inspired by the BVWU campaign.

New Portland IWW members are bringing more robust feminist and anti-racist frameworks to the Branch’s organizational culture and to the BVWU campaign. The BVWU’s Black and Brown Caucus, for example, aims to fight racism in their workplace

and in their union. The BVWU also fundraises to pay worker-organizers of color \$15 per hour for their organizing work. The union is vocal about these efforts to fight racism and support organizers of color. In a July 13, 2018 public Facebook post advertising its “Organizers of Color Stipend Program,” the BVWU highlights the fact that workers of color experience more “exploitation and oppression” both inside and outside of the workplace, “which is why as a union we have to be about more than just wages and benefits.” “This is why we’re treating our broad vision of labor justice as the intersectional fight that it is,” the post continues, “We refuse to operate under any pretext that treats race, gender, ability or immigration status as secondary concerns.” This message speaks to the BVWU’s broad and explicitly intersectional approach to organizing—an approach that I examine in depth in this dissertation.

The remainder of my dissertation investigates precarious low-wage workers who are deploying creative strategies to build power in and out of their workplaces by organizing across issues. In Chapter 3, I demonstrate how the BVWU’s mutual aid programs, which offer subsidized childcare, food boxes, bus passes, and GED tutoring, are a return to strategies that were critical to ensuring the survival of the working class in the 19th and early 20th centuries. As I investigate in Chapter 4, by allying with decolonial, immigrants’ rights, tenants’ rights, and environmental justice organizations, the BVWU carries on in the tradition of poor workers’ unions and Alt-labor to join up with other progressive movements. But first, in Chapter 2, I examine labor exploitation, worker organizing, and sustainability discourse in Portland’s foodservice and retail industries. While Chapter 1 has uncovered how and why foodservice workers have been left behind by the mainstream labor movement, the next chapter investigates why the alternative food

movement—which I position as a subset of the mainstream environmental movement—has failed to prioritize the struggles of foodservice workers. I argue that because the BVWU is organizing in a city where green values drive conscious consumption and mask worker exploitation, it is important to situate workers’ experiences within the context of sustainability branding. Further, the worker-organizers’ stories I profile in the next chapter offer insight into the struggles facing workers—not only in Portland and not only in the food industry—but in other cities and industries where values-based discourse promotes ethical consumption, sometimes at the expense of workers’ health and wellbeing.

Chapter 2: “Poverty Wages are not Fresh, Local, or Sustainable”: Exposing the Contradictions of Conscious Consumption Under Capitalism

“Poverty wages are not fresh, local or sustainable” reads a flyer handed to passers-by as more than 200 supporters march a picket line in front of a busy Burgerville shop near the Oregon Convention Center in Portland. On this crisp October evening in 2016, the Burgerville Workers Union (BVWU) is celebrating six months of being public at this popular “eco-conscious” fast-food chain. The timing is strategic and serendipitous: it’s opening night of the Trail Blazers basketball season, what would normally be the highest grossing night for this location.

If the picket line isn’t deterring die-hard Burgerville customers and Blazers fans from spending their dollars on Local Pumpkin Milkshakes, Seasonal Sweet Potato Fries, and Brie Turkey Burgers, then the temptation of a *free* meal is. “Get your free *union-made* burgers here!” yells a BVWU supporter from behind a makeshift burger assembly line, complete with two grills set on top of a flatbed trailer on loan from members of Carpenters Local 1503, who have also generously supplied the buns, patties, burger fixings, and Tillamook-brand cheese, which is as much a Pacific Northwest icon as Burgerville itself. Kettle-brand potato chips and Izze-brand sodas, donated by supportive local grocery co-ops, complete the meal. Most would-be Burgerville customers respect the picket line, some opting for a free burger instead. The Burgerville shop is nearly empty, save for a few nervously pacing managers, private security guards hired to intimidate picketers, and excited workers who momentarily step away from their work stations to snap photos of the commotion outside.

“Marionberries now are here! Our right to organize is clear!” the picketers chant, playing off of Burgerville’s famous marketing of seasonal, locally sourced ingredients. When customers choose Burgerville or other ethically branded restaurants, they are “voting with their forks” for environmental sustainability and vibrant local economies. Yet, many of those who work in these restaurants experience the same poverty wages, discrimination, and exploitative labor practices that plague the food industry at large. Indeed, profits from conventional and “alternative” food chains alike depend fundamentally on the exploitation of workers, which remains hidden behind the commodity relation.¹⁵ However, as I examine in this chapter, the higher profit margins of ethically branded restaurants depend on valorizing the labor of some—namely the local farmers and award-winning chefs who are predominantly white and male—while concealing the racialized and gendered hands, bodies, and minds that perform the majority of labor in these industries.¹⁶

Women, people of color, Latinx, and immigrant workers are overrepresented in the Portland metropolitan region’s foodservice and retail sectors, which constitute nearly 69,000 jobs and 77% of employment in the region’s \$22 billion food economy (Green et al., 2015). In 2012, most of Portland’s foodservice and retail workers earned between \$9 and \$11 per hour and were almost twice as likely to live at or near the poverty level compared to the overall workforce (ibid). While these figures speak to the foodservice and retail sectors as a whole, my ethnographic research demonstrates that workers in Portland’s sustainability-branded restaurants and grocery stores—establishments where workers

¹⁵ Marx’s labor theory of value demonstrates how surplus value is extracted from labor under the capitalist mode of production (Marx, 1992).

¹⁶ While I am not aware of any empirical research demonstrating that sustainability branding directly yields higher profits, McClintock et. al identify food cart owners’ advertising of local sourcing as a signifier of cultural capital that then translates into economic capital via increased sales (McClintock et al., 2017).

stock, prepare, and serve local, organic, and “sustainable” food—do not fare much better, if at all, than their counterparts in more conventional establishments. This is consistent with scholarship that finds alternative agricultural production, such as certified organic production, diverges little from the industrial status quo with regards to working conditions (Alkon, 2012; Galt, 2013; Gray, 2014; Guthman, 2014; Shreck et al., 2006). Indeed, from “farm” all the way to “table,” the growing sustainability-branded food industry is part and parcel of low-wage labor degradation in Portland and beyond.

The BVWU is exposing and confronting an uncomfortable contradiction for Portland’s foodies: those who work in the city’s plethora of “sustainable” restaurants cannot sustain themselves. Erratic scheduling, poverty wages, and a lack of employer-sponsored benefits are not sustainable conditions for workers, yet are largely absent from conversations around sustainability. As I demonstrate in this chapter, sustainability-branded institutions appeal to a particular population of consumers—who are, by and large, white and middle-class. These institutions attract conscious consumers through values-based discourse that masks the exploitative labor relations that undergird the industry—relations which ultimately strain workers’ ability to reproduce themselves. Workers must contend with these increasingly precarious conditions and their impact on social reproduction—the mental, manual, and emotional work and care necessary to fulfill human needs and reproduce the next generation (Brenner & Laslett, 1991)—as they fight to improve their working conditions and their lives.

The BVWU is bringing these tensions to the public light through their organizing campaign. While the majority of unions have long deemed fast-food workers “unorganizeable”—a phenomenon I discussed in the Chapter 1—many of the Portland

IWW's organizing campaigns have been in the foodservice and retail industries, where workers have long struggled at the bottom of Portland's growing food economy. Many of these campaigns have targeted ethically-branded foodservice establishments—the kind that hold a special cachet in Portland—offering a unique opportunity to understand how companies and worker-organizers draw on sustainability discourse to build power in the workplace.

I begin this chapter by reviewing the critical food studies literature to set the stage for a discussion of sustainability discourse in four sustainability-branded institutions in Portland—a natural foods retail chain, a vegan fine dining restaurant, a wholesale bakery chain, and a fast-food chain. These sustainability-branded institutions have shaped Portland's food scene over the past 20 to 30 years and are considered popular industry leaders, lauded for their commitment to local sourcing and other sustainable business practices. They are also workplaces where workers have organized, with the support of the Portland IWW, to push back against exploitative working conditions. I analyze workers' experiences in the sustainability-branded foodservice and retail industries to demonstrate how values-based discourse and sustainability branding masks the exploitative labor practices that make it difficult for workers to reproduce themselves. In doing so, I extend conversations about the social relations of local, fair trade, and organic agriculture (Born & Purcell, 2006; S. Brown & Getz, 2008; DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; Guthman, 2011b, 2014; Jaffee, 2007) further down the food chain to examine the exploitative, racist, and patriarchal labor relations of the sustainability-branded foodservice and retail industries.

Workers' stories help expose the contradictions and limitations of sustainability discourse and conscious consumption as means to achieving more just and sustainable food

systems. Rather than drawing directly upon customers' perspectives, which lie outside of the scope of my research, I instead mine workers' experiences interacting with customers for insight into how consumers understand (and sometimes wilfully ignore) labor practices in relation to sustainability branding. I argue, in conversation with critical food studies literature, that the majority of customers who shop at sustainability-branded restaurants and grocery stores identify primarily as "consumers," in part because alternative food movement discourse privileges consumption as the primary vehicle for social change. In this way, the alternative food movement reinforces how sustainability branding masks exploitative labor relations and keeps consumers from identifying with or as workers. However, most consumers are of course workers, too, and shifting their consciousness to identify as such would enable them to understand their shared common interest with the workers who serve them.

In the final section, I analyze organizing campaigns in each of the four profiled institutions to demonstrate how workers are chipping away at the green veneer of sustainability-branded capitalism, which I argue is a first step towards shifting consumers' consciousness. Workers' struggles, I argue, offer important lessons and insights that might help reorient alternative food movement concerns away from consumption politics. Mobilizing around the politics of (re)production, rather than consumption, I conclude, can help foster solidarity between workers and consumers, opening new pathways towards a more just conception of sustainability.

I. “Vote With Your fork”: The Values-Based Discourse of Green Capitalism

Conscious consumption of food is increasingly central to what Carfagna et al. (2014) term “eco-habitus”—a reconfiguration of high cultural capital practices that valorizes environmental consciousness (McClintock, Novie, & Gebhardt, 2017). In fact, McClintock et al. take the Bourdieusian analysis a step further, offering “gastropolitan habitus” to conceptualize how “ecominded” foodies perform their environmental values by choosing local, organic, and sustainable food. Through eco-habitus and gastropolitan habitus, conscious consumers distinguish themselves from “others living less sustainably” (McClintock, 2018, p. 582). Eco-conscious foodie practices and other performances of eco-habitus, such as home gardening, not only generate cultural capital for affluent and predominantly white residents and consumers, but are also valorized as economic capital on the city scale, fueling gentrification and green growth (McClintock, 2018). This “ecogentrification” is intimately connected to racial capitalism, and sustainability-branded restaurants and grocery stores often create sociospatial inequality by contributing to exclusion and displacement in racially diverse neighborhoods—a process some refer to as “food gentrification” (Anguelovski, 2016). Indeed, food localization is central to sustainability branding in Portland, where “the gastropolitan valuation of local and organic appears to mirror the socio-economic geography of the city” (McClintock et al., 2017). Recent studies have shown that the relationship of sustainability-branded restaurants and grocery stores to gentrification is not unique to Portland, but is in fact contributing to uneven development in cities across the global North (Anguelovski, 2016; Burnett, 2014).

As eco-habitus’ role in reproducing racial capitalism and uneven development demonstrate, conscious consumption is far from apolitical, but its power to leverage the

kind of positive change that consumers want is exaggerated. The notion that we can “vote with our forks” for environmental sustainability and social justice by dining in sustainability-branded restaurants is indicative of a broader political atmosphere that privileges individual choice and the act of voting as the primary means of change. While citizens can only exercise their formal “right to vote” for politicians and ballot box measures occasionally through official elections, they can “vote with their forks” by choosing “good food” as many as three times a day, the logic goes. However, this rationale belies the fact that undocumented people, incarcerated people, and many poor people and people of color are often disenfranchised from both of these privileged forms of so-called political action. Further, the notion of “voting with our forks” elevates people’s position as consumers to that of political agents, conflating one’s conscious consumer identity with that of political activist.

The focus on individual consumption and market-based mechanisms as the means of change stand in stark contrast to the collective action and boycotts that were integral to food systems organizing in the 1960s and ‘70s. Drawing on the momentum of the civil rights movement, communities of color framed labor as a critical social justice issue and united against the exploitation of migrant farmworkers, for example by supporting the strikes and boycotts led by the United Farm Workers. During this same time, however, “back to the land” movements began popularizing local and organic agriculture, natural food cooperatives, and vegetarian diets, sowing the seeds of many of today’s popular alternative food initiatives (Belasco, 2007). By the 1980s, the majority of these initiatives were oriented primarily towards achieving environmental sustainability (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Allen et al., 2003). These efforts continue today and are led primarily by

white, middle-class consumers who oppose industrial agriculture and promote a return to romanticized notions of agrarian relations to combat the alienation of modern urban life (Guthman, 2008a, 2011b). Popular author Michael Pollan and chef and educator Alice Waters call on consumers to “vote with their forks” and support social and environmental change by purchasing local and organic food (Guthman, 2002, 2008a).¹⁷

Critical food studies scholarship challenges the normative ideal held by the mainstream alternative food movement that promoting local and organic food is the means to achieving more environmentally sustainable and socially just food systems (S. Brown & Getz, 2008; Guthman, 2011a, 2014). These scholars argue that championing local eating as inherently more ecologically sustainable and socially just conflates spatial relations with social relations and ignores the inequality between places (Alkon, 2012). This “unreflexive localism” (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005) or “local trap” (Born & Purcell, 2006) fails to acknowledge that inequality and institutionalized racism, classism, and sexism are not bound to scale, and in fact are often manifested at the local level.

Scholars and activists alike have critiqued alternative food movements for being exclusionary and even racist in their efforts to educate others about “healthy eating” and trying to convince consumers to “pay the full cost” of “good food” (Alkon, 2012; Guthman, 2011b; Slocum, 2006). Much of the logic underpinning this work reduces structural inequality to cultural difference and/or lack of education, enrolling colorblindness, ignoring white privilege, and universalizing white values and consumption practices as normative and superior (Alkon & McCullen, 2011; Guthman, 2011b). Further, alternative

¹⁷ To his credit, Pollan has centered the issue of labor exploitation in his more recent food systems advocacy writing (Besky & Brown, 2015).

food discourses often romanticize an agrarian past, thereby whitewashing a history of patriarchal and racist land and labor relations (Alkon, 2012; Guthman, 2011b, 2014).

The neoliberal tensions of market-based entrepreneurial strategies and voluntary certification and labeling schemes have also been the subject of scholarly critique and debate. Whereas the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s organized to alter power relations between labor and capital through collective action, many current initiatives seek to transform the food system through market mechanisms alone. Organic and fair trade voluntary certification schemes have been partially successful in “reembedding” the market in social relations and internalizing environmental and social externalities (Jaffee, 2007, 2012).¹⁸ However, their success also makes them susceptible to corporate cooptation and regulatory capture, opening up a new channel for capital accumulation and contributing to the weakening of certification standards (Guthman, 2014; Jaffee, 2007, 2012; Jaffee & Howard, 2009). As market mechanism, regulatory form, and social cause, these strategies often contradict the radical ideological aims of alternative food initiatives, potentially foreclose on collective action approaches, and reinforce state withdrawal from the regulation of capital (S. Brown & Getz, 2008; Guthman, 2014; Jaffee, 2012; Jaffee & Howard, 2009).

Many alternative food initiatives focus on protecting consumer rights, achieving environmental sustainability, and supporting family farmers, without paying adequate attention to the struggles of food chain workers (Gray, 2014; Levkoe et al., 2016; Minkoff-Zern, 2017). Research on the labor relations of alternative food production, particularly

¹⁸ For more on Polanyi’s notions of embeddedness see Daniel Jaffee’s work cited here and *The Great Transformation* (Polanyi, 1944).

Community Supported Agriculture and Organic certified production, reveal that they diverge little from the industrial status quo (Galt, 2013; Guthman, 2014; Shreck et al., 2006). Consumers tend to assume that the majority of the work done to produce their local and organic foods is done by farm owners, overlooking the fact that even small-scale alternative farmers typically hire farmworkers and often engage in exploitative labor practices (Alkon, 2013; Gray, 2014). Even well-intentioned organic and local food activists sometimes reproduce social boundaries between U.S.-born organic farmers and non-citizen immigrant farmworkers (Sbicca, 2018). In short, alternative food practices might generate local and organic food for consumers who are willing and able to pay the premium, but do little to transform inequitable relations of food production and consumption.

II. Food Justice: Bringing Labor Back into the Food System and Scholarship

Alternative food initiatives that take an explicit social justice orientation are better positioned to challenge structural inequality in the food system. Food justice advocates recognize that the production, distribution, and consumption of food is organized around race and class. Many communities of color have been stripped of their access to the means of producing food, but are exploited as farmworkers, prison laborers, and other underpaid and unpaid food workers, many of whom disproportionately lack access to healthy food (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Liu & Apollon, 2011; Sbicca, 2018). The food justice movement asks who wins, who loses and in what ways, from both the industrial food system and the market-based alternative initiatives that challenge it (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2013). In their review of food justice literature, Kirsten Valentine Cadieux and Rachel Slocum (2015) identify four points of food justice intervention: confronting social trauma

and inequity related to race, gender, and class; designing exchange mechanisms based on communal reliance and control; creating innovative methods of sharing and utilizing land outside of the market; and pursuing labor relations that are economically viable for workers and not dependent on women's unpaid reproductive labor. In his more recent book *Food Justice Now! Deepening the Roots of Social Struggle*, Joshua Sbicca (2018) argues that truly transformational food justice organizing broadens the terrain of struggle beyond food to tackle the roots of injustice: colonialism, neoliberal global capitalism, and institutionalized racism. He profiles food justice activists in Oakland, California, who are organizing at the intersection of prison reform and abolition, restorative justice, and permaculture to produce living-wage jobs for formerly incarcerated people and create space for healing from the trauma of mass incarceration. He also demonstrates how the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 770 is working with food justice activists to promote healthy food and improve the livelihoods of immigrants working in L.A.'s grocery and food processing industries. Drawing lessons from these examples, he calls on the food justice movement to unite with other social movements to build collective power. Crucial to this process, he argues, is that food justice activists develop class consciousness and build solidarity with other workers.

Many other food and labor studies scholars have also raised the centrality of labor issues to food justice (Besky & Brown, 2015; Myers & Sbicca, 2015; Sachs, Allen, Terman, Hayden, & Hatcher, 2013; Sbicca, 2015). For their part, food justice activists have begun advocating for farmworker rights, for example by supporting boycotts, general strikes, and marches organized by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in Florida (Field & Bell, 2013). Yet, these activists have paid less attention to the non-agricultural food labor

that takes place in the foodservice and retail industries (Coplen, 2018; K. P. Hunt, 2016). Of the 21.5 million people who labor in the food system in the U.S., 65% work in the foodservice and retail industries (Food Chain Workers Alliance and Solidarity Research Cooperative, 2016). A 2011 study of the restaurant industry in eight major metropolitan regions revealed that wage theft, racial discrimination, and sexual harassment are rampant, and nearly 90% of restaurant workers do not have paid sick leave (Restaurant Opportunity Centers United, 2011). Organizations such as the Food Chain Workers Alliance and Restaurant Opportunity Centers United (ROC) argue that movements for sustainability and ethical consumption need to prioritize the struggles of workers throughout the food chain (Brady, 2014; Lo, 2014; The Restaurant Opportunities Center of Michigan, Restaurant Opportunity Centers United, & Southeast Michigan Restaurant Industry Coalition, 2013).

Recent scholarship has taken up the task of investigating labor exploitation and organizing in the foodservice and retail industries. Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2001) was an early exposé of the exploitation of fast-food workers and meatpackers, and Marc Doussard's (2013) research demonstrates how the mid-sized food retail industry actively produces inequality by downgrading labor—paying low-wages, creating poor working conditions, and violating labor law. Kathleen Hunt's (2016) research demonstrates how ROC's #LivingOffTips campaign enables tipped servers to articulate their experience of the subminimum wage (the federal minimum wage for tipped workers is only \$2.13), thereby making their struggle more visible to the public and to alternative food movement activists, who tend to privilege production-oriented food system labor. My research with Jennifer Gaddis (2017) on the National School Lunch Program demonstrates how metrics that account only for speed and volume of service devalue care labor and undermine the

potential for this \$12.5 billion public program to foster ecological and feminist goals. In another article, I demonstrate that an urban political ecology lens can push critical food systems literature to better engage with labor along the entire supply chain (Coplen, 2018). More research—from a range of disciplinary perspectives—is needed to investigate paths towards building workers’ negotiating power across the food chain. Because sustainability branding is gaining power in conscious consumers’ minds and reinforcing consumption as the primary path towards environmental sustainability, it is especially important to investigate labor exploitation in the industries that distribute, prepare, and serve local and organic food.

III. Local Sourcing and Community Embeddedness: Portraits of Four Sustainability-Branded Institutions

The four Portland-based institutions profiled below offer opportunities to investigate the tensions and contradictions of sustainability discourse in the sustainability-branded foodservice and retail industries. I refer to these businesses as “institutions,” because they have each played an important role in shaping Portland’s food industry over the past 20 to 30 years. They operate on different scales and through different business models, but they all tout a commitment to environmental sustainability, animal rights, and local and organic sourcing. Of course, sustainability branding and attention to sourcing are not unique to these four institutions, but are quickly becoming the norm, rather than the exception, in Portland and other “sustainable cities” (Heying, 2010).

A. New Seasons Market: “The Friendliest Store in Town”

New Seasons Market (New Seasons) was founded in 2000 by “three pioneers of the natural foods industry,”¹⁹ including Brian Rohter.²⁰ Rohter was a member of the Portland/Multnomah Food Policy Council and penned op-eds for *The Oregonian* newspaper in support of various progressive legislative causes, including country of origin food labeling and fair electoral campaign financing (Rohter, 2002; Rohter & Mundy, 2010). In 2013, former Starbucks executive Wendy Collie took the helm as president and CEO, publishing her own progressive op-eds in support of raising Oregon’s minimum wage and banning no-cause evictions (Collie, 2017; Collie & Randall, 2015).

New Seasons’ innovative business model centers on sourcing both conventional and alternative-branded products. This hybrid model, which makes room for Doritos and Coca-Cola as well as \$13 6-ounce jars of local nut butter, is distinct from the Whole Foods model, where the majority of products are higher-end and organic. New Seasons offers the best of both worlds, according to one worker-organizer who calls this model “revolutionary” and “radical” for its time, because people can “get whatever [they] need in one stop” and not be judged for purchasing conventional items. Breaking out of what another worker-organizer refers to as the “food police model,” enables New Seasons to cater to organic purists, conventional shoppers, and everyone in between. One worker-organizer (who uses gender-neutral “they” pronouns) explains their take on the company’s perspective: “Everybody’s money is green! We don’t care what you buy, as long as you

¹⁹ <https://endeavourcapital.com/ec/new-seasons-market/>

²⁰ Rohter is the former owner of the Portland-area grocery chain Nature’s Northwest, which became an independent subsidiary of the General Nutrition Company in the mid-1990s, was purchased by Wild Oats in 1999, and then later by Whole Foods. <http://www.referenceforbusiness.com/history2/66/New-Seasons-Market.html>

buy it here!” Indeed, mainstream grocery stores have caught on to this trend and are now stocking local and organic products and even producing their own private-label organic brands (e.g., Kroger’s Simple Truth).

The success of the New Seasons model is apparent: the company has expanded at a rate of two new stores per year, totaling 21 stores in Oregon, Washington, and Northern California, and employing over 4,000 workers. This fast growth and financial reorganization has contributed to the degradation of both working conditions and sustainability practices over the years. However, according to a longtime worker who witnessed these dramatic changes, New Seasons has maintained their image as a locally owned company committed to the “triple bottom line” of achieving environmental, social, and economic sustainability, while simultaneously slashing workers’ wages and benefits and engaging in union-busting, which I detail in a later section. In fact, amid its growth and reorganization, New Seasons became the first grocer to achieve B-Corporation status, a private certification based on “social and environmental performance.” B-Corporation status enables New Seasons to cement their image as a place where consumers can vote with their dollars. Indeed, the B-Corporation website reads as an ode to consumption politics: “You cast your vote every day with the choices you make—what you buy, where you work and who you do business with. You have the power to make your voice heard beyond the ballot box. Every day is election day.”²¹

²¹ <https://bcorporation.net>

B. Portobello Vegan Trattoria: Pioneer of Vegan Cuisine

Operating on the smallest scale of the four institutions profiled here, Portobello Vegan Trattoria opened in 2008 as a fine-dining restaurant and bar with a staff of around 20 workers. Portobello featured, according to its website, “the best and freshest organic, local produce, with fine olive oils, artisan vegan cheeses and charcuterie, locally made pickled vegetables and the finest breads in Southeast Portland.”²² Their website also boasts that the restaurant’s table tops were made by a local “green remodeler” with wood sourced “from an abandoned, decades-old barn in rural Oregon,” which “preserves and celebrates...the embodied narrative of Oregon timber, farming, craftsmanship, and now, culinary arts.” However, Portobello’s real claim to fame was its elevation of vegan cuisine. The head chef was (and still is) considered to be “one of the pioneers of vegan cooking in Portland,” according to an article in the food and dining review site *Eater PDX* (Bamman, 2016). One worker-organizer recalls serving diners who had traveled to Portland from around the world specifically to eat at Portobello after they had read about the restaurant and head check in the vegan lifestyle magazine *VegNews*.

When asked about the ethics and values of Portobello, one worker-organizer succinctly delineates the “brand” of veganism that the owners subscribed to: “‘animal-rights-meat-is-murder-free-them-all vegans’ not like ‘plant-based-diet-let’s-be-healthier-environmental vegans.’” The restaurant regularly donated money to animal sanctuaries and rescue projects and, according to one worker, “had a policy of asking customers who were wearing egregious animal clothing to put [it] in their car.” Portobello’s owners—who had previously worked at the Red and Black Café, a vegan collective and a hub of Wobbly

²² <http://portobellopdx.com>

organizing until it closed in 2015—were celebrities in radical and vegan circles and were heralded for their commitment to animal liberation. However, worker-organizers cite many grievances related to working at Portobello, the most abhorrent of which was enduring verbal and physical abuse from the head chef, who espoused radical, feminist, and animal rights politics.

C. Grand Central Bakery: “Portland and Seattle’s Favorite Locally Owned Artisan Bakery”

Grand Central Bakery (Grand Central) opened its first sandwich shop in Seattle in 1989, “ignit[ing] a bread revolution,” according to its website, “by introducing rustic artisan loaves to Northwest tables.”²³ The company expanded to Portland in 1993 and has since grown to include five locations in Seattle and seven in Portland, together employing over 200 people. The popular regional wholesale and bakery chain serves sandwiches, soups, and salads and sells breads and pastries. The company also sells wholesale to restaurants and retail shops throughout the Northwest.

Like New Seasons, Grand Central is a certified B Corporation and prides itself on being family-owned and maintaining strong ties to the local community. In 2015, Grand Central general manager/co-owner Claire Randall co-authored an op-ed in *The Oregonian* with New Seasons CEO Wendy Collie in support of raising Oregon’s minimum wage “responsibly” (2015). In the article, Collie and Randall proclaim, “Both of our companies were founded on the idea that business can be a force for good, serving our staff, our communities and our planet as part of growing healthy businesses.” They go on to argue

²³ <https://www.grandcentralbakery.com/about/>

for “phased in” wage increases so that “companies can build them into their budgets sustainably” and for tiered increases that “account for the differences between urban and rural economies.” Their recommendations eventually came to fruition, when the Oregon Legislature passed an incremental, tiered minimum wage bill that undermined \$15 Now Oregon’s state-wide ballot initiative.

The company’s carefully cultivated image involves promoting their support of other family-owned businesses, for example, by highlighting their relationship with a family fishery that sources their salmon, according to one worker-organizer. “We partner with innovators and small mills,” their website reads, “to strengthen the local grain economy and shorten the time it takes for grain to get from field to bread.” By eating their bread, Grand Central implies, customers help shorten the supply chain and support small grain farmers.

Worker-organizers characterize Grand Central’s branding as “very progressive,” “forward thinking,” and “community-focused.” One describes the company as having a “‘for the people’ image,” and another notes that Grand Central takes pride in having its cafes serve as pick-up spots for Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares. “Values are at the heart of our company and sustainability touches everything we do,” reads the Grand Central website, “from where we buy ingredients to how we care for our employees and invest in our communities.” However, workers’ experiences with organizing against grievances at Grand Central—including health and safety issues related to recycling and composting practices as well as the inaccessibility of healthy food options—contradict the company’s effective branding.

D. Burgerville: “Serve with Love”

George Propstra opened the first Burgerville restaurant in Vancouver, Washington in 1961. The company has since grown to include 42 quick service restaurants that employ approximately 1,500 hourly workers in Washington and Oregon. A self-proclaimed “eco-conscious burger chain,” Burgerville is known for serving seasonal sandwiches, shakes, and other specialty items made from locally sourced ingredients. The company purchases wind energy credits and donates waste fryer oil for biodiesel processing. Burgerville also cultivates an image of being an integral part of the local community by advertising its support of local farmers and fundraising for community groups.

Burgerville uses “eco-conscious” branding to set it apart from other fast-food chains and to plug into a growing market for locally sourced food in Portland. Burgerville’s hybrid slow/fast-food model mirrors New Seasons Market’s hybrid local/conventional model, enabling Burgerville to make ethical consumption accessible to fast-food consumers while simultaneously making fast food accessible to alternative foodies. Local sourcing is a smart marketing strategy in a city where many consumers expect access to the farmers who produce the ingredients in their food. Bucolic pictures of local farmers and ranchers are a hallmark of Burgerville’s advertising, both on social media and in their restaurants. The company’s framing of local sourcing is designed to convey to consumers that when “you’re buying Burgerville you’re helping out one of the farmers in your community,” explains one worker. The restaurant’s menu boards feature not only photos of the burgers themselves, but “pictures of people on an actual ranch, harvesting stuff,” the worker continues. Another worker describes posters designed to tell the story of Burgerville’s seasonal shakes by showcasing farmers walking through an orchard with

hazelnuts underfoot and a farmer couple standing in a strawberry field. Burgerville caters to conscious consumers by assigning “a story to the food,” according to one worker, and using imagery of local farms and farmers to “shorten the distance between land and the fast-food kitchen,” according to another. In these ways, Burgerville paints a picture of “where food comes from,” to quote a trope from the alternative food movement.

Burgerville faces challenges to balancing their commitment to sourcing local ingredients and remaining profitable and competitive in the fast-food market. In May 2016, Burgerville CEO Jeff Harvey spoke at the Ted-Talks inspired event VANTalks in Vancouver. During his presentation, Harvey discussed how the company struggles to source local and organic ingredients at a cheap price point, and admitted that Burgerville had not sourced local chicken for the past 20 years. Despite not sourcing all ingredients locally, Burgerville’s high-profile marketing of a few seasonal ingredients that they do source locally seems to spill over into their overall brand. However, the ways in which consumers map sustainability branding onto Burgerville’s employment practices are more complicated and subtle, a subject I turn to next.

IV. Sustainability Branding ≠ Just Labor Practices

These four profiles reveal how Portland’s foodservice and retail businesses cultivate values-based discourse and imagery that attracts diners to “vote with their forks,” for local, organic, and sustainable food. Many consumers also assume that their ethically branded companies of choice are necessarily good employers. Several of the worker-organizers I interviewed described conversations in which friends, acquaintances, and/or customers communicated an idealized vision of working conditions in sustainability-

branded institutions. A former Portobello employee describes how the owners' well-known animal liberation politics translated into customers' perceptions of what it must have been like to work there. "From the outside," she notes, "there was this picture that we were all living this dream by working there." Workers at all four companies note that when they mention where they work/worked, people tend to respond with enthusiasm: "Oh! I've heard it's so great to work there!" or "Oh, that must've been *amazing*!" Worker-organizers recall conveying the reality of their working conditions to customers who reacted in visceral ways. One former New Seasons employee who uses gender neutral "they" pronouns describes how people would literally "put their hands over their ears, close their eyes, shake their heads, and go, 'No, no, no, don't tell me that, don't tell me that!'" when they would try to explain how terrible the company's employment practices were "because they know it's true, but they don't want to be responsible for it." People "love their image of New Seasons, they love how good they feel when they go in there to shop," the worker-organizer continues, describing the affective component of conscious consumerism. When challenged with the idea that the "amazing, good people who work there...are maybe not being taken care of the way they know they should be," conscious consumers struggle to reconcile their assumptions. A similar phenomenon happens when Burgerville worker-organizers give presentations about their union organizing to church groups and other union locals. One BVWU member sums up the collective response: "Oh my God! I can't believe Burgerville! I always thought they were different!"

The contradiction between customers' idealized vision of the workplace and the actual reality of workers' experiences presents a serious ethical dilemma for people who feel that the places where they dine and shop are an extension of their personal values and

politics. The resulting cognitive dissonance is a symptom of the broader political climate under capitalism, wherein consumers feel disenfranchised and are vulnerable to marketing appeals that frame individual choice and purchasing power as the primary means of effecting change. Rather than relating to workers, identifying as workers themselves, and organizing collectively to push back against consolidated power, customers identify primarily as individual consumers and lean into their perceived purchasing power to affect change through market mechanisms (S. Brown & Getz, 2008; Guthman, 2007, 2008b, 2014; Jaffee, 2007, 2012). This movement of political action out of the public sphere and into the private sphere embodies the logic that social and environmental problems are a product of bad individual choices rather than symptoms of structural forces bearing down on social and natural systems. In these ways, consumers' "unreflexive localism" (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005) and propensity to "vote with their forks" is both a symptom of and a response to the alienating politics of consumption under capitalism and a clear artifact of the neoliberal focus on markets and individualism.

The failure of consumption politics to deliver justice for workers is not lost on a Grand Central worker-organizer who raises "the question of ethics under capitalism, ethical consumption under capitalism," continuing, "you can *try* I guess, but it doesn't really exist; there's always gonna be workers, there's always gonna be problems." Sustainability branding leads consumers to believe that if they spend money at a certain place they are "good people," she says, but "problems" lie up and down the food chain, from the exploitation of migrant farmworkers to grocery store workers stocking shelves. Debunking the conscious consumerism myth by exposing worker exploitation can lead a consumer to think that they are a bad person, she continues, but in reality "you're just a person and you

need groceries. But don't walk around telling everyone how amazing it is and how you're supporting this beautiful B corporation."

Masking exploitative working conditions—from the migrant farmworker picking the apples to the grocery worker stocking those apples in the produce aisle—is fundamental to maintaining the green and ethical veneer. Another former New Seasons worker explains that if customers would "just open their eyes," they would see that workers are literally running around the store to keep up because they are so understaffed, but "people don't see that because labor is invisible, especially when we want that organic apple...If [customers] like a place, they don't really want to know what is happening behind the curtains." As this worker reveals, the promise of ethical consumption depends on shielding consumers from the plight of workers, because ignorance is (sustainable) bliss. This blissful ignorance is maintained in part by customers identifying primarily as consumers who are being served by workers rather than identifying as workers standing in solidarity with other workers. Sbicca investigates a similar phenomenon of social boundary-making among local food activists who maintain an "us" (alternative producers and food movement activists) and a "them" (immigrant farmworkers) needed to keep the food system running (2018). More broadly speaking, the promise of the "progressive" city requires that people ignore the plight of workers who, in many ways, create the progressive culture that Portlanders consume.

Worker-organizers' descriptions of ethical consumption in progressive Portlandia meld into one narrative that describes how the public conflates ethical branding with ethical employment practices across Portland's sustainability-branded foodservice and retail

industries.²⁴ While the labor of farmers and ranchers features prominently in their advertising, the companies' own labor practices are all but missing from their sustainability branding. "[We've] been erased from the narrative of their brand identity," says one worker, "I don't think the community is trained, or I don't think it's an instinctive part of our relationship to ask [how workers are treated]." If consumers did ask how workers were treated, they would see that sustainability branding and sustainable working conditions are not one and the same.

Many of the worker-organizers I interviewed understand the contradictions of their employer's sustainability branding in an explicit and intimate way—they live out these contradictions on a daily basis. While customers consider Burgerville to be a better alternative to fast food, workers are paid at or just above minimum wage, face erratic scheduling that employers like Burgerville advertise as "flexible," and suffer other degraded labor practices that are common within the broader foodservice and retail industries. One Burgerville worker notes that he and his coworkers are up against a "chafa" [Spanish for cheap] scheduling system. "They have shit pay, because it's intentional," he says, "They could pay their workers better easily. They choose not to, because [it's their] model. It's a poverty-wage model." Another Burgerville worker points to a contradiction between the company's community fundraising efforts and its "unwillingness to fix real problems at the core by just paying their workers what they need to survive...That's not helping the community whatsoever." In this worker's mind, the company engages in fundraising that "brings in business" and cultivates Burgerville's image as a community

²⁴ Portlandia is a term that was popularized by the sketch comedy television series with the same name that mocks the hip, craft, and sustainable culture and imaginary of Portland.

supporter while ignoring the very real needs of workers, many of whom are living in poverty. If Burgerville isn't ensuring that workers are meeting their basic needs, she implies, then how can the company truly be considered a community supporter?

Workers also express frustration at how their employer's commitment to supporting local suppliers appears to be at odds with the way the company treats the workers who they employ directly. One BVWU worker explains that Burgerville positions itself as "help[ing] out impoverished organic ranchers" and "supporting the farms that none of the other fast-food places buy from" in order to cultivate a "humanitarian" and "sustainable" image. This stands in contrast to how "they treat their workers like mindless robotic drones" and "sub-human," she continues. A former New Seasons worker regards the company's support of farmers, fisherman, and other local producers as "really admirable," but, in contrast, she is "running around the store, sweating, not making any money at all, just barely over minimum wage, and then being told that I need to work harder and smarter—even though I'm literally running and sweating."

Worker-organizers at Grand Central make a distinction between what they see as engaging with "social responsibility" by sourcing local and ethically produced ingredients, versus practicing "social justice" or "food justice," which they imply requires just treatment of workers. One worker in particular notes that Grand Central does a great job at hyping social responsibility, but comes up short on the social justice side. He elaborates, "Similar to Burgerville, [Grand Central says,] 'Oh, everything we do is *local*, we only buy chicken that's been *free-range*...the eggs come from [Valley Farms].'²⁵ But that's the way that they choose to engage with any kind of social responsibility. *Nothing* with social justice

²⁵ This business name has been changed to protect identities.

whatsoever...they treat workers like completely disposable resources...They act as though they're some great, benevolent 'leader of people' to help 'bring on this movement of local food.' But in reality, they're the most brutal that I've worked for." Another worker, who has a particular commitment to sustainable food systems work, shares a similar sentiment. When asked whether she saw her experience at Grand Central as connected to her work in sustainable food systems, she replies flatly, "No, I didn't, because it felt like such lip service to me." When pressed to explain, she notes that while Grand Central's sourcing may have been "better than Panera...it also felt really vapid, because it wasn't any kind of food justice in any profound sense, especially working there and having experiences as a worker, not feeling respected or treated fairly by the owners or the management." This deep sense of injustice was shared by her coworkers, she says, whose general sentiment was that the company cares a great deal about "these greens from Sauvie Island, but they don't care about us at all."

This contradiction was particularly stark at Portobello, where it manifested in an abusive and tyrannical boss. Workers note that they were "vastly underpaid" and endured verbal, emotional, and even physical abuse from the head chef/co-owner. Workers argued that his anti-racist, feminist, and "vaguely anarchist" political commitments were in direct opposition to his behavior as, according to one worker, "a white male abuser who happens to believe in some leftist or radical ideas, kind of, but not in practice." Another worker elaborates on the contradictions, noting that while the chef seemed to believe in "socialism and maybe even communism, he was a small business owner underpaying his workers." She continues, expressing her attitude towards her former boss, "You are profiting from

my labor straight up, and you're abusing me while you do it, so if you think that you are an anti-hierarchical-thinking dude, you're wrong. You are in total denial."

While the verbal and physical abuse endured by Portobello workers is an extreme example, all workers I interviewed were subject to some combination of poverty wages, erratic scheduling, and unsafe working conditions, which I explore in more detail in Chapter 3 through the experiences of Burgerville workers. These precarious conditions strained workers' ability to socially reproduce themselves and their families—or to perform the mental, manual, and emotional work and care necessary to fulfill their needs (Brenner & Laslett, 1991). Meanwhile, they were doing underpaid work to reproduce others—mainly white, middle-class consumers who were either willfully ignorant, or chose to overlook the toll that exploitation took on foodservice and retail workers. In the next section, I discuss in greater depth how sustainability discourse masks the racialized divisions of production and consumption that are ubiquitous in the sustainability-branded food industry.

V. (White) Sustainability Branding and (Green) Capitalism

Portland's sustainability-branded foodservice and retail industries offer a lens into the racial tensions of ethical production and consumption. Mirroring the conscious consumer discourse embedded in most alternative food initiatives, sustainability-branded advertising is designed to appeal to progressive, white, middle-class consumers; it valorizes the labor of farmers and chefs, who are predominantly white and male, while rendering the labor of women and workers of color invisible. For example, when asked what Burgerville's messaging around its tagline "fresh, local, sustainable" looks like, one worker

emphasizes the “aesthetic” of “the farmer with their hands dirty,” noting that “they’re always white and farm *owners*,” as opposed to farmworkers. Referencing an image of a local white farmer and his son that the company displayed to promote seasonal onion rings sourced from Walla Walla, Washington, one worker of color comments, “It’s like, are these *really* the people that farm your food? Probably not.” Here, this worker implies that the majority of labor required to grow and harvest food is done not by white farmers, but by farmworkers who are predominantly migrant workers of color. By keeping farmworkers of color out of advertising materials, Burgerville essentially keeps them from entering customers’ consciousness.

Considering the unappetizing reality of farmworker exploitation—even along supposedly “sustainable” supply chains (Alkon, 2012; Galt, 2013; Gray, 2014; Guthman, 2014; Shreck et al., 2006)—it is unsurprising that sustainability-branded establishments omit farmworkers from their carefully curated bucolic branding. One former worker describes how early on in their tenure at New Seasons, the company advertised Temple Grandin’s Certified Humane Program, which “was supposed to be addressing *all* parts, not just that animals were raised humanely and treated humanely in slaughtering them (laughs), but that also workers were treated humanely in that process.” However, over time, the store stopped carrying meat products that were labeled with the certification. When the worker was invited to tour a lamb ranch supplier and asked the owner why products were no longer labeled as Certified Humane, the rancher answered that although the ranch was able to meet the qualifications for the treatment of animals, they were not able to maintain the qualifications for the treatment of workers. The underlying racial implications here point to the question of whose labor is valued (predominantly white farm and ranch owners) and

whose labor is de-prioritized or invisibilized at best, and hyper-exploited at worst (predominantly farmworkers and other food workers of color). This example demonstrates the complicated ways in which the neoliberal tensions of voluntary certification schemes intersect with continuing legacies of racial oppression in agricultural production. When labor standards that were meant to protect the wellbeing of farmworkers proved to be too big a burden, this ranch owner reverted to the status quo, reproducing inequality in who bears the burden of the undervalued reproductive labor required to feed others.

Race and class intersect in other illuminating ways along the “sustainable” supply chains that feed into Portland’s foodservice and retail industries. While owners paint themselves as, according to one worker, “stand[ing] shoulder to shoulder with the farmers” by posting pictures on social media of themselves picking apples in an orchard, they are also quick to distance themselves from labor disputes along their supply chains. For example, when workers represented by the United Farm Workers (UFW) went public with grievances at the Beef Northwest feedlot in Boardman, Oregon—which is part of the cooperative Country Natural Beef that supplies New Seasons, Burgerville, and Whole Foods—the CEO of New Seasons wrote a blog post ensuring readers that the company “is not a party in the dispute.” “We have a great deal of respect for both the United Farm Workers and Beef Northwest Feeders,” Brian Rohter continues, and “we have no way of knowing who is right or wrong.”²⁶ Ten years later New Seasons sided with farm owners when farmworkers were organizing against wage theft and hostile working conditions at Sakuma Brothers berry farm in Washington. A worker lays bare the racial implications of

²⁶ <http://newseasonsmarket.blogspot.com/2007/11/whats-story-with-country-natural-beef.html>

New Seasons refusing to honor a boycott of Driscoll's—Sakuma Brothers' largest client—despite pleas from her and her coworkers. She recalls,

Instead of investigating [it] themselves—going to the farms and seeing what's happening—managers were telling us that everything was fine. And we pushed back against that, saying, 'No, nothing is fine if workers are willing to put their livelihood [on the line through] a boycott'... Instead of addressing it...they refused, which to me is another form of racism, because they're not following through. Their whole thing with these growers is to figure out what's going on. They're like 'Oh, the Driscoll's are great people.' Well that may be, but there are people living in shacks and not being able to support their families and having horrible working conditions...They wouldn't get ahead of it, and I was like, 'Let's go look! Let's drive down there! Let's go! Get in the car, Wendy [the CEO of New Seasons at the time], I'll drive!'

In this way, New Seasons makes it clear to workers that its allegiances lie with farm owners at the expense of farmworkers. The worker identifies this story as an example of “another literal whitewashing of what's coming from farm to table.” This story is particularly ironic considering that New Seasons proudly displays a mural featuring a bunch of grapes, a head of lettuce, and the United Farmworkers logo serving as a patterned backdrop for the vibrantly painted Cesar Chavez quote, “It is always about people,” in the parking garage of one of their Portland locations.

Other sustainability-branded establishments are also guilty of appropriating and whitewashing working-class history through their branding. A former Grand Central worker tells a story of being recruited by the website manager to write up a mini-history of Irish Soda Bread to advertise for St. Patrick's Day. Irish Soda Bread, the worker-organizer explains, “was a bread that really, really poor folks had to make because they couldn't get the good flour...They'd use potash, which is a precursor to baking soda or baking powder, to leaven it.” He expressed frustration at how the manager took his mini-history, in which

he highlighted how the bread was a staple of the Irish underclasses, “and just whitewashed the piss out of it!” In his mind, the manager was making the piece “completely palatable to the upper middle-class, bougie, ‘I’m doing something with my money’ liberal.” In other words, he felt that the working-class element was integral to telling the history of Irish Soda Bread, but was left out because it did not appeal to Grand Central’s target customer base.

While this history buff was acutely aware of Grand Central’s whitewashing of Irish working-class politics, many of the workers I interviewed shared an understanding of the racial politics of green-washing, sustainability-washing, or “friendly washing,” according to one New Seasons worker. Maintaining an image of what one Burgerville worker-organizer refers to as “white sustainability,” requires more than just promoting white farmers and chefs in advertisements, it also requires maintaining whiteness behind the counter or checkout. Cultivating whiteness through advertising and through employment practices goes hand-in-hand. The worker explains that Burgerville’s image of “we’re better than fast food!” involves

hiring more white people and having white people on all their photos and white farmers and happy white managers. Obviously, it’s not universal, but I feel like that’s something I hear when my coworkers get a second job at Taco Bell...and they’re like, ‘Yeah, nobody speaks English there,’...which that’s kind of a racist thing they’re saying and the way they’re saying it. They’re not just stating a fact, they’re very much making a judgement. But I feel like that does reflect a tendency around hiring and part of the Burgerville image...One of their largest target customer bases is the white middle class, or the white upper class, which obviously in Portland is a large demographic. But I think that’s definitely a piece of it, of their image. So yeah, local, sustainable, white, better than other fast food.

In this worker’s mind, Burgerville maintains their image of “local, sustainable, white” by both featuring white people in their advertising and by hiring more white people to work

in their stores, implying that white people feel more comfortable patronizing restaurants where they see other white people working. Burgerville brands itself as “better than other fast food” by looking and sounding less like Taco Bell—by hiring fewer Black, Brown, and Spanish-speaking workers. Indeed, Burgerville uses the E-verify program to prevent undocumented workers from applying for jobs. Workers notice that applicants of color get hired (and promoted) at a much lower rate compared to their white counterparts, and workers of color tell stories of racial discrimination and harassment in the workplace. Some workers are also complicit, exhibiting racist behavior and language on the shop floor. Keeping workers of color out of the workplace, and keeping them *down* by not promoting them when they are let into the workplace, positions Burgerville as “better”—that is, whiter—than other fast-food establishments.

Racial politics at New Seasons have played out in a more public way. One worker-organizer recalls the company recruiting workers of color in an attempt to do damage control after facing community opposition before opening up a new store in a historically African American neighborhood. The company initially hired people of color from the “local” neighborhood, the worker recalls, but they did not necessarily retain those employees:

The image is ‘we’re local, we’re super local, these [employees] are people who are in the neighborhood!’ But no, actually, especially that store at Williams; there were people who lived in the neighborhood who worked there when that store opened, and there are still a few left, but most of them were gone in the first few months. They made a big deal of putting lots of people of color in the front end, cashiering, and most of those people are gone. I don’t know what the circumstances of them leaving were...but I think a lot of them were fired, I don’t know for what reasons. I mean, other workers have talked about it, we see it...They’re really good at tokenizing their community engagement.

While the circumstances under which these employees of color left this store are unknown, this worker's perception is that the company tokenized workers of color and then pushed them out. Rather than seeking to maintain whiteness from the outset, New Seasons instead initially hired people of color to maintain their "local" image of community embeddedness. However, this did not last, and the racial makeup of the store became whiter over time.

These stories shed light on how companies actively cultivate (and sometimes default back to) a (white) image of sustainability to appeal to a particular customer demographic. The whiteness of ethical consumption and production are intimately connected through the valorization of white labor and the erasure of Black and Brown labor along the entire supply chain, all the way to the workers who stock, prepare, and serve "fresh, local, sustainable" food. Further, as predominantly white customers perform their environmental values by eating at sustainability-branded institutions, they code these spaces as white, alienating many people of color and poor people (Henson & Munsey, 2014; Ramírez, 2015)—including workers who make conscious consumption possible, but, as I examine in the next section, cannot afford to participate.

VI. When Workers Cannot Afford the Premium on Sustainability

A glaring contradiction of sustainability branding is that those working to put sustainable food on customers' plates cannot always afford to feed themselves and their families, much less pay the premium prices for the healthy, local, and organic food they serve to others. While some workers who I interviewed express a shared commitment to sustainability and local sourcing, nearly all of them map wealth and whiteness onto the food they serve, demonstrating that sustainability branding is both financially and

culturally inaccessible to the very workers who make the “fresh, local, sustainable” food that foodies enjoy and companies profit from. This is consistent with other research on workers’ perceptions of the “class and racial fissures” of the alternative food movement (Sbicca, 2018, p. 101). For example, when asked whether sustainability appeals to her coworkers, one Burgerville worker illustrates this phenomenon, noting that most of them “would never think of going to Burgerville” if it weren’t for their 70% discount. “It’s not that the idea of local, sustainable, fresh food isn’t associated with good things in their heads,” she explains, “but it doesn’t seem like a realm that’s particularly accessible or normalized for most of my coworkers.” She classifies the consumption of local, sustainable food as “a very classed and raced thing,” noting that it’s not affordable. “Or what is affordable at Burgerville,” she continues, “is the basic, boring cheeseburger that you could get at any other fast-food store.” Another worker-organizer agrees, stating that although Burgerville advertises a locally sourced alternative to fast food, in reality workers view what they are serving as “overpriced fast food,” because they see the ingredients that go into the food and know that much of it is *not* local or organic. Even with their employee discounts, which range from 15 to 70% in the institutions I studied, workers are often unable to afford the healthy and substantial food items on the menu.

The premium on sustainability puts the food that workers stock, prepare, and serve out of their reach, forcing them to purchase food at conventional grocery stores and fast-food chains. A Grand Central worker notes that her coworkers would go around the corner to Jack-in-the-Box on their lunchbreaks to eat the very food that is antithetical to the values that their employer was promoting. “[Grand Central] is saying, ‘This is bad food, don’t support this kind of food system,’” she notes, referring to Jack-in-the-Box, “and yet, most

of their workers can only afford to eat that food. So that always struck me as ironic and unfortunate.” Another worker clearly articulates this central tension for workers in the sustainability-branded food industry, noting that Grand Central is inaccessible to “actual working-class people—we can’t eat there.” Instead, he continues, the company is catering to “people that think the only political power you have is the vote in your checkbook...it’s about making people feel good for paying more and casting a stigma on people that can’t. It’s *inherently* classist...Saying, ‘Oh, you need to pay a little bit more for food’ to people who can’t pay for rent, is just outrageous.” Voting with one’s fork is obviously not accessible to everyone, particularly to the workers who are making such faux democracy possible in the first place.

The inaccessibility of sustainability-branded food to those who make it is particularly glaring in relation to the amount of food that gets wasted in these industries. Workers at Burgerville, for example, cannot use their employee discount to purchase food at the end of their shift to take home for themselves and/or their families, which according to one worker-organizer is a particularly egregious policy in light of the amount of food that the company is “throwing out, *every single day*” that could “feed *a lot* of people.” Managers sometimes cite food safety code in justifying their policy about throwing away food that doesn’t end up getting served to customers. However, for workers facing food insecurity, this argument falls flat. One worker argued that the food should be salvaged and made available to workers or donated to a soup kitchen: “There’s gotta be a way, people!” he argues, “You’re throwing stuff *out, food out*. There has to be a way that we can work this out.”

A similar dynamic exists at New Seasons, where seemingly unsustainable waste management policies fly in the face of the company's carefully cultivated image. One worker tells a story of store-wide refrigeration systems breaking down and the company requiring all perishable food to be disposed of. The refrigeration malfunction resulted in the store disposing of three dumpsters full of food, one of which "broke because it was so full," the worker notes. The company then prohibited workers from salvaging the food, the worker recalls, and in fact threatened to fire workers if they took any of it home. "It's *food*," the worker continues with frustration, "It's fancy fucking expensive food. It's cured salmon and shit like that, and all the yogurt and all the cheese—*everything*." According to the worker, the company stationed a store manager outside all night long to guard the dumpster "to make sure that no hungry people were eating that food." The worker points out the contrast between the company's "zero-waste image" and "situations like this where they dump it all into the garbage." These stories embody the contradictions of sustainability discourse in an industry where hungry workers are prohibited from consuming the fruits of their own labor or even consuming the waste of the "sustainable" foodservice and retail industries that their labor is built on.

VII. Scaling Up at the Expense of Workers and the Environment

Sustainability-branded companies face an interesting set of challenges as they grow and also seek to maintain their image as socially responsible, local businesses that are deeply embedded in the community. This phenomenon is primarily evident at New Seasons and Grand Central, where workers have felt the labor squeeze that has accompanied rapid expansion and financial reorganization. New Seasons has expanded at a rate of two new

stores per year, totaling 18 stores in Oregon, Washington, and Northern California. In 2013, New Seasons purchased the California-based grocery chain New Leaf Community Markets.²⁷ That same year, the private equity firm Endeavour Capital purchased a majority share in New Seasons, investing over \$17.5 million.²⁸ One of Endeavor’s investors is the Vancouver, Washington-based M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust—an organization that funds the anti-worker Freedom Foundation, the anti-LGBTQ hate group Alliance Defending Freedom, and several anti-choice “crisis pregnancy centers.” In the midst of its rapid expansion, New Seasons also became the first grocer to be certified as a B Corporation.

Grand Central’s expansion has taken a different form. Rather than opening up many additional retail locations, the company has instead focused on scaling up wholesale production. However, the growth and financial re-organization at both companies has been accompanied by backsliding with regards to sustainability practices—including waste, recycling, and local sourcing—and labor practices, including wages, benefits, and working conditions.

Both companies have dramatically restructured labor to accommodate larger scales of production. New Seasons developed a commissary and central kitchen to increase and streamline the production of high-profit-margin prepared foods. This not only resulted in high quantities of waste (e.g., single-use plastic containers that are not curbside recyclable), it also changed the nature of deli labor from a job “where people could make things every day” to one where workers just “open boxes and heat things up now,” according to one

²⁷ <https://www.bizjournals.com/portland/blog/real-estate-daily/2013/11/new-seasons-to-buy-californias-new.html>

²⁸ https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1592230/000159223013000001/xslFormDX01/primary_doc.xml

worker. Similarly, as Grand Central’s owners sought to supply more wholesale customers, they mechanized production and de-skilled labor dramatically. Whereas the majority of the bread was previously hand-formed by workers, management introduced large machines to shape the bread. Despite this significant change in the production process, according to worker-organizers, Grand Central continued to label machine-shaped breads as “artisanal” and “hand-formed.”

For both companies, scaling up meant outsourcing skill and labor to machines and, in the case of New Seasons, to other companies. Products such as sausage that were once handmade and smoked in the store eventually got “farmed out” and “shipped in,” according to a worker who had previously enjoyed making sausages by hand. The worker-organizer was frustrated by this change, describing the new sausages as “awful” and “gross.” The New Seasons bakery department experienced a parallel trend, when at one point during expansion the company began making most of its bread at a central kitchen. However, some New Seasons stores continued to make a handful of breads in in-store bakeries, which are a focal point for customers. According to one worker, the company strategically chose simple and cheap breads to make in-house in order to maintain the image that *everything* is being made in-house.

Although it is less clear what impact expansion has had on labor at Burgerville—perhaps because the company’s growth happened at a slower pace over a longer period of time—producing and serving “fresh, local, sustainable” food on a large scale squeezes workers there in unique ways. Burgerville workers are pressured to deliver sustainable food at fast-food prices and speeds. In this case, sustainability presents an added burden for workers, since working with fresh and local ingredients changes the nature of their “fast-

food” work. One worker articulates how workers are expected to occupy the unrealistic space between fast-food worker and seasoned chef. “It’s hard,” he says referring to the large amounts of work required, “...you gotta slice the tomatoes fresh. You gotta make the Walla Walla onion rings, which are this prep nightmare, because they are handmade...It’s a *fuck ton* of work. So, it’s harder than a McDonalds job. It’s not being a chef—all of those techniques [we use] are carefully planned out so people can do them...without, like, skills.” In short, the production of “fresh” locally sourced Walla Walla onion rings requires more time and skill than other fast food, but is not considered the “skilled” work of a “chef.” However, customers (and managers) still expect the food to be made quickly. Another worker explains that “it’s hard to make that food fresh and good for you and fast at the same time.” Managers set a “speed of service goal,” of three and a half minutes, which may be realistic for a regular burger, but becomes more challenging when preparing a seasonal brie turkey burger or making sure a customer’s gluten-free bun isn’t contaminated. “We’re trying to make this ‘better than fast food’ food for you,” the worker explains, “in the same time that a fast-food restaurant would. It’s a lot of pressure.”

Sustainability-branded companies juggle many costs associated with sustainability practices, which are oftentimes more labor intensive, as they scale and speed up production. While companies might advertise a “triple bottom line,” sustainability is primarily a branding tool, and actual sustainable production practices take a backseat to the primary bottom line—profit. This often requires squeezing labor and generating large quantities of waste. A Burgerville worker recalls discarding countless rubber gloves while portioning sweet potato fries and simultaneously staffing the drive-through cash register in order to meet his managers’ expectations of multi-tasking. Each time he was summoned to the

drive-through, he was forced to discard a glove. “I was having to use one glove per fry bag that I’m portioning,” he says, “I did several trays of these, like *tubs* of these fries. So, by the end of the day I just had this big garbage can that was half full of these rubber gloves...just so wasteful.” Of his own accord, this worker identifies a singular bottom-line priority: “Gotta get those labor costs down. They can’t afford to have somebody just sit there and prep sweet potato fries. It’s gotta be done in the 30 seconds in between cashing out cars, [otherwise] it’s a waste of labor.” Other Burgerville workers speculate that the company’s composting and recycling programs were phased out and scaled down, respectively, due to the labor required to maintain them. These stories demonstrate that as the company chases profit, they speed up production at the expense of workers and the environment.

Although sustainability branding and scaling up have different impacts on labor practices at Burgerville compared to New Seasons and Grand Central, workers are nonetheless expected to absorb the costs. Even though workers have little to no control over sustainability practices in their workplace, they often bear the brunt of customers’ discontent regarding (un)sustainable business practices. Burgerville workers detail encounters with customers who are angry because the company no longer offers compost and recycling bins in the dining area. One worker recalls a customer who blamed employees for the backsliding, assuming that it had been an employee-managed recycling program. She expresses her own frustration over this interaction, noting, “What I wish I had said was, ‘Lady, I *know* it wasn’t employee-managed because they don’t let us manage *anything* here...Also, fuck you for blaming the employees for a lack of recycling and not blaming the fucking company.’”

VIII. Organizing to Expose the Contradictions of the Sustainable Foodie City: Revisiting Four Organizing Campaigns

Capitalism is failing. Companies like New Seasons are just extracting wealth under the moniker of being “locally owned and operated,” which is just a fucking lie, it’s not true at all. If we’re going to exist within capitalism, let’s at least recognize that you can’t put a smiling face on that. – former New Seasons worker

Green capitalism is still fucking capitalism—don’t be fooled. – Burgerville Worker Union Member

Throughout my interviews, workers pushed back against their employer’s ethical branding, sometimes questioning it, sometimes contradicting it, and other times cultivating their own counter-narrative. In some cases, sustainability came at the expense of workers’ wellbeing and they organized to push back.

A. New Seasons Workers United

New Seasons’ image as a locally owned neighborhood market and socially responsible company has largely endured, despite their rapid expansion and the corresponding deterioration of both sustainability practices and working conditions. Workers began organizing around workplace grievances with the support of the Portland IWW as early as 2002, just two years after New Seasons was founded. Worker-organizers engaged in direct action aimed at improving workplace safety, pushing back against abuse by store managers, and expanding the company’s health care coverage. One of the biggest victories they won was transgender-inclusive healthcare benefits, which according to one worker-organizer, made New Seasons one of the first large companies to offer such benefits. At the height of organizing in 2012, around 10 worker-organizers at one New

Seasons location were actively involved and began to whistle-blow on an abusive store manager. Workers at other locations were also starting to meet and form organizing committees. When the abusive manager fired one of the most active worker-organizers, the public-facing campaign began to wane. However, workers continued to organize around workplace grievances in both low-key and more high-profile ways. In 2015, workers held a rally outside of a busy store to protest the company's low wages and contribution to gentrification in Portland, highlighting the inability of New Seasons workers to afford to live near their workplaces.²⁹ One worker held a sign reading "New Seasons Employee: Free Range and Broke!" and others passed out fliers to customers letting them know that New Seasons' board member Stephen Babson had recently held a fundraiser for Republican presidential candidate Jeb Bush and called for abolishing the federal minimum wage (VanderHart, 2015).

In 2017, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) launched a corporate campaign against New Seasons when the company announced plans to expand into the Seattle area, where union membership is relatively high in the food retail industry. "Gentrification is threatening the sustainability of our city as a home for working class people," read a letter to New Seasons signed by over 40 community and labor organizations, "particularly people of color and those with lower incomes." The letter identifies how New Seasons "presents itself as a socially-responsible company" yet "has no qualms about intentionally fostering gentrification and displacement to drive up the value of their investment" and engages in "substandard employment practices." The letter

²⁹ <https://www.portlandoccupier.org/2015/04/24/workers-expose-cruel-underbelly-of-portlands-friendliest-store/>; For more on the "Whole Foods effect" and the relationship of high-end restaurants and grocery stores to gentrification see Anguelovski (2016), Hyde (2014), Burnett (2014).

points to the importance of “defending workers’ rights” in order to “[keep] our local economy sustainable for all.” The media campaign was designed to shame New Seasons and draw attention to how the beloved company profits from urban processes of gentrification and labor degradation.

While UFCW focused most of its resources on a corporate media campaign to pressure New Seasons to stay out of the Seattle grocery market, the union also hired staff and salts to organize in Portland-based New Seasons stores. During this time, worker-organizers pushed back against sustainability branding and took the company to task for not practicing the purported values that they profit from. In their collaboratively generated “shared statement of principles,” New Seasons Workers United communicate how the company’s restructuring and expansion has come at the expense of the very workers who create the progressive culture that has made the company so successful (see Figure 1). By referring to New Seasons’ “progressive reputation” as a “clever marketing strategy,” worker-organizers begin to pull back the curtain on progressive branding. By directly referencing the tagline “People, Planet, Profit” in their commitment to “resist[ing] business practices that value profit over people,” worker-organizers call out their employer for exploiting them in the name of green capitalism. Workers “are not thriving,” as the triple bottom line of sustainability branding promises, but are instead “merely surviving.” New Seasons’ rapid expansion and shareholder profits come at the expense of workers’ wellbeing, as workers are increasingly unable to reproduce themselves and their families in a city where the cost of living is skyrocketing.

IT'S A STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES

New Seasons Market claims to have a socially conscious and community-oriented mission that provides a progressive workplace where employees can thrive.

We are not thriving; we are merely surviving.

We're the ones that create and nourish the culture that customers have come to associate with the company. We are dedicated and contributing members of the community. We are parents, students, neighbors, friends and customers. We make New Seasons the friendliest store in town in spite of our working conditions, not because of them.

The company that we helped build has changed. Since its acquisition by the private equity firm Endeavour Capital, the New Seasons has abandoned its foundational values in pursuit of higher profits and rapid expansion. Its progressive reputation is now little more than a clever marketing strategy.

We now have no say in the direction the company is taking. We are losing our opportunities and rights by the day.

We, the undersigned, have come together to hold the company accountable and to demand a return to its core values. We are united for:

DIGNITY & RESPECT

We, the undersigned workers, are united to lift up our collective voice without fear of retaliation. We are united for fair pay relative to the cost of living in this city. We demand not only that our voices are heard, but that our voices also visibly inform our company's progress, both at store and company levels.

SAFETY

We, the undersigned workers, are united for safety in our workplace. We require safe staffing and facilities to do our jobs. We are united for a workplace that not only values physical health and emotional well-being, but also one that values diversity and prioritizes the safe expression of multiple social identities. We reject acts of bigotry and oppression both overt and covert.

ETHICAL BUSINESS PRACTICES

We, the undersigned workers, are united to resist business practices that value profit over people. We require a workplace that internally reflects the values it outwardly promotes.

EQUITABLE TREATMENT & ACCOUNTABILITY

We, the undersigned workers, are united to oppose unfair systems of accountability and favoritism. We require transparency in communications and decision making, equal opportunity for advancement, and equal application of rules. We are united to develop and participate in peer-driven systems of accountability.

Figure 1 New Seasons Workers United Statement of Principles

When New Seasons caught wind of the UFCW’s organizing campaign, the company hired the “union-avoidance” consulting firm Cruz & Associates—the same firm that President Donald Trump and casino owner Phil Ruffin paid to fight unionization efforts at Trump International Hotel in Las Vegas. New Seasons’ union-busting tactics garnered attention from the media and progressive local politician Rob Nosse, who penned a guest column in *The Oregonian* shaming the company for not “living up to its brand” (2018). In the article, Nosse called on New Seasons to cut ties with Murdock Trust and stop their union-busting tactics in order to embody the “progressive, pro-worker” brand that has made the company so successful.

In 2018, UFCW began to pull resources away from the New Seasons campaign, laying off staff and salts. According to a former paid UFCW organizer—who had previously worked at New Seasons and organized there as a Wobbly in the late aughts—the UFCW campaign was top-down and leadership resisted organizers’ efforts to support workers in democratic organizing.³⁰ After hearing that UFCW would no longer be supporting their efforts, New Seasons Workers United has continued organizing, even winning an unfair labor practice case against New Seasons for retaliating against worker-organizers.

Also in 2018, Wendy Collie stepped down as CEO of New Seasons. Collie had spearheaded the effort to certify New Seasons as the first B Corporation grocer in the U.S., and according to a local news article, “beefed up benefits, boosting wages and introducing paid paternal leave.” When asked about where her career would take her next, the article

³⁰ Although the UFCW New Seasons campaign offers a rich opportunity to learn about the limitations of top-down organizing tactics common in the Mainstream Labor Movement—many of which were discussed in Chapter 1—this analysis is outside of the scope of my dissertation project.

reports that Collie “would like to continue helping steward companies toward a triple bottom line philosophy” (Baker, 2018).

B. Portobello: “Workers are Animals Too!”

Operating on a much smaller scale and up against two co-owners who they worked with on a regular basis rather than a CEO and a venture capital firm, Portobello workers used different organizing strategies than New Seasons Workers United. In 2010, Portobello workers began collectively organizing around grievances at the restaurant, which had become the quintessence of ethical dining in the vegan community. Workers organized around several issues, including the owners’ refusal to pay them on time and the wrongful firing of their coworker. They were successful in securing timely payment for their labor and winning their coworker’s job back. However, their primary grievance centered around the chef’s emotional and physical abuse, which worker-organizers argued was in direct conflict with his ethical commitment to animal rights.

Portobello workers engaged in direct action, refusing to work with the head chef, and eventually ousting him from the workplace. However, as time passed and worker power diminished through turnover, the abusive chef made his way back into the kitchen. One worker eventually quit in protest. Her story sheds light on the contradictions of being exploited and abused by vegan bosses who are committed to animal liberation. In what she refers to as a “last little communiqué,” which she tacked up on a bulletin board on her way out, she wrote: “Workers are animals too, be a better vegan.” She is also a vegan and explains her logic: “How could you be so pro-animal rights and ‘save the animals’ and ‘liberate the animals’ and also mistreat and abuse and exploit your workers? I was like, ‘I’m an animal, we’re *all* animals.’” According to her coworkers who I interviewed, the

chef gathered them around so that he could read her communiqué out loud, but omitted the phrase “workers are animals too,” which she shared with them later on. Why did he omit the poignant phrase that would become a legacy rallying cry for an organizing campaign by vegan foodservice workers? Perhaps because it was effective at exposing the contradiction between his supposed commitment to animal liberation and his abuse of his employees, who were, after all, animals, too.

In 2014, the head chef sold his shares of Portobello to his long-time business partner, who eventually closed the restaurant in late 2016. In 2015, he opened an even higher-end vegan restaurant, which tourists now flock to for a “plant focused tasting menu connecting our diners to the Cascadian bioregions’ bounty of forest, farm, and field...,” according to the website.³¹ In an interview in *Portland Monthly*, he describes his new venture as “our alternate version of a Cascadia...where it never occurred to people to eat animals” (Clarke, 2016). While he is famous for pioneering Portland’s vegan fine dining scene, his reputation as an abusive boss has somehow managed to stay out of the public light. In 2018, a Zagat video series “Eat Like Me” features the chef powerlifting, hugging farmers, and preaching about how his brand of veganism extends beyond animal rights to people and politics.³² In the video, he characterizes veganism as a “gateway” into “anti-oppression politics in general—racism, homophobia, transphobia, patriarchy.” He claims that when he became a vegan his “relationship to people changed, the way that I look at the world has changed, my values have changed in general.” Basking in the celebrity limelight, he continues, “A vegan who is interested in intersectional politics should try and

³¹ <https://www.farmspiritpdx.com>

³² <https://www.zagat.com/v/meet-the-powerlifting-plant-eating-vegan-chef-of-portland>

figure out how they can comport themselves as a more ethical person in all aspects of their life.” Former Portobello workers who suffered years of emotional—and at times physical—abuse under his employment would likely agree with this sentiment, but would strongly object to the abusive chef serving as the poster boy for intersectional anti-oppression politics. The fact that he continues to promote (and profit from) values-based discourse, despite his past history of abusive behavior, demonstrates the power of consumption politics in masking labor exploitation.

C. Grand Central Bakery Workers United

In 2013, Grand Central workers began to organize with the support of the Portland IWW, eventually forming the Grand Central Bakery Workers United (GCBWU). The GCBWU’s efforts included a self-organized employee forum; a campaign to “End Lunchlessness” by increasing employee discounts on healthy food options; a petition demanding the reinstatement of a worker who they felt had been unjustly fired; and the production and distribution of a booklet of stories titled “I Got Your Back: We’re In This Together,” detailing successful actions that Grand Central workers took to address grievances on the shop floor. In the booklet, worker-organizers articulate the tensions between sustainability practices and working conditions. For example, in a story titled “Going Green at the Cost of Worker Safety,” they recount how the company’s recycling and composting practices put workers’ health and safety at risk. At Grand Central cafés, customers were instructed to put all of their dishes, recyclables, compost, and waste into the same bus tub. The absence of a trashcan gave the illusion that there was no trash being generated, shielding customers from the consequences of their consumption. It also

eliminated customers' dilemmas regarding whether or not, for example, their plastic cup was recyclable. Instead, Grand Central management expected dishwashers to rummage through the bus tub and sort the contents. One worker-organizer notes that the company was "really proud of not having a trash can," and not requiring customers to sort their own materials. However, this created a situation where customers had no choice but to comingle dog poop bags, bloody Band-Aids, and dirty diapers with dishes and recyclables, according to one worker. This exposed workers to hazardous waste, violating health and safety code. One worker-organizer recalls his coworker getting pricked by a hypodermic needle. This issue became a particular focal point for the GCBWU's organizing, and workers fought for a year and a half until the company finally yielded and purchased a small trashcan for the café.

The GCBWU also organized to expose another contradiction of Grand Central's sustainability branding: the fact that workers cannot afford to eat the fresh, healthy, local food they themselves were preparing and serving. Playing off of the company's slogan "End Breadlessness"—which was itself a cooptation of the call to "End Homelessness"—workers organized a campaign to "End Lunchlessness." While workers were allowed to eat their fill of pastries and soup, they were only allowed a 15% discount on prepared foods. Their demand was to increase their employee discount to 50%, and to make their case, they crunched the numbers, creating spreadsheets to calculate exactly how much each sandwich cost the company. According to one worker-organizer who led the effort, an egg salad sandwich cost only 75 cents to make, but employees were charged \$7. Unable to afford the healthy substantial options, the worker recalls eating soup every day that he worked at the company. He notes that he would entertain friends by asking them to calculate how many

gallons of soup he ate over the years: “12 ounces a day, 4 days a week, for 8 years.” The End Lunchlessness campaign drew support from workers who felt that they deserved to afford the healthy lunch options that their labor made possible. The GCBWU presented a petition to management who responded with an email to the staff stating that “we are not currently liquid enough to expand meal benefits,” citing food cost as the “primary culprit.” The email continues,

We are struggling to find the right balance between the cost of high-quality ingredients, our values and pricing... We remain committed to buying only meat that is 100 percent antibiotic-free, serving eggs from local pasture-raised hens and only using real butter in our pastries. It’s part of why our food is so delicious, and it means our purchasing dollars help create wealth throughout the local and sustainable food system. When I see John from Valley Farms dropping off eggs or Steve from Hidden Ranch making a delivery of grass-fed beef, I feel proud that by making the choice to spend more on these ingredients, we support local, sustainable and family-scale agriculture which, in order to survive, has to compete in a landscape that is biased toward industrialized corporate agriculture... We strive to make delicious food from great local and sustainable ingredients and serve it at an accessible price, while creating good jobs and providing fair compensation. That might sound simple, but it’s not.³³

This language demonstrates that the company is making a clear trade-off between local, sustainable sourcing and workers’ wellbeing. Pastoral stories about local pasture-raised egg producers and grass-fed beef ranchers are effective at evoking the company’s commitment to supporting “sustainable and family-scale” farmers as they compete against “industrialized corporate agriculture.” Grand Central’s owners imply that workers must sacrifice in order to support small farmers and sustainable food systems. This communicates, in essence, that workers’ sustainability—their ability to reproduce themselves—is not as important as local sourcing. While the company cites an effort to

³³ Business and business owner names have been changed to protect identities.

serve local and sustainable food at an “accessible price,” Grand Central’s prices were not accessible to the company’s own workers. These tensions reveal the impossibility of achieving the mythical “triple bottom line” that Grand Central and other sustainability-branded businesses have built their brand around.

The GCBWU’s campaign to “End Lunchlessness” failed. One worker-organizer attributed the defeat to the GCBWU’s reluctance to go public with their campaign and release the numbers that they had compiled on exactly how much it would cost the company to make healthy lunch options more accessible to workers. According to one worker-organizer, the numbers “illuminated how much the company devalued us,” and not releasing them was a missed opportunity to publicly shame Grand Central and have a better chance at winning a higher employee discount.

In 2014, the company successfully squashed worker organizing by closing the retail location where the majority of organizers were concentrated. The owners refused to re-hire the laid-off workers at any of the other seven Portland locations.

D. Burgerville Workers Union

The BVWU campaign, which is still underway and has been the most high-profile campaign in recent Portland IWW history, offers a chance to investigate how workers at a self-proclaimed “eco-conscious burger chain” are pushing back against sustainability branding in a fast-food context. In part due to the public nature of their struggle, the BVWU’s messaging clearly articulates the contradictions of green capitalism. One of their main campaign slogans—“Poverty wages are not fresh, local, or sustainable”—succinctly articulates how workers are left out of the sustainability equation. One worker-organizer

explains what is missing from sustainability discourse: “It’s sustainability,” she says, “but it’s not *justice*. And it’s sustainability, but it’s still shitty. And that sustainability bullshit doesn’t extend to the workers.” The BVWU is turning the company’s infamous sustainability branding on its head to change customers’ perceptions and expose, according to the same worker-organizer, “the contradictions of green capitalism” by illustrating how Burgerville’s anti-union tactics are no different than those used by giant corporations like Wal-Mart. “We can drag their name through the mud,” she continues, “because I think people are paying attention...”

Although the BVWU is building a counter-narrative that is primarily designed to appeal to conscious consumers, according to one worker-organizer, “blowing up those contradictions is important on the shop floor,” as well. That is, “flipping corporate speak” against the company in conversations with coworkers can help build workers’ consciousness about how their employer is not walking the talk of sustainability or meeting its commitment to the community, to Burgerville workers.

There are also limits to the usefulness of sustainability discourse in organizing low-wage Burgerville workers who can’t afford to access the “sustainable” and ethical consumption that they make possible for others. One worker-organizer notes that “sustainability is not a word that my coworkers use.” Early on in the campaign, one worker-organizer discussed launching and managing their own composting program on the shop floor—an idea which never gained enough traction to get off the ground. While organizers use the language of sustainability on the shop floor to expose the contradictions of Burgerville’s ethical branding, the term “sustainability” itself is less useful in cultivating messaging that organizers can rally their coworkers behind. This is in part due to the fact

that workers' conceptions of sustainability are also intimately tied to their inability to access the high price point of the local and organic food they prepare and serve to others.

IX. Conclusion: The Contradictions of Sustainability-Branded Capitalism

The organizing campaigns at New Seasons, Portobello, Grand Central, and Burgerville offer insight into the contradictions of sustainability-branded capitalism in the foodservice and retail industries. Consistent with findings on the social relations of alternative food production (Galt, 2013; Guthman, 2014; Jaffee, 2007), my research demonstrates that the experiences of workers in the sustainability-branded foodservice and retail industries diverge little, if at all, from the industrial status quo. Not only is worker wellbeing missing from the ethical commitments of employers, but those commitments—to environmental sustainability, animal welfare, and consumer health—are sometimes positioned as trade-offs to worker welfare. In the case of Grand Central, the owners made this explicit: arguing in a letter to staff that meeting their demand for higher discounts on healthy food was not possible given the high costs of sourcing local and organic ingredients.

The stories and perspectives shared in this chapter speak to the inability of an alternative food movement that is organized around consumption politics to build power for workers. In fact, consumption politics further tip the balance in favor of employers, who benefit from an alternative market narrative that simultaneously masks worker exploitation and champions consumption as a means of buying our way to environmental sustainability. Workers cannot “vote with their forks,” because they cannot afford the healthy, local, sustainable food that they produce for others.

Consumption politics drive a deeper wedge between “consumers,” who can afford to “vote” with their forks for sustainability, and workers, who cannot. By cultivating an eco-habitus that delivers cultural capital, sustainability branding distances consumers from the workers who serve them. Worker-organizers call attention to the inherent racial and class distinctions between workers and conscious consumers, but the majority of consumers are workers, too, and this presents an opportunity for uniting on common ground. By focusing not on the politics of consumption—which reinforce people’s identity as individual consumers—but instead on the politics of (re)production—which challenge people to identify and take action collectively as workers—the alternative food movement can better target the structural inequality embedded in our food system, and our broader political economy. By engaging a more holistic view of sustainability that includes the wellbeing of workers and by understanding workers’ economic struggles as part and parcel of sustainability, the alternative food movement can prioritize those who are most affected by un-sustainable food systems in organizing for justice and sustainability. In the next chapter, I investigate how the BVWU is organizing around social reproduction in order to prioritize the needs of their most vulnerable coworkers and thereby make their lives more sustainable. The BVWU’s efforts offer important lessons, not only for the alternative food movement, but for other contemporary movements for social, economic, and environmental justice.

Chapter 3: Survival Pending Revolution: Organizing Around Social Reproduction and Building Fast-Food Worker Power Through Mutual Aid

“Healthcare! Childcare! Bus Fare! Now!” chant members and supporters of the BVWU as we form a picket line in front of a crowded Burgerville shop during dinner rush on a chilly Friday evening in February 2018. This shop near the Oregon Convention Center is one of the most profitable Burgerville locations and the host to frequent BVWU pickets. But this time the stakes are higher: yesterday, workers at this shop walked off the job, beginning a three-day strike in response to retaliatory firings and unfair labor practices. “We are on strike today because no one deserves to live in poverty,” reads a BVWU Facebook post, “Life in Portland only gets harder—rents go up, groceries get more expensive, and Burgerville wages stay unlivable...[Burgerville] need[s] to recognize the poverty its wages have forced workers into. They need to acknowledge that health care, consistent scheduling, and basic dignity on the job are all necessary parts of living a full, human life.”

The strike is not the only game changer. We’ve just marched over from a rally at Holladay Park, where just moments ago, BVWU members upped the ante. They announced to Burgerville and the world that they were escalating their campaign, unfurling a banner reading: BOYCOTT BURGERVILLE. The BVWU’s boycott, strike, and frequent pickets and marches on the boss represent a return to the militant direct action that the labor movement has largely abandoned, but which it pioneered (McAlevey, 2016; Tilly & Tilly, 1998). However, the BVWU is also engaging in a lesser known strategy that is even more unique in the context of modern labor organizing drives: mutual aid programs. The BVWU

designed these social reproduction-focused direct support programs—including subsidized childcare, bus passes, and food boxes—to build power in a large and growing industry where many workers are unable to meet their basic needs.

The BVWU’s impassioned demand for “Healthcare! Childcare! Bus Fare! Now!” is indicative of the BVWU’s intersectional approach to organizing in a rapidly gentrifying city where low-income people are facing skyrocketing rates of eviction and displacement. The struggles for housing security, accessible transportation, and affordable healthcare and childcare are inextricably linked to the fight for higher wages at Burgerville. Further, these issues disproportionately affect women, parents, and people of color, signaling a need to bring feminist and anti-racist politics to the fore of the BVWU’s organizing.

Although an uncommon labor organizing tool today, mutual aid practices played an integral role in the U.S. labor movement during the 19th century. Union members delivered social services to fellow workers in need, thereby fulfilling what was considered a shared responsibility for ensuring basic welfare (Webb & Webb, 1907). This historical role of mutual aid in protecting the working class is all but absent from our collective memory, and its loss is felt most deeply by low-income women, parents, and people of color who bear the brunt of unpaid and underpaid reproductive labor. The retreat of the welfare state over the past 40 years, combined with rapidly increasing inequality and the continued decline of organized labor, has created precarious conditions for the working class. Poverty wages, erratic scheduling, and the erosion of employer-sponsored benefits not only strain workers’ ability to reproduce themselves, but also hinder their capacity to organize. The BVWU’s mutual aid programs are a timely and creative strategy for building worker power.

This chapter examines mutual aid as a strategy for organizing low-wage workers. I demonstrate how the BVWU's organizing around social reproduction embodies an inclusionary and intersectional politics that prioritizes the needs of women, parents, and people of color. In conversation with feminist political economy and anarchist theory, I investigate how the BVWU is extending the political terrain of its organizing campaign beyond the site of production to encompass reproduction as well. I argue that the BVWU, by approaching the precarity of work and life as an interconnected and communal struggle, is better positioned to support low-wage workers in building their own power.

This research also demonstrates that the BVWU's organizing around social reproduction signals an engagement with the timeless battle over who—the state, the employer, the community, or the individual—is ultimately responsible for ensuring social welfare. By deploying mutual aid as an organizing framework, the BVWU is disrupting neoliberal narratives that individualize responsibility and blame workers for their precarity. The union views its mutual aid programs as a short-term strategy to care for their coworkers until they can force their employer to ensure the wellbeing of its workforce. However, my analysis also reveals the need for a longer-term vision for building and maintaining systems of social reproduction that are collectively controlled, independent from the state and the employer, and also liberated from racialized and gendered divisions of care labor.³⁴ The story of the BVWU presents an opportunity to consider the possibilities and pitfalls of

³⁴ I am intentionally treating the state as a monolith here and not making a distinction between the welfare state and the neoliberal state. I agree with Purcell (2013) that while efforts to defend what is left of the welfare state from the grip of neoliberalism are worthwhile, state power—no matter what form it takes—is oligarchic by nature. Many theorists, including Lefebvre, Deleuze and Guattari, Hardt and Negri, Laclau and Mouffe, and Rancière, identify the state primarily as an agent of repression rather than liberation. From an empirical perspective, I am organizing with radical-worker organizers, most of whom subscribe to anarchist politics on some level. Naturally, I am drawing on anarchist theory to understand their organizing.

mutual aid as an organizing strategy for today's movements for social and economic justice.

I. A Brief History of Mutual Aid: Politicizing and Collectivizing Social Reproduction

Mutual aid is one of many ways to organize social reproduction—the mental, manual, and emotional work and care necessary to fulfill human needs and reproduce the next generation (Brenner & Laslett, 1991). Social reproduction is “secured through a shifting constellation of sources” including the household, the state, capital, and civil society, and struggles between these spheres shift responsibility for social reproduction over time and space (Katz, 2001, p. 711). Capitalist production relies on the unpaid and underpaid housework and other care work required to restore alienated workers and reproduce labor power (Caffentzis, 2002; Dalla Costa & James, 1972; Federici, 2012; Fortunati, 1995; Picchio, 1992). The burden of reproductive work falls along lines of race, class, and gender. Low-wage fast-food workers, for example, are predominantly women and people of color who labor to feed and reproduce others while struggling to reproduce themselves and their families.

The practice of mutual aid has anarcho-communist roots and embodies the politics and action of solidarity, survival, and collective struggle. The Russian geographer Peter Kropotkin's extensive analysis of mutual aid is foundational to modern anarchist theory ([1902] 2006). Responding to the emerging social Darwinist theory of the time, which privileged competition as the driving force of evolution, Kropotkin drew on observations from the natural world and analyzed human evolution and history to argue that cooperation

figures more prominently in the progressive evolution of a species. However, during the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the state violently destroyed institutions of mutual aid that were critical to collective practices of social reproduction, including communal lands, general assemblies, independent administrations, and guilds. Sylvia Federici's (2004) detailed account frames this process as "social enclosure," whereby peasants were expropriated from the means of reproduction.³⁵ Reproductive activities that were once performed communally in the public sphere were desocialized and decollectivized, becoming the responsibility of the family to secure in the home, or private sphere, and subjugating women to the reproduction of labor power (ibid.). Despite attacks by the state on collective forms of social reproduction, Kropotkin detailed how communities maintained mutual aid practices throughout history.

Mutual aid societies were ubiquitous in the U.S. in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Members of beneficial and insurance societies, secret societies, and burial societies typically paid small weekly or monthly dues and received sickness and death benefits, comprehensive medical care, and other direct support and care from fellow members. Afro-Cuban cigarmakers who founded a mutual aid society in Tampa, Florida in 1904, for example, were socialist militant trade unionists who used surplus funds to hire readers to recite Kropotkin and other political theorists while they worked (Du Bois, 1907; Greenbaum, 2018).

Many labor unions in the U.S. started out as mutual aid societies that emerged from close-knit working-class communities. Members were not only required to pay dues, but

³⁵ Federici's analysis thereby offers a more complete picture of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, which orthodox Marxists have generally theorized through a productivist framing, focusing narrowly on the expropriation of the means of production, without attending to the reproduction side of the coin.

to deliver social services to fellow members (Jarley, 2005; Webb & Webb, 1907). However, as unions grew in the early and mid 20th century, they played an active role in shifting the burden of social reproduction onto firms and the welfare state. They helped shape Progressive Era reforms that resulted in public housing, health services, education, and other social welfare programs, and they pressured firms to offer benefits packages with health insurance and pensions (Bacharach et al., 2001; Katz, 2001; Peck, 1996). With the introduction of public assistance, the state took on the responsibility of mediating class relations and controlling social reproduction, thereby fundamentally changing the relationship between labor and capital (Federici, 2004). New employer- and state-sponsored forms of social reproduction rendered mutual aid societies less relevant (Sehgal, 2005), particularly for the white workers and families whom exclusionary unions and the racist welfare state were designed to protect. Over time, mutual aid societies ceased providing economic security and ensuring basic needs, and civil society yielded collective control over social reproduction to the state and the employer.

The deregulation of capital, the decline of organized labor, and the retreat of the welfare state over the past 40 years has strained social reproduction, particularly for lower-income communities (Peck, 1996). Since the 1980s, the state has privatized welfare provisioning and normalized precarious work, allowing firms to shirk their responsibility for social reproduction by hiring part-time and temporary workers and outsourcing labor to the “gig economy” so that they are not legally obligated to offer benefits or living wages. These flexible labor market practices leave many workers without the necessary time and/or resources to adequately reproduce themselves and their families (Peck & Tickell, 2002).

Without communal structures of mutual aid to fall back on, these changes have had devastating consequences on processes of social reproduction. David Harvey (1990) argued that as flexible and precarious forms of labor were on the rise, practices such as babysitting, cleaning, and odd jobs that were once exchanged as favors in low income communities were being commodified. He noted that this resulted in entrepreneurial social relations and the further deterioration of informal mutual aid systems. However, feminist and anarchist geographers argue that self-organized and non-commodified practices and “community economies” (Community Economies Collective, 2001; Gibson, 2002) continue to make up a significant amount of production, consumption, and exchange, and are therefore a core part of our collective lived experience and economic landscape (Gibson-Graham, 2003; Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2012; Roelvink & Gibson-Graham, 2009; Springer, Ince, Pickerill, Brown, & Barker, 2012; White & Williams, 2012).

A dialectical understanding of mutual aid bridges these different perspectives. DeAngelis argues that community building—the practice of fostering “relations of mutual aid and support, solidarity and concrete practices of human exchange that are not reduced to the market form”—resists capitalism’s destructive tendencies (De Angelis, 2003, p. 13). These oppositional movements toward building and breaking down community create the landscape upon which struggles over how to organize social reproduction play out. As a practice of community building, mutual aid can be a generative spatial and political practice that challenges neoliberal social relations based on competition and cultivates cooperation between individuals, places, and diverse social groups (Featherstone, 2012; Kelliher, 2017; Kropotkin, [1902] 2006; Peet, 1978). Solidarity networks are an opportunity to experiment with everyday practices of collective survival at the

neighborhood scale, across the city, and beyond. For example, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast Program laid bare the white supremacist welfare state and politicized the practice of feeding hungry Black children as integral to its militant revolutionary struggle (Heynen, 2009). More recently, the grassroots solidarity initiatives that emerged out of the 2011 Syntagma square occupation in Athens, Greece—including popular assemblies, time banks, barter markets, and work cooperatives—discursively undermined the neoliberal rationality of austerity as participants worked collectively to meet their basic needs (Arampatzi, 2017; Purcell, 2013).

Grassroots organizing around social reproduction is far from apolitical. Mutual aid programs can be a strategic radical and material response to oppressive and oftentimes violent forces bearing down on marginalized peoples. My analysis of the BVWU's engagement with mutual aid in the context of a fast-food labor organizing campaign demonstrates that struggles over “work” and “life” are not separate or individual. By treating “production” and “reproduction” as the intimately interconnected and communal struggles that they are, the BVWU and other social movement groups are better positioned to push back against neoliberal policies and practices of privatization and deregulation and build new relations of solidarity in their place—or—as the IWW would say, create “the new society within the shell of the old” (Industrial Workers of the World, 1905).

II. Intersecting Insecurities in the Foodservice Industry

The BVWU is organizing to build power in an industry where many workers are struggling at the bottom of Portland's growing food economy. In 2016, Burgerville's

hourly workers earned a median wage of \$9.47 per hour and worked an average of 26.6 hours per week, below the 32 hours required to qualify for the company's health insurance benefit.³⁶ Although the state of Oregon passed legislation that increased Portland's minimum wage to \$9.75 in July 2016, with stepped increases to \$14.75 by 2022, this is not enough to bring workers out of poverty.

Burgerville's low wages, in combination with Portland's skyrocketing rents, make food and housing insecurity all too common among workers. One worker-organizer notes that within his first two weeks of work, two of his coworkers lost their housing. "I've had to buy lunch for coworkers multiple times," he continues, "Everybody's always broke, and that means...having to live really far away [from work], really far out [from the city center], having trouble finding housing they can afford...You spend your whole first paycheck of the month on rent, basic bills, and then you're done." This insecurity is intensified by on-demand and erratic scheduling practices, which are rampant in the fast-food industry and make it difficult for workers to juggle competing responsibilities and secure a consistent and sufficient income (Scott, King, & Reddy, 2017). When asked about how workers with children cope with erratic scheduling, one worker says, "I don't know. One of my coworkers struggles a lot with that, and has called out [sick] a lot recently as a result of that, and it's put her job in jeopardy. I feel like people just wing it as much as they can." Furthermore, erratic scheduling also presents particular challenges for workers who rely on public transportation for their commute. One interviewee tells the story of her coworker who lives 14 miles from his workplace and is sometimes scheduled to work until

³⁶ This data is based on a survey that the BVWU conducted of 123 workers at four Burgerville locations in Oregon and Washington.

1:00AM—after his bus line has stopped running. “After working a 10-hour shift [he] will walk home four and a half hours, sleep for six hours, and then have to get up the next day and take the bus back to work.”

These experiences illustrate the ways in which workplace issues (e.g., poverty wages and erratic scheduling) intersect with non-workplace issues (e.g., housing, childcare, and transportation) to compound workers’ precarity. Moreover, while these degraded workplace conditions are the impetus for organizing at Burgerville, they also serve as barriers to workplace organizing, because they strain workers’ ability to care for themselves and their families. When workers are struggling to cope with the insecurity of everyday life, they have little capacity to attend meetings and participate in organizing in meaningful ways. Worker-organizers are also confronted with the challenges of engaging their coworkers who are living paycheck to paycheck and cannot afford to get fired or have their hours cut in retaliation for organizing.

While the campaign’s core worker-organizers are also Burgerville workers who face varying degrees of precarity themselves, there are some key differences between “salts”—organizers who applied for jobs at Burgerville with the primary intention of organizing—and members who came to the union primarily as Burgerville workers. I discussed these differences in Chapter 1, but it is important to reiterate that many salts differ from their coworkers in terms of race, education, and class background. This, along with the fact that most salts are not parents or primary caretakers, affords them more time and resources than many of their coworkers. This also contributes to a meeting culture and power dynamics that can be uncomfortable for and/or inaccessible to workers. As I also discussed in Chapter 1, these dynamics extend to the Portland IWW, which is made up

largely of white, male-identifying members. However, this is changing as more women, LGBTQ, and people of color-identifying members have joined the Branch, in part because of the BVWU campaign. These new IWW members, along with the BVWU's Black and Brown Caucus—which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4—have helped bring more robust feminist and anti-racist frameworks to the Branch's organizational culture.

After going public with their union in April 2016, BVWU organizers began seeking creative ways to actively engage their coworkers in organizing—particularly women, parents, and people of color. Influenced by the direct action and support work done by the Black Panther Party in the 1960s and '70s, as well as the ongoing immigrant support work of No One Is Illegal, organizers understood that supporting their coworkers' basic needs was vital to building negotiating power in the workplace. They surveyed their coworkers and identified childcare, food, and transportation as pressing issues that they could tackle through mutual aid programs.

III. Mutual Aid in Action: Building a Safety Net, a Social network, and Solidarity

The BVWU's collective organizing around social reproduction has ranged from informal and spontaneous practices—including carpooling, couch-crashing, and food-sharing—to formal programs, such as hardship fundraising and their Union Benefits program. Informally, workers recall driving their coworkers home because the bus had stopped running when their shift ends; paying for coworkers' meals when they can't afford to eat; and housing coworkers temporarily after they are evicted or while they escape an abusive partner. These activities are usually spontaneous, one-on-one interactions, but workers also engage in planned and communal mutual aid practices. One example is Union

Yoga, led by a union supporter with the help of the local food co-op, who donated their “community room” and yoga mats so that workers who were otherwise unable to afford costly studio prices could practice managing their physical and emotional stress together. These small-scale acts of mutual aid are survival strategies for low-income workers.

While many of these informal mutual aid practices are largely invisible to outsiders, other efforts find a more public expression. For example, when organizers feel that the company has wrongfully fired someone—typically in retaliation for organizing—they mobilize to publicly pressure Burgerville to rehire their coworker and call on supporters to donate to a hardship fund. Hardship funds, along with supplemental food boxes from Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, support the unemployed worker’s household while they fight to get their job back or find other employment. One worker-organizer recounts the impact this support had on her household when her roommate—who was also her coworker—was fired. “We had just moved into our apartment and did not have any money after the deposit and the first [month’s] rent...and we just wouldn’t have been eating, we wouldn’t have had any groceries if it weren’t for [the food boxes],” she recalls, “And then Scottie’s Pizza brought us pizza too, that was really cool...” The union’s mutual aid not only helped her and her coworkers get through a tough time, but it also stood in stark contrast to their employer’s unwillingness to take responsibility for reproducing her and her coworkers. In her words, “It sent a message: ‘The company isn’t providing for you so we will.’” Another worker-organizer describes this form of community support as “a safety net” that allows people to take risks knowing that if they get fired in retaliation for organizing, “at least there’s some backup.”

The BVWU's Union Benefits program is another public expression of the union's efforts to organize around social reproduction and ensure the wellbeing of their coworkers. Launched in February 2017, the program offers free babysitting once a month, discounted monthly bus passes, and weekly food boxes delivered to food insecure union members (see Figure 2). Additionally, all Burgerville workers, regardless of whether they are a BVWU member, can access Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED) tutoring on an as-needed basis and a Rapid Response Hotline to confront workplace issues and navigate basic needs. These "benefits" run on the collective efforts of BVWU members and supporters, money raised through public crowd-funding campaigns, and partnerships with faith groups.

BVWU Union Benefits Program

Beginning February 1st

We are excited to announce the BVWU Union Benefits Program. This program is inspired by organizations that have come before us, such as No One Is Illegal organizing in Canada which emphasizes the need for direct support work in addition to direct action, and the Black Panther Party social programs and their slogan "survival pending revolution."

BVWU Member Benefits

Bus Passes

BVWU members will be able to purchase discounted bus passes. Bus passes must be requested in advance.

Free Babysitting

Union members can request free babysitting once a month for up to 4 hours. We will have trusted volunteers who have experience working with children and have passed background checks.

Food Boxes

BVWU members will be able to apply for a food box. Quantities are limited, and will be given on a first request basis.

All Burgerville Crew Member Benefits

GED Test Prep Classes

Any Burgerville crew member can attend our GED test prep class. Further tutoring may be available if needed.

Grievance Hotline

Any Burgerville crew member can contact us with job grievances around unfair treatment by management or work safety concerns. We will do our best to help you come up with a plan for your grievance. 503.389.5495

Please contact us with any questions.
Email: BurgervilleWorkersUnion@gmail.com
Phone: 503.389.5495

Figure 2: Flyer announcing the BVWU Union Benefits Program posted on bulletin boards in Burgerville breakrooms and on the BVWU Facebook page in February 2017

The most widely utilized union benefit is subsidized monthly public transit passes. A network of college students who work at Burgerville—or have friends who do—purchase discounted passes from their school at half of the normal monthly cost and then sell them to BVWU members, passing along the cost savings. While logistically challenging for the students who manage this transfer, one organizer describes this method as “a cool way of funneling privilege—the concrete benefits of privilege—to people who don’t have it.” A monthly transit pass normally costs \$100, which is out of reach for most Burgerville workers, but the BVWU’s subsidized monthly pass costs only \$50. Explaining the role of subsidized bus passes, one worker-organizer highlights the challenge of juggling basic needs, which all compete for a share of a small paycheck: “If you think about all the other things that your paycheck has to go to, like housing and childcare, it’s pretty hard to balance all those things, and I feel like the little support really helps a lot.” Another worker-organizer recounts distributing seven bus passes to her coworkers one month, noting that she expects demand to increase when many of them graduate from high school and are no longer eligible for discounted youth passes. While Union Benefits do not ease the time burden of commuting—which for some workers can take two hours or more—subsidized monthly transit passes at least ease the financial burden.

As a strategic arm of the BVWU’s organizing efforts, mutual aid not only helps workers materially meet their basic needs, it also connects union members to one another and to supporters outside of the union. This “social network of people to reach out to,” notes one worker-organizer, offers emotional and financial security and creates “a sense of community and solidarity in the union that helps people feel like they’re all in it together.” These networks of internal and external support include organizations that have a presence

in other labor struggles (e.g., the worker advocacy organization Portland Jobs with Justice), but also include individual supporters—who teach yoga classes, house workers temporarily when they are evicted, and help workers find new jobs when they are fired. Helping former union members find another job is outside the scope of organizing for most mainstream labor unions. However, true to the Wobbly motto “organize the worker, not the job,” the BVWU prioritizes job-hunting as important to building working-class power. By leveraging social networks and practicing mutual aid, the BVWU is cultivating a community of solidarity (De Angelis, 2003; Jarley, 2005). In doing so, the BVWU demonstrates the value of organizing and being a union member to low-wage workers who have traditionally been underrepresented in—and considered “unorganizable” by—the mainstream labor movement.

IV. Mobilizing Mutual Aid to Engage a Broader Set of Workers in the Labor Movement

The BVWU is breaking new ground, not only as the nation’s first fast-food workers’ union in over 40 years, but as an organization committed to challenging workers’ (mis)conceptions about what unions are or could be. Most Burgerville workers have little first-hand experience with unions and so first develop a meaningful understanding of organized labor through the BVWU. Alternatively, a handful of workers have prior experience with larger business or service unions, where, as one organizer explains, “...dues got taken out of [my coworker’s] check and they still earned minimum wage, so they were like, ‘Fuck this.’” This common experience of unions as dues-collecting bureaucracies is indicative of a fundamental problem with today’s labor movement:

workers no longer see value in unions (Jarley, 2005). Despite a broad understanding that the labor movement is losing ground, mainstream unions remain entrenched in a service model—workers pay dues and expect union representatives to provide services in return (McAlevey, 2016). This approach is not focused on building worker power.

The BVWU represents an alternative to service and business unionism as usual. The BVWU's mutual aid programs center *workers as the union* by offering concrete ways for workers to directly engage in their union and meet their immediate needs by relying on one another rather than on a slow grievance procedure. In an interview I conducted nearly a year and a half before his shop won its National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election, a BVWU worker-organizer who was previously a shop steward with the Service Employees International Union highlighted how Union Benefits sets the BVWU apart from other unions: "People tend to want to get more involved if they feel like this is a way to better themselves," which he argues "is a tactical and very, very savvy thing that we're doing because very few unions do this—give benefits before union recognition." His comment speaks to the IWW's unique approach to organizing: workers can operate as a union without paying dues and whether or not they are formally recognized by the state (i.e. whether or not they win a NLRB election).

Indeed, their mutual aid programs are evidence that the BVWU is looking beyond the modern-day labor movement for grassroots strategies. When designing Union Benefits, organizers drew inspiration from revolutionary organizations who have long understood the importance of organizing around social reproduction. Like the Black Panther Party's free breakfast and other survival programs, which were direct-action strategies to build Black power (Heynen, 2009), the BVWU's Union Benefits program is designed to build

worker power. Rather than shy away from these radical roots, organizers credit the Black Panther Party and No One is Illegal in their outreach materials (see Figure 2). By referencing these “organizations who came before us,” the BVWU emphasizes the political nature of their programs. According to one worker-organizer, when his middle-aged Black coworker read “survival pending revolution” in the flyer announcing the launch of Union benefits (see Figure 2), she remarked, “Ooooooh, you’re on some Panther shit!” This language clearly had cultural relevance to her, demonstrating the potential for anti-racist politics and radically oriented mutual aid practices to appeal to workers of color—a population that the Portland IWW has previously struggled to engage. By designing mutual aid programs rooted in feminist and anti-racist politics, the BVWU is demonstrating that their struggle extends beyond wages, scheduling, and other common workplace grievances, to equally important issues of social reproduction that disproportionately affect women, parents, people of color, and immigrants.

V. Creating New Spaces for Political Struggle

The BVWU’s organizing around social reproduction through its engagement with mutual aid is also generating new spaces for political struggle—the home, the bus, the body—that are intimately connected to, yet distinct from the workplace. Tackling issues that are not traditionally considered “workplace” issues embodies an intersectional approach to labor organizing. As one BVWU organizer puts it, not all of workers’ problems start at work and “they certainly don’t end at work...they just *continue* at work.” The BVWU operates with a “much more porous boundary between what’s a union issue and what’s not,” she continues, “Someone’s got a mold problem in their apartment—that’s a

union issue. If somebody's uncle has to go to immigration court, that's still a union issue. If somebody's child was taken by child protective services because they had an unstable home...if someone needs a place to stay for the night—all those things are union issues...” These issues—supporting an undocumented uncle, a mother desperate to keep her child, a coworker who finds themselves houseless after escaping an abusive partner—matter to workers and therefore matter to the union.

This intersectional approach resembles longtime labor organizer and scholar Jane McAlevey's (2016) concept of “whole worker organizing”—a strategy that integrates workplace and nonworkplace issues, action, and learning in a holistic way. McAlevey argues that service workers—predominantly women, many of them women of color—have long understood the linkages between “workplace” and “non-workplace” issues. Access to housing, childcare, healthcare, education, transportation, clean drinking water, food, and an end to police brutality and the criminalization of immigrants are connected to wages, workplace health safety, and employer-provided benefits. All of these issues—not just wages—contribute to the wellbeing of workers and their families.

The business unions that are bargaining on behalf of workers have deepened the bifurcation between “productive” and “reproductive” issues as they focus ever more narrowly on the *wage* as the primary terrain of the labor struggle. Meanwhile, the women and workers of color who are more likely to perform underpaid reproductive work in the service economy and face discriminatory hiring practices, sexual harassment, and racism in their workplaces, also often bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid reproductive responsibilities outside of their paid work. McAlevey agrees, noting that these women are “saddled with wage work and endless nonwage work” (ibid. p. 69). While mainstream

labor unions were adept at organizing male factory workers whose work and home lives were largely separate, “The pressing concerns that bear down on most workers today are not divided into two neat piles, only one of which need be of concern to the union...” (ibid. p. 69). If unions are to succeed in building worker power in the 21st century, they must engage in grassroots participatory organizing at the intersection of workplace and home, production and social reproduction. The BVWU’s integration of workplace and non-workplace issues enables the union to create new spaces of political struggle that matter to workers.

The BVWU’s mutual aid programs offer a practical way of organizing across the (artificial) border between “work” and “life” and an accessible way to engage workers who would otherwise not be drawn to organizing from an activist orientation (Arampatzi, 2017). One organizer notes that people might not necessarily be attracted to “the concept of fighting or struggling,” but might join if the organization is directly meeting their needs. Union Benefits offers an opportunity for the BVWU to, according to one worker, “pragmatically enable people—especially people who wouldn’t be able to otherwise participate in the union—to participate and to be active and help organize and make decisions in the union.” In this way, the BVWU legitimizes reciprocity and mutual aid as a less confrontational form of activism (Jarley, 2005). Mutual aid offers a safe and accessible entry point into organizing, but also serves as an opportunity to build workers’ capacity to engage in mass collective struggle. Rather than using fast-food workers symbolically like Fight for \$15’s wage campaigns, mutual aid—much like “whole worker organizing”—positions workers as the central actors who are organizing to build power and change their own communities and lives (McAlevey, 2016).

By integrating issues of “work” and “life” into organizing, the BVWU also exposes exploitative working conditions at Burgerville (and under capitalism writ large) and pushes back against dominant narratives that individualize responsibility. “I’m part of the union because we should all be able to afford housing,” says one organizer in a public post on the BVWU’s Facebook page, “None of my coworkers should have to live in their cars.” This strategic messaging communicates that workers are up against the same systemic problems and positions the union as an opportunity to collectively resist. The BVWU challenges the neoliberal rhetoric that justifies precarity while simultaneously countering this precarity in a practical, immediate, and collective way through mutual aid programs. This solidarity-building practice embodies a “praxis from below” (Arampatzi, 2017) that empowers the disempowered to work together to change their material conditions.

The intentions behind the BVWU’s Union Benefits and other mutual aid programs stand in stark contrast to Burgerville’s own Employee Assistance Program, which directs workers to outside social services and public assistance. Oregon—home to 28 out of 42 Burgerville locations—has one of the highest percentages of workers receiving state assistance and one of the lowest corporate tax rates in the country (Reddy, Morris, Scott, Bussel, & Dyer, 2014).³⁷ Rather than taking responsibility for workers’ social reproduction by compensating them with living wages and benefits, the Employee Assistance Program instead serves as a conduit for the state and non-profit sector to subsidize Burgerville’s

³⁷ Oregon taxpayers spent \$1.76 billion on safety net assistance to working families in 2012, while corporate profits exceeded \$99.5 billion (Reddy et al., 2014). Seventy-three percent of enrollments in major public benefits programs in the U.S. come from working families (Allegretto et al., 2013). Public assistance to families of fast-food workers alone amounts to nearly \$7 billion each year, and even fast-food workers who are employed 40 or more hours per week rely on taxpayer-funded safety net programs at a rate of 52%—more than twice the rate of the workforce as a whole (ibid.).

poverty wages. This charity model institutionalizes poverty and legitimizes the state's and the employer's withdraw from the responsibility of social reproduction.

The BVWU's Union Benefits program, on the other hand, challenges both charity-based narratives that reinforce an unequal power relationship between the giver and receiver of care and neoliberal narratives that position social reproduction as an individual responsibility. Instead, the BVWU reframes precarity as a collective and systemic problem—a crisis of capitalism. In addition to positioning social reproduction as a collective space for political struggle (both in a theoretical sense and a practical sense), the BVWU's engagement with mutual aid presents an opportunity to transform the oppressive social relations that reproduce precarity by replacing them with reciprocal relations of giving and receiving rooted in a common lived experience (Arampatzi, 2017; Kropotkin, [1902] 2006). As such, the BVWU's mutual aid practices signal a “radically different geography of survival than that enforced through the outsourcing of welfare to charity” (Heynen, 2010, p. 1231).

VI. The Challenges of Mutual Aid

Mutual aid practices operate within the constraints of deeply entrenched commodified market relations that create a hostile environment for cooperation. The BVWU's mutual aid practices are up against competing discourses that individualize responsibility for social reproduction. Indeed, “[a]ny node of a social network of mutual aid and solidarity,” writes DeAngelis, “is also at the same time a node within a social network in competition with others” (2003, p. 11). The larger neoliberal paradigm that forces workers into isolation and competition is compounded by myriad practical

limitations to organizing mutual aid programs. Consistent with other research on mutual aid organizing, these obstacles include limited financial and material resources to meet demand and a dearth of active participants to self-organize on a large scale (Arampatzi, 2017).

The BVWU faces significant challenges in implementing their childcare program in particular. Worker-organizers originally envisioned paying trusted friends with prior experience to babysit for parents once a month for up to four hours. However, shortly after launching the program, organizers scaled it back to instead reimburse union members for their own childcare expenses on an as-needed basis. Parents have used the benefit multiple times, and one union member was reimbursed for a full day of babysitting so that she could attend a day-long BVWU planning retreat. However, most organizers agree that the benefit has not been utilized to its full potential. The Portland IWW's Junior Wobblies program faces similar challenges. For two years I served as a co-coordinator of Junior Wobblies—a committee that organizes child supervision for Branch members. My fellow coordinators and I struggled to carry out our vision of providing better support for parents, integrating children and their needs more squarely into the Branch's organizing work, and developing programing to train kids to run their own organizing campaigns.

Both of these childcare support programs face interrelated issues of inadequate volunteer capacity and entrenched gendered divisions of care labor. After observing that care work within the Branch is shouldered primarily by femme- and non-binary identifying members, the Jr. Wobblies committee recruited and trained several cis-gender men to volunteer. However, these new volunteers did not become active participants who care for children on a regular basis. Without a core of committed and active volunteer or paid

babysitters who are committed to sharing equitably in care labor, the capacity of both Jr. Wobblies and the Union Benefits babysitting program is limited.

Parents also face significant structural barriers to utilizing childcare programs and getting involved with organizing in general. None of the core BVWU organizers are parents, which according to one worker-organizer and longtime Branch member, makes it difficult to relate to parents and convince them that “you’re somebody who understands what they’re going through or what they have to put on the line to be involved.” This lack of shared experience makes it challenging to build trust. The same worker-organizer explains, “How do you ensure that it’s going to be okay to leave your kids with this person, with this all-volunteer organization? How do you make them comfortable with the fact that you vetted the people who are doing childcare properly? And how *do* you make sure you vet those people properly?” These questions speak both to the challenges of understanding parents’ experiences and also of safely and adequately meeting their needs. Organizers are trying to create mutual aid programs built on trust and reciprocity, but are up against a wider social climate of fear and isolation governed by a dominant ideology that caring for children (and reproducing one’s family in general) is an individual responsibility—and primarily that of mothers.

Childcare is a full-time job, and the BVWU and the IWW doesn’t have the resources to meet parents’ needs in a substantial way. One BVWU worker-organizer explains, “We can really only offer occasional, one-off shit, and that’s not what people need. If people want babysitting they’re gonna call their mom or cousin or something. What people need is *real* childcare, real, daily childcare—that’s what people need. And we can’t offer that.” Another organizer agrees, highlighting how the structural hurdles to providing

“*real* childcare” intersect with other practical challenges. “People really need structure to sustain childcare,” she says, “and so I think it’s really easy to forget that there’s this once a month available thing that doesn’t list dates or explain how to access [it], doesn’t tell you who will be taking care of your kids either...And I think it has also led me to not talk to people about it much, because I actually don’t understand how it works, personally.” Without concrete knowledge on how the program works, worker-organizers struggle to communicate the details to their coworkers.

The interrelated logistical and communication challenges that keep parents from utilizing the childcare program extend to other mutual aid programs as well. One worker-organizer notes that although some people access food boxes on a regular basis, others may not even know they are available. Another worker-organizer notes that the high turnover rate at Burgerville makes spreading knowledge about the union challenging, pointing out that many of the 1,500 hourly Burgerville workers spread across 42 locations don’t even know about the BVWU. Even organizers who are plugged into the goings-on of the union express confusion about the scope and details of the Union Benefits program. This lack of awareness is indicative of the challenges of implementing and communicating mutual aid programs on a small budget and with low volunteer capacity.

These challenges also limit the potential for mutual aid programs to have a meaningful impact on workers’ lives. One worker explains that Union Benefits cannot “solve or alleviate the hardship of being a Burgerville worker, ‘cause the BVWU doesn’t have the resources to do that in a very meaningful way...The only person who can do that really is the workers themselves and the boss. And the boss isn’t going to give up much unless the workers demand it together.” Beyond the practical limitations of organizing

robust long-term programs, this quote scratches the surface of a political tension that some organizers express: a contradiction between developing mutual aid programs and working towards their ultimate goal of forcing the boss to take responsibility for workers' wellbeing. "Benefits are supposed to come from the boss," notes one organizer, "we're supposed to get concessions from the boss." Several organizers share this sentiment, positioning Union Benefits in relation to the company's refusal to take responsibility for the social reproduction of its workforce. Rather than conceptualizing Union Benefits as a permanent self-sustaining program, organizers instead view it as, according to one organizer, an opportunity to provide for themselves in the short term, pressure and shame the company through direct action, and eventually "transfer a lot of the responsibility onto them..." The BVWU communicates a similar message in a Facebook post announcing the launch of Union Benefits (see Figure 3 below). In the post, the BVWU states that if an all-volunteer group is capable of organizing and maintaining a subsidized bus pass system, certainly their employer can find the resources to manage such a program.

Burgerville Workers Union

February 5, 2017 · 🌐

...

The BVWU is excited to announce the start of the Union Benefits Program! Food boxes, discount bus passes, and monthly free babysitting services are now available to Union members, and a grievance hotline and GED tutoring are available to all Burgerville workers. This just goes to show what the Union can accomplish when workers and community members come together in solidarity.

If the all-volunteer Union can serve Burgerville workers with this much love, a multimillion dollar corporation certainly can afford to. Until Burgerville agrees to negotiate, though, the Union will continue to support its workers in their struggle for fair treatment and a living wage. We will hold each other up as we fight for the respect that we deserve. #superbowl #burgerville #union #WeNeedARaise #solidarity #superbowlsunday

Figure 3: BVWU Facebook post announcing the launch of their Union Benefits Program in February 2017

From both pragmatic and ideological perspectives, worker-organizers position mutual aid programs not as an end in and of themselves, but rather as one piece of a larger strategy aimed at building worker power and shifting the burden of social reproduction onto their employer. The BVWU has already found some success on this front. Burgerville recently began to formally offer GED support to hourly workers, announcing this new benefit in the latest employee handbook. While on the surface this appears to be a union win, it is also an effort by the company to coopt the union's mutual aid programs, which strips workers of autonomy and solidarity-building (De Angelis, 2003). Yielding responsibility over social reproduction to the boss necessarily requires giving up control over how workers' basic needs are met.

In a microcosmic way, the BVWU's goal of shifting responsibility for worker wellbeing to the company calls to mind the labor movement's 20th century efforts to force

the burden of social reproduction onto firms through wage increases and social benefits packages (Bacharach et al., 2001; Katz, 2001; Peck, 1996). These “victories” also signaled the collapse of mutual aid societies. Once employers (and the state) were forced to carry more of the burden for reproducing workers, mutual aid societies all but lost their relevance, and civil society relinquished control over how social reproduction was organized (Jarley, 2005; Sehgal, 2005). In envisioning Union Benefits primarily as a short-term strategy for transferring the burden of social reproduction onto the employer, I argue, organizers are ignoring—and risk ceding—an important emancipatory feature of mutual aid practices: self-organization and autonomy over how basic needs are met without relying on the whims of the state or the employer.

VII. Conclusion: The Radical Potential of (Re)organizing Social Reproduction

The BVWU’s fight for living wages, predictable schedules, affordable transportation, food security, childcare, and more is a microcosm of the larger political economic struggle over social reproduction. The union’s mutual aid practices and programs offer an alternative way to organize social reproduction in an economy where workers cannot rely on a welfare state or their employer to ensure that their basic needs are met. Most unions have strategically avoided organizing in the low-wage foodservice industry, but this is where collective bargaining power is desperately needed. To build a more inclusive labor movement that privileges the voices and needs of low-wage workers, women, parents, and people of color, I argue that unions must effectively engage with social reproduction as a terrain of political struggle.

The BVWU is politicizing social reproduction by laying claim to important non-workplace sites—the home, the bus, workers’ kitchen cupboards, their bodies, their children. The state and the employer frame these as apolitical spaces where individual parents and other caregivers are failing to house, transport, feed, and otherwise care for themselves and their families. But mutual aid practices expose neoliberal narratives of personal responsibility and individual failing for what they truly are: attempts to obscure the systemic economic, racial, and gender violence of capitalism. The framework of mutual aid simultaneously offers the discourse with which to challenge neoliberal rhetoric and the material antidote of solidarity-building towards collective resistance. Mutual aid is a community-building practice that counters capitalism’s destructive tendencies; Mutual aid is “survival pending revolution.”

The mission of the IWW is to organize the working class, take possession of the means of production, and abolish the wage system (Industrial Workers of the World, 1905). This requires not only a radical re-envisioning of the organization of productive labor, but also of the organization of social reproduction—that is, a vision for how to meet basic human needs outside of commodified market relations. This vision must necessarily merge the productive and the reproductive and offer a path towards collective caring and liberation—not just from class, but from racial and gendered divisions of labor. The BVWU’s organizing around social reproduction, coupled with militant pickets and strikes, might just embody the strategic combination of tactics that foodservice workers need to successfully build power in their workplaces and beyond. Only time will tell. The BVWU is deploying mutual aid to build organizing capacity and demanding that Burgerville take responsibility for reproducing its workforce. However, this strategy raises important

questions regarding who controls social reproduction, how it is organized, and to what end. Is it possible for workers to transfer responsibility to the boss without ceding autonomy over how their basic needs are met? How can workers maintain the important element of solidarity-building that is inherent to the framework of mutual aid? How can they resist the company's efforts to coopt their mutual aid programs and strip workers of power? It is important to keep these questions in mind. Nevertheless, taking mutual aid seriously, both within the labor movement and other movements for social and economic justice, I argue, is a necessary first step towards envisioning what a collective re-organization of social reproduction might look like and then building that alternative.

Chapter 4: An Injury to One is an Injury to All: Building Solidarity Across Struggles Over (Re)production

On November 20, 2016, the Burgerville Workers Union (BVWU) sent a delegation to the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota to struggle alongside Water Protectors to halt the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). “The protest is historic,” wrote organizers in an email asking for donations to support the delegation, “in addition to the biggest gathering of Native peoples in over a hundred years, this is a critical intersection in the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty, protecting the earth, moving away from fossil fuels, and fighting against militarized U.S. imperialism.” In the days leading up to the delegation’s arrival, police and private security guards violently attacked Indigenous people and their allies at Standing Rock. The BVWU’s delegation embodied the union’s commitment to an intersectional politics that recognizes the interconnectedness of struggles against capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism. Four BVWU delegates joined over 300 Native nations and allied social movement groups, including labor, environmental, social, and racial justice activists, to stand in solidarity with Water Protectors (Dhillon & Estes, 2016). This massive response to the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe’s call to join their struggle at the Oceti Sakowin Camp represented a historic cross-movement mobilization that departed from the siloed, single-issue campaigns that tend to be the focus of today’s mainstream progressive movements.

The #NoDAPL fight was the latest chapter in a centuries long struggle against settler-colonialism, capitalist exploitation, and environmental destruction. In the past 50 years, neoliberal policies have increased the precarity of life on Earth—from the struggle

to earn a livable wage in a “flexible” economy, to lasting struggles of racial and gender injustice, to new environmental threats brought about by global climate change. These crises of capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy are intimately interconnected, yet mainstream progressive movements continue to focus narrowly on single issues (e.g., the wage, carbon emissions, the “right to choose”). Mainstream single-issue campaigns that drive artificial wedges between workplace and non-workplace, social and environmental issues, and/or production and reproduction are out of touch with the lived experiences of people under neoliberal capitalism and governance.

As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, the mainstream labor movement has stayed a “productivist” path that focuses narrowly on class identity, the wage, and the workplace as the primary terrain of struggle, thereby isolating itself from other progressive movements. The alternative food movement, which I examined in Chapter 2, focuses largely on consumption politics, which alienate workers and reinforce—rather than expose and transform—exploitative working conditions in the food system. However, as I emphasized in Chapter 3, low-wage workers—most of whom are also welfare recipients and unpaid and/or underpaid reproductive workers—have long understood the linkages between “workplace” and “non-workplace” issues (McAlevey, 2016; Tait, 2016). Access to housing, childcare, healthcare, education, transportation, clean drinking water, food security, and safe streets, and an end to police brutality and mass incarceration are just as important as workplace health and safety, employer-provided benefits, and other “labor” issues. All of these issues—not just wages—contribute to worker and family wellbeing. Building worker and community power requires grassroots participatory organizing that

challenges the dichotomy between workplace and home, humans and nature, and production and social reproduction.

Drawing false distinctions between what are in fact interconnected issues has created fragmented and ineffective progressive politics (Di Chiro, 2008). Effectively pushing back against neoliberalism and white nationalism necessitates building broad-based social movements that address the interconnected nature of crises. Radical social movement groups offer an important opportunity to explore how social movements might rebuild the “infrastructures of dissent” (Sears, 2005) that were strong forces of social change throughout the 20th century. Among these were poor workers’ unions—detailed in Chapter 1—which found ways to build power by organizing across issues, because their lives depended on it. In order to better understand the nuances of social movements, scholars and activists alike should take seriously the ideas of ordinary people who are learning, organizing, and acting together in struggles for social change (Choudry, 2015). Not only is the learning, theorizing, and strategizing that goes on in these groups incredibly valuable in its own right, but it is also has the capacity to push broader progressive movements in more radical directions. History and Black studies scholar Robin Kelly urges researchers to investigate the struggles, lived experiences, and reflections of activists to “discover the many different cognitive maps of the future of the world not yet born” (2002, p. 10). What insight can mainstream progressive movements glean from small scrappy groups that are uniting across issues to combat precarity, attacks on social reproduction, climate change, etc.? What can progressive movements learn from the BVWU and its radical anti-capitalist vision for change?

This chapter investigates the coalition politics and critical revolutionary praxis of the BVWU. As a small radical social movement group committed to an intersectional struggle, the BVWU's efforts offer important lessons for building a broader social movement to resist the interrelated attacks on labor, social reproduction, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). I first briefly review the literature on coalition politics, focusing on the ways in which intersectionality is mobilized by social movement groups to connect across "single" issues and build cross-movement alliances. I then review a strand of social movement theory focused on critical revolutionary praxis to identify the process through which people develop the radical political subjectivities required to understand and change oppressive conditions. I mobilize these concepts to demonstrate how the BVWU is building cross-movement solidarity with other groups and transforming worker-organizers' consciousness through radical political education to addresses economic, racial, and environmental justice issues relationally. Through my analysis, I identify three threads that articulate across the BVWU's critical revolutionary praxis: 1) the interconnectedness of issues facing workers and other exploited groups, 2) a decolonial analysis that emphasizes the role of white supremacy in perpetuating violence against BIPOC, and 3) an anti-capitalist framework that unmasks the collusion between the state and capital.

I. Coalition Politics

Coalition politics is a strategy for building "transcommunal alliances and communities of practice" that reject siloed single-issue mobilizing in favor of a relational vision of change through grassroots social movement building (Di Chiro, 2008, p. 279).

Originally articulated by civil rights leader Bernice Johnson Reagon (1983), coalition politics are simultaneously a symptom of and a solution to the fragmentation of progressive social movements. Fragmentation leaves social movement groups without a sense of common strategy or political agreement about how systems operate. Coalitions are an attempt to “connect the dots” of compartmentalized movements and issues. Through the process of building coalitions, people gain a better understanding of how issues and struggles are connected. Encounters between groups and movements enable organizers to share stories with others outside of their immediate circles and to frame, reframe, and articulate their messaging and vision in a more integrated way (Choudry, 2015).

At the core of coalition politics is an attention to intersectionality. As early as 1949, Black communist activist Claudia Jones articulated how race, class, and gender oppression compound to engender the superexploitation of Black women (Busby, 1993). Beginning in the 1960s, Chicana feminists organized complex campaigns around the intersecting issues of class, race, nation, gender, and sexuality. In the 1970s, the Combahee River Collective—made up of Black women who were fighting for reproductive rights, struggling to end sterilization abuse, and supporting women defending themselves from gender violence—issued a statement articulating the interlocking nature of social identities (The Combahee River Collective, 1983). Building on this legacy, critical race theorist and legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw first coined the term “intersectionality” to critique the legal regime that invalidated the experience of Black women workers by considering racial and gender discrimination as two separate wrongs (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Women of color scholars and activists continue to mobilize intersectionality in order “to envision and enact new

social relations grounded in multiple axes of intersecting, situated knowledge” (Chun, Lipsitz, & Shin, 2013, p. 917).

The “viral” status of intersectionality today offers a common language for understanding how power and oppression operate and for building coalitions to resist the interlocking oppressions affecting many groups who suffer injustice. Intersectionality is being deployed by today’s radical social movements as a “new militancy and a challenge to single-issue, single-factor analyses” (Gordon, 2016). While critics of identity politics point to the ways in which articulating identities can be divisive, intersectionality offers a strategic analytic tool for understanding identities, not as impediments to building solidarity, “but as valuable evidence about problems unsolved and as new coalitions that need to be formed” (Chun et al., 2013, p. 923).

International social movements and local advocacy groups alike are deploying coalition politics to assert their right to healthy environments, which are foundational to social reproduction. The growing international movement for climate justice, for example, articulates how the global problem of climate change is expressed across locales and how these are compounded by the disinvestments in social reproduction harming millions of people worldwide. On a local scale, the Bay-area based Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ) expanded their singular focus on reproductive healthcare to include affordable housing and transportation, employment, education, and the environment, joining the Coalition for Healthy Communities and Environmental Justice in the late 1990s to shut down California’s largest medical waste incinerator, which was

emitting carcinogenic compounds harmful to reproductive health.³⁸ These examples of coalition politics on different scales embody a direct engagement with the “fleshly realities of socio-ecological interdependence” informed by feminist and environmental justice orientations (Di Chiro, 2008, p. 279).

The labor movement itself has a long history of “labor-community coalitions.” In the 1930s and 1940s, community organizing fostered powerful relationships between workers and religious organizations. During this time, for example, the Catholic church and other religious organizations supported the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee in Chicago and sanitation workers in New York to fight for racial and economic justice (Tattersall, 2010).³⁹ While unions largely turned away from coalition building when they grew powerful enough to exert social and economic influence on their own, beginning in the 1990s they returned to coalitions as a strategy for rebuilding their ranks (Bussel, 2003; Harding & Simmons, 2018; Reynolds, 1999; Reynolds et al., 2017). Many of these labor-community coalitions have persisted, developing relationships and strategies over time that have enabled them to leverage recent popular support to win distributive economic reforms (i.e., minimum wage and earned sick leave legislation), even in cities like Chicago that are governed by centrist and antilabor elected officials (Doussard & Lesniewski, 2017; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017). These coalitions have been successful, in part due to their attention to issues of racial justice and their embrace of a longer-term vision of social, economic, and political change (Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017).

³⁸ One of ACRJ’s popular education strategies included organizing a “tour” for residents, teachers, community leaders, and journalists of a welfare office, a garment factory, a high school, a correctional facility, and a medical waste incinerator to communicate the intersecting issues facing their community.

³⁹ This legacy of faith and labor coalitions is still present today—Portland Jobs with Justice’s Faith Labor Committee serves as one institutionalized example: <https://jwjpdx.org/ourwork/jwjcommittees/faithlabor>.

Coalition politics is not an idealized hypothetical tool. Rather, it is an actually existing organizing strategy that poor workers' unions, environmental justice, and reproductive justice organizations implement out of necessity to counteract the neoliberal forces bearing down on them. It is a holistic movement building response to the unbearable conditions brought about by neoliberal policies of privatization and deregulation: declining real wages, dismantled social services, and a lack of access to healthcare, education, clean air and water, etc. Comprehending the interconnections between workplace and non-workplace, social and environmental, and productive and reproductive issues lays the groundwork for an organic understanding of the complex structural political economic conditions that govern our daily lives and how these can be dismantled and rebuilt in an equitable, life-affirming way.

II. The Critical Revolutionary Praxis of Small Social Movement Groups

While coalition building is the organizational work required to develop cross-movement solidarity, critical revolutionary praxis is the necessary process through which people develop radical political subjectivities and take action to change oppressive conditions. Through critical revolutionary praxis, people develop theory about how power operates, how to resist it, and how to create alternatives (Choudry, 2015).

A Marxist theory of praxis, informed by Gramscian and Freirean understandings, helps us understand the dialectical relationship between thought and action. For both Antonio Gramsci (1971) and Paulo Freire (2000), political action and education occur in

tandem, and are mutually constituted through particular sets of social relations.⁴⁰ Freire's concept of *conscientization* is the process through which people reflect on and question their historical and social conditions in order to develop critical consciousness that enables them to strategize to take action.

By reflecting on one's experience and the experiences of others, and by undertaking the work of organizing to take action, social movement groups formulate theories of change and forge a collective identity (Goodling, 2018; S. Hunt & Benford, 2004). Deliberation in organizing spaces offers a collaborative opportunity for people to work across difference and generate knowledge by sharing stories, formulating and communicating arguments, and highlighting internal tensions. Deliberation can also be an important way for people to participate democratically in organizing and come to value their own role in producing ideas together and thereby build confidence that they are capable of organizing for change (Kilgore, 1999). Through critical reflection, people also generate theories about how the daily struggles they face relate to other struggles and, in turn, to the broader political economy (Choudry, 2015).

Critical revolutionary praxis is developed through struggle in the many spaces where the violence of capitalism is experienced. Indeed, political engagement takes place in various spheres of life and on multiple scales (Boudreau, 2016). By engaging in multiple sites of struggle—the home, the bus, the workplace—workers come to see these sites as mutually constituted and equally important to improving their lives. Although activist meetings and organized direct actions are rich spaces of critical revolutionary praxis, not

⁴⁰ See Purcell (2013), as well, in which he elaborates on Gramsci's notions of "common sense," "good sense," and the role of education in developing collective intellectual capacity and political awareness.

all learning and political action takes place in organizing settings, and there is a diverse range of ways in which people “take action.” Boudreau (2016) discusses informal, non-linear, and unpredictable actions that serve as “daily quiet encroachment” on the status quo. She draws our attention to the everyday life of activists beyond their activism, arguing that “levels of engagement can range from simple curiosity to political activism, stemming from a perceived challenge to one’s rootedness and comfort, a desire to feel competent or an urge to ‘change the world’ and be socially useful” (ibid. p. 76). Boudreau’s work highlights the continuity between everyday life and activism and broadens the scope of political action, shining light on the diverse array of spaces—from public to private—within which action takes place. Everyday personal struggles are intimately connected to broader collective struggles, and making these connections is key to developing critical consciousness.

A group’s ability to develop critical revolutionary praxis also depends on its ability to prefigure its politics, that is, to live out the liberatory social relations within its organizing that it is fighting for on a larger scale.⁴¹ The alterglobalization movement, for example, which publicly emerged during the 1999 WTO protests, used prefiguration as a strategy for developing alternative political structures as a means of transforming the way power operates (Maeckelbergh, 2011). Wobbly organizing also often embodies prefigurative politics, eschewing or de-emphasizing the legal route of formal union

⁴¹ Prefigurative politics are not always radical or justice-oriented, however. For example, Joshua Shicca argues that the alternative food movement deploys a “prefigurative politics of secession rather than confrontation with the conventional agrifood system,” which marginalizes social and economic justice concerns, including the exploitation of food chain workers and poor urban consumers (2015, p. 23). McClintock (2014) offers more nuance, calling on food justice scholars and activists to “come to terms with urban agriculture’s contradictions,” namely, the tendency for these projects to be some combination of radical, reformist, and neoliberal simultaneously.

recognition and instead focusing on shop-floor direct action to build democratic worker power outside of dominant top-down institutions (i.e. mainstream unions) (Ince, 2012). By practicing a prefigurative politics that acknowledges revolution as “an unending process of development,” argues Anthony Ince, organizers “...[produce] political spaces that are processual and in tension between the present and future; between the actual and the possible” (ibid. p. 1653). In doing so, prefiguration connects the micro-scale relationships and practices that organizers are actively cultivating in their everyday lives to their larger goals for societal transformation. An “abbreviated experience” or “glimpse” of alternative social relations, argues Paula Allman, is the necessary fuel for larger revolutionary social transformation (2001, p. 157).

The prefigurative praxis of simultaneously theorizing and building the new world in the shell of the old is a defining vision of the IWW. As we saw in the last chapter, the BVWU’s mutual aid programs offer an alternative to both employer-sponsored benefits and state-sponsored welfare programs, showing that not only is mutual aid possible, it is necessary. Mutual aid programs have the potential to offer members the taste and feel of an alternative, so that they can believe in an alternative way of organizing social reproduction and begin to theorize how to make that alternative possible. In the next section, I demonstrate how the BVWU is extending their struggle beyond their union to build cross-movement solidarity, and transforming workers’ political subjectivity in the process.

III. The BVWU's Critical Revolutionary Praxis

The BVWU is developing a critical revolutionary praxis by engaging in two interrelated strategies: 1) coalition politics aimed at building cross-movement solidarity and 2) political education that transforms workers' political subjectivity. In this section, I investigate the ways in which the BVWU has mobilized these strategies to organize around three concrete issues: housing security, #NoDAPL, and immigrants' rights. I follow these with a section that briefly illustrates examples of the IWW/BVWU's philosophy on building revolutionary unionism beyond Burgerville. Throughout this empirical section, I identify three threads/themes that articulate across coalition politics and political education: 1) the interconnectedness of issues facing workers and other exploited groups, 2) a decolonial analysis that emphasizes the role of white supremacy in perpetuating violence against BIPOC, and 3) an anti-capitalist framework that unmasks the collusion between the state and capital.

A. Finding Common Ground: Connecting Low-wage Labor to Housing Insecurity

There is no blueprint for the connective work required to build coalitions, but the BVWU develops relationships with other organizations in order to advance their agenda for economic, racial, gender, and environmental justice. The willingness of other organizations to ally with the BVWU is indicative of a shared understanding of the ways in which low-wage precarious work intersects with other issues, including Portland's housing crisis.

Without rent control or other sufficient tenant protections, the cost of housing in Portland is skyrocketing, forcing low-income renters further from the city center—and

their jobs. Many Burgerville workers face housing insecurity, which the union views as directly related to their workplace struggle. “There’s obvious intersections in the issues,” notes one organizer, “rent is too damn high and wages are too damn low. Those things are intricately connected. We have to be working at it from both sides.”

In summer 2017, the BVWU began building a relationship with the women of color-led tenants’ rights non-profit Community Alliance of Tenants (CAT) to organize around housing insecurity. The BVWU-CAT alliance was originally sparked through dialog between a CAT organizer and a BVWU worker-organizer who both hoped that the relationship would help transform their respective organizations. The tenants’ rights organizer wanted to push CAT to engage in more direct-action tactics (a BVWU specialty), while the union organizer was interested in enabling the BVWU to engage and support more workers of color.

On September 23, 2017, CAT and the BVWU held a joint rally, march, and picket as part of the Oregon Renter Week of Action, which, in turn, was a part of a national coordinated day of renter action. “Renters rights are workers rights!” read a BVWU post advertising the event, “We can barely survive on Burgerville’s wages. With rents rising in Portland and all over the country, our lives are becoming ever more precarious. The minimum wage is set to rise over the next few years, but rent prices are exploding TODAY. We don’t have time to wait.” A CAT representative articulated their organization’s take on the joint effort through a bullhorn: “Today we’re here all gathered together—renters, workers—and what we want is the same thing. What we want is fair wages to support our families.” Workers and renters from both organizations took turns sharing their personal stories of struggling with precariousness. Picketers held up signs that read “Affordable

housing prevents hunger” and “Bargain at home and work,” clearly communicating the intersections between housing, food, and economic insecurity and the need to build collective power to push back. The event included a light brigade of supporters holding up fiber-optic letterboards spelling out “RENT’S DUE! RAISE NOW!” The event enabled CAT and the BVWU to build solidarity between their organizations and engage in political education and action together. It serves as an example of how organizations can act in coalition to move beyond siloed organizing and single-issue narratives.

Mutual support between small radical social movement groups can also be critical to their survival. Without the staff and resources of large business unions, the BVWU fundamentally relies on material support from other organizations. Because the BVWU is so direct action-focused, their campaign also depends on other organizations showing up to picket lines, and in some cases taking the lead on organizing pickets. The BVWU’s partnerships with more established and better resourced organizations like CAT build their capacity and credibility within the larger community. This reliance on other organizations pushes the BVWU to strategically center alliance building as fundamental to the health of the campaign. However, the BVWU also draws upon their own capacity to support other struggles, particularly those of BIPOC.

B. #NoDAPL: Applying a Decolonial Analysis

The act of responding to the call from the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe was a process of bringing a decolonial analysis into the BVWU’s organizing. During their trip to Standing Rock, BVWU delegates developed a shared understanding of the connections between the labor movement, Indigenous rights, and environmental/climate justice. On their road trip

to North Dakota, they read aloud and discussed the material offered in “#TheStandingRockSyllabus,” which included background literature to help situate the struggle in, according to the syllabus website, “a broader, historical, political, economic, and social context going back over 500 years to the first expeditions of Columbus, the founding of the United States on institutionalized slavery, private property, and dispossession, and the rise of global carbon supply and demand.”⁴² One member of the delegation notes that through this process of political education with her coworkers, she began making connections between “the history of crimes against Indigenous people [by] colonists and the United States...in the name of capitalism” to the “crimes against the environment.” This political education helped deepen her understanding of material she was reading in her college environmental studies class and inspired her to seek out literature on “alternatives to capitalism,” including Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto*, when she got back from the trip.

Learning and participating in a very different organizing space—an intentional, communal, and prefigurative organizing space cultivated by and for Indigenous peoples directly fighting against colonization—enabled workers to develop their critical consciousness. All of the delegates spoke of the transformational nature of the trip. One in particular reflected on her experience: “I was just so honored to be on the land...I didn’t know anything about it. I’m still trying to figure out my life. I didn’t know the history. I didn’t know what’s been going on for 20 years, because I wasn’t there and aware of it. But now, to be able to be part of it is so amazing.” The worker-organizers who traveled to North Dakota were able to, in Staughton Lynd’s words, “touch and taste an alternative way of

⁴² <https://nycstandswithstandingrock.wordpress.com/standingrocksyllabus/>

doing things” and “briefly live inside that hope, in order to come to believe that an alternative might really come true” (2010, p. 74).

Learning through experience, through critical praxis, the BVWU delegation also developed critical theory about how capitalism and colonialism operate. The delegation was an opportunity to explore the “complex entanglement of capitalism and colonization,” according to one delegate, by “re-center[ing], reimagin[ing] the relationship between the working-class labor struggle...[and] native and decolonial struggles.” Both struggles, he continues, are “grounded in expropriation and exploitation” and “what we’re seeing at Standing Rock is a continuation of that 500-year history...” By connecting across these issues and supporting Indigenous peoples in a material way, the BVWU is applying a decolonial lens that is missing from the majority of social movement work (Choudry, 2007).

BVWU organizers were then able to bring a decolonial lens back to their organizing in Portland. Delegates discussed the relevance of Standing Rock to the BVWU campaign on the shop floor, thereby engaging their coworkers in political education. BVWU organizers recognized the fight against the development of the Dakota Access Pipeline as “intimately entangled” with the BVWU’s struggle for recognition by their employer, because both are “power struggles against capitalism,” according to one worker-organizer. Through critical reflection, the delegates were able to understand how their own daily struggles relate to the struggles of Native peoples and to the broader political economy (Choudry, 2015).

However, just as the world we live in and the struggles we are up against are not simple or straightforward, neither are the conversations regarding their interconnected

nature. “Those have been an important and necessary challenge for us as organizers,” reflects one of the delegates regarding discussions with his coworkers. However difficult those conversations can be, he notes, they often yield exciting moments of clarity when workers begin to understand and articulate connections together. These moments offer workers an opportunity to forge a collective identity that promotes solidarity with one another and with other oppressed groups (S. Hunt & Benford, 2004).

C. “Immigrant Power is Worker Power!”

The BVWU’s decolonial analysis and commitment to fighting white supremacy is also embodied in their efforts to make immigrants’ rights central to their campaign. On May 23, 2017, they united with the immigrants’ rights organizations Pueblos Unidos and Voz Hispana Cambio Comunitario, a public-school teachers’ union, the ACLU of Oregon, and a church to hold a Rally for Immigrants’ Rights and Respect in East Multnomah County, which is home to growing immigrant communities. Attendees demanded that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) cease all raid activities and that the City of Portland establish a legal fund to represent detainees in court. “Immigrant power is worker power!” reads a BVWU Facebook post reporting on the event, “[I]t’s up to us workers, families, neighborhoods, teachers, and students to stand together, have each others’ backs, and get organized to oppose exploitation and intimidation. No one is disposable, no one is illegal: power to the people!” In this post, the BVWU articulates a commitment to joining with other groups to make demands on the state on behalf of a vulnerable population.

The BVWU also made immigrants’ rights issues central to their campaign by proposing articles in their collective bargaining agreement that Burgerville opt-out of E-

verify and not cooperate with ICE. The union frames these under the umbrella demand of a “Sanctuary Burgerville,” an effort that was led by the BVWU’s Black and Brown Caucus—a group of Burgerville workers of color who organize to end racism in their workplace and in their union. To this end, the Caucus elevated immigrants’ rights issues to strategically push back against racism at Burgerville. “The main way that Burgerville participates in white supremacy is by preventing workers of color from working there,” one worker-organizer notes. The Caucus views the demand as a “concrete way” to center the BVWU’s commitment to “combating white supremacy” at Burgerville, according to one worker-organizer.

The union declares that a “Sanctuary Burgerville” is “Now and Forever in Season!,” playing off of the company’s messaging of local and seasonal sourcing (see Figure 4). Their Facebook post elaborates, “We want to see the company become a sanctuary for workers that face the structural violence carried out by I.C.E. and the federal government. We call upon Burgerville to stand on the right side of history, and proactively adopt the sanctuary demands that we are putting forward.” They frame Burgerville’s anti-immigrant labor policies as an effort to “police and exclude immigrants in our community,” and therefore “a labor practice that mirrors the action being taken to separate immigrant children from their families.” This framing articulates the workplace as a locus of growing anti-immigrant sentiment. By drawing connections between state violence towards immigrants in the community and Burgerville’s anti-immigrant policies in the workplace, the BVWU highlights the collusion of the state and capital to reproduce the exploitative and oppressive conditions of capitalism (Choudry, 2015).

Figure 4: BVWU Facebook post from July 11, 2018 demanding a "Sanctuary Burgerville"

In August 2018, the union's push for a "Sanctuary Burgerville" came to a head in one Burgerville shop. Workers defied instructions from management to take off their "Black Lives Matter," "No One Is Illegal," and "Abolish ICE" buttons. Ten workers refused to remove their buttons and instead walked out, forcing managers to close the store for much of the day. In a public Facebook post justifying their walkout, the BVWU rejects the narrow focus on single issues that predominates the mainstream labor movement and explicitly challenges the dichotomy between "workplace" and "non-workplace" issues. "Unions are about more than just wages and benefits," the post reads, "White supremacy is a workplace issue. Sexism and misogyny are workplace issues. Fascism is a workplace issue. And if unions are about making a fairer and more just workplace, then that means fighting all of those forces on the job as well." This powerful proclamation clearly and broadly defines the multifaceted battleground upon which the union stands; the BVWU is committed to fighting not only for economic justice, but for racial, immigrant, and gender justice as well, because these struggles are intimately connected.

The day after the walkout, Burgerville officially revoked its new anti-button policy and paid workers back wages for their missed work. "Let's be crystal clear," reads another BVWU Facebook post, "the only reason they changed this policy is because of the actions of our coworkers...[who] used their collective power to denounce white supremacy and shut down the drive thru and dining hall...Our union believes strongly that Black Lives Matter and that prisons and detention centers must be abolished for our communities to be free," the post continues, "We denounce all forms of white supremacy and call on the company to do the same." However, after the story got a good deal of media attention, which drew racist comments from alt-right trolls who used the hashtags #ISupportICE

#MAGA, and #BuildTheWall, the company again reversed course. Bowing to the public pressure of white supremacists, Burgerville instituted a formal written policy prohibiting workers from wearing buttons of any kind. In response, workers at two shops (the one suffering the button crack down and another shop that is represented in collective bargaining) walked off the job in September on National Cheeseburger Day—one of the company’s busiest days of the year. The button battle continues to be fought at the bargaining table, where worker-organizers are negotiating for their right to political expression at work.

While workers have so far been unsuccessful in winning their right to wear buttons, they have succeeded in breaking down artificial distinctions between what are commonly considered “workplace” and “non-workplace” issues. Organizers communicated the connections between their inability to express themselves at work and the multitude of issues that affect them both inside and outside of the workplace: racism, white supremacy, and anti-immigrant sentiment. By articulating these connections and engaging their coworkers (and the public) in generative dialog, organizers turned a campaign for freedom of expression at work into critical political education that motivated workers who had not yet been active in the organizing to walk off the job.

IV. Revolutionary Unionism Beyond Burgerville

Coalition politics and political education are critical to achieving BVWU’s vision for revolutionary unionism and politics beyond Burgerville. A central component of this work is challenging workers’ (mis)conceptions about unions, a topic I discussed in Chapter 3. Whereas mainstream labor unions might restrict the focus of their struggle to the shop

floor and the workers in a given bargaining unit, the IWW prides itself on being a union for all workers. Acting in solidarity with other struggles is part and parcel of political education in the IWW and BVWU. “Doing revolutionary work,” notes one longtime Wobbly and BVWU member, “to me that means that this is one fight among many, *and* that part of the goal is building up a base in the working class in Portland who have a vision for radical transformation. And that is very concrete.” He notes that he is in constant conversation with his coworkers about politics and works hard to turn people out, not only to BVWU events, but other local protests and rallies. He reflects on how the IWW’s approach to political education extends beyond the workplace: “We are looking at our coworkers and saying: ‘how can I support you in fighting for a better society, *period, end of story*, Burgerville or not, I don’t give a *fuck*.’” He views the BVWU as the first step towards fostering workers’ critical consciousness. “The first conversation is the BVWU,” he says, referring to his holistic approach to engaging in political education with his coworkers, “and then they got a bug” and become interested in activism more broadly.

Worker-organizers discuss the importance of having critical conversations with their coworkers about “viral” issues, such as police brutality and white supremacist activity in Portland. These conversations sometimes lead to encouraging coworkers to engage in further learning that is relevant to their own identities. One worker-organizer recalls her Haitian coworker expressing interest in learning about the history of Haiti. The worker-organizer recommended that her coworker read C.L.R. James’ *The Black Jacobins* (1938), which details the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1803, when enslaved Haitians organized an insurrection against French colonial rule. The same worker-organizer recalls drawing on the rich history of organizing for labor and racial justice in conversations with her

coworkers, including the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, which brought together civil rights, labor, and religious groups. These examples embody Freire's concept of *conscientization*—the process through which people reflect on and question their historical and social conditions in order to develop critical consciousness that enables them to strategize to take action. These conversations also demonstrate the relevance of historic struggles to informing social movements today.

Supporting workers' political development is part and parcel of organizing an inclusive union that is capable of participating in broader movements for social change. The BVWU is a vehicle for building the IWW and building a broader working-class movement. "We need to recruit people off the shop floor, *into* the IWW," one worker-organizer explains the long-term strategy, "so that *they* are organizers for the long haul and [so that] they have a perspective of revolutionary unionism and revolutionary politics *beyond* Burgerville. That's part of the goal." This broad approach to fostering radical political education beyond the workplace and beyond the union is different than the approach that mainstream labor unions take to organizing, which is usually confined to narrowly conceived shop floor issues. However, there are many hurdles to recruiting Burgerville workers to join the IWW. As discussed in the previous chapter, many don't feel comfortable in IWW and BVWU meeting spaces, which hinders the Branch's capacity to build an inclusive and intersectional working-class movement in Portland.

V. Challenges to Developing Critical Revolutionary Praxis

The BVWU faces challenges that are common in many small social movement groups. One particularly sticky phenomenon is that radical organizers sometimes reproduce

the very inequalities and oppressive power relations that they are fighting against (Choudry, 2015). Gendered divisions of care work within the BVWU and the Branch, as well as hierarchical and stodgy meeting dynamics, affect who feels comfortable being at the table and participating in decision-making. The core BVWU organizers are primarily white, and even early members of the Black and Brown Caucus were “white-passing,” according to one organizer. Due in part to these dynamics, the BVWU has struggled to build deep relationships with organizations led by people of color. One worker-organizer notes that it is challenging to build those relationships because the union doesn’t have “organic connections” to communities of color.

In some instances, other organizations have challenged the union’s decisions regarding their demands for justice. For example, Enlace—a Portland-based coalition of low-wage worker centers, unions, and community organizations in Mexico and the U.S.—questioned whether the BVWU’s demand to end E-Verify was truly coming from Burgerville workers themselves, or was instead a demand made *on behalf of* undocumented immigrants for access to employment at Burgerville. Reflecting on this critique, one worker-organizer notes that the union should have built closer relationships to the immigrants’ rights community and identified an organization that could have been an anchor for the campaign around the “Sanctuary Burgerville” demands. “We would’ve had to earn that trust,” he says reflecting on the challenges, which would have been easier if the BVWU was more established and had more resources, “but we’re a scrappy-ass thing, what the fuck do they have reason to trust a bunch of honky anarchists? They don’t have a reason to trust us.”

On a more fundamental level, the union also struggles to connect across issues in a material way. One worker-organizer reflects on the union's partnership with CAT, noting that the relationship between tenants' issues and workers' issues is rooted in poverty, but the "concrete tactical relationship" is more abstract. The inability to fully articulate the connections and move beyond the abstract to a more material and mutually beneficial path for organizing means that the relationship remains somewhat superficial: "an organizational relationship between two separate organizations." This speaks to the widespread fragmentation of social movement organizations and their well-intentioned efforts to "connect the dots" that oftentimes fall short. BVWU members note that they would like to identify more opportunities to build deeper relationships with other groups to organize across issues that their coworkers truly care about.

Organizers generally agree that there is "a lot of political education work to do," in order to make the connections between economic, racial, and gender justice more explicit. Many of the worker-organizers I interviewed emphasized the importance of conversations with their coworkers, but highlighted the incremental nature of such one-on-ones. One worker-organizer highlights the difficulty of doing political education in a more "structural way" to reach more workers, suggesting that infographics that tie racial justice to labor justice might help provide the political education that workers need.

"Viral" issues like police brutality and social movements like Black Lives Matter offer important points of reference for workers to think about the connections between racial justice and labor justice, a relationship that organizers would like to make more explicit through political education. However, drawing these connections during conversations with coworkers can be challenging, according to one worker-organizer, who

identifies as a person of color: “They’re not always immediately tied back to, ‘Hey wait, we’re people of color and we work at this shit job.’ A lot of POC work at shit jobs and are living in poverty. How do we tie those issues?” She also questions whether organizing at Burgerville is the place to really make those connections and whether it’s going to be “transformational for folks of color. If not, then what’s the point?” Her ambivalence surrounding whether the BVWU’s labor organizing is the most transformative vehicle for workers of color is indicative of the challenges the BVWU faces in trying to do the authentic multi-issue, coalition building work required to bring about the transformative change workers need to see, not just at work, but in all spheres of their lives.

Lastly, while the BVWU has brought a decolonial analysis to their organizing, something that many non-Indigenous led groups fail to even attempt, one organizer calls into question whether the delegation to Standing Rock truly had a material impact or was just a “gesture of solidarity.” Indeed, Choudry’s critique of the tendency of non-Indigenous activists to come to the aid of Indigenous struggles only during acute times of crisis is not lost here (2007, 2015). This phenomenon signals a deep chasm between siloed social movements and the challenges of building broad-based anti-colonial, anti-capitalist struggles.

VI. Conclusions: “This Shit is Bigger than the Workplace”

We have a basic politics that all this shit is bigger than the workplace. It’s bigger than Burgerville, it’s bigger than the low-wage economy. —BVWU worker-organizer

The BVWU's intersectional approach to organizing exemplifies a budding coalition politics that serves as an antidote to the siloed single-issue campaigns that dominate today's mainstream progressive movements. Rather than focusing narrowly on the wage, the BVWU sees their struggle as much broader than Burgerville and the low-wage economy, a sentiment reflected in the quote above. BVWU members are not only Burgerville workers—they are parents, immigrants, renters, etc. They simultaneously occupy multiple vulnerable identities. While winning a raise at Burgerville would certainly change their lives for the better, it would not solve all of their problems. Understanding Burgerville workers as “whole” people enables the union to set its sights on building power to struggle for broader change (McAlevey, 2016).

The BVWU's approach to political education is fundamentally rooted in revolutionary praxis—the unity of radical thought and action (Choudry, 2015). Taking part in direct action—such as the Oregon Renter Week of Action, the delegation to Standing Rock, the Immigrants' Rights Rally, and workplace walkouts and strikes—shifts workers' political consciousness in tangible ways, including helping them draw connections to larger anti-authoritarian, decolonial, and anti-capitalist movements. Through political education, the BVWU breaks down the divisions between “single issues” by clearly articulating connections so that workers understand their own struggle for liberation not only as multifaceted, but as bound up in the liberation of other oppressed groups, who may be different from them. The BVWU's political education work focuses on articulating how their struggle for dignity and respect on the job is linked to movements for decolonization, environmental justice, and immigrant justice.

While the BVWU campaign is firmly rooted in Burgerville shop floors, it is also expansive—connecting to Indigenous struggles against big oil and colonialism in North Dakota, to the violent attacks on immigrant families, to police brutality against Black bodies, and beyond. Through political education, organizers connect “workplace” and “non-workplace” issues. By making demands on ICE, the City of Portland, and Burgerville, the BVWU highlights how the state and capital work together to violently enforce colonialism and capitalism.

The BVWU is engaging in critical revolutionary praxis to build power for ordinary people in a specific time and place against a specific oppressor (e.g., an exploitative employer), but their campaign also transcends space and time to connect a “critical, solidarity-affirming moment and the larger system it challenges, giving the workers in crisis a new way of seeing themselves and a newly formed sense of the society’s political economy” (McAlevy, 201). Coalition building and political education fuel everyday struggles happening in the here and now, but they are also informed by lessons from social movements that came before, such as the Haitian revolution and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Coalition building and political education are also necessary strategies that prepare workers to fight for the future. By taking seriously the IWW’s goal to “organize the worker, not the job,” and offering workers the opportunity to “touch and taste” alternatives through prefigurative politics, the BVWU serves as a vehicle for building members’ capacity to engage in future movement building aimed at realizing the broad-scale change they want to see in their world.

The connections between workplace and home, production and social reproduction, and humans and nature become increasingly clear as employers and the state continue to

withdraw responsibility for social reproduction by gutting social welfare, eroding workers' rights, divesting from public education and housing, and deregulating markets and environmental protections. All of these moves increase the precarity of social reproduction (Ettlinger, 2007; Meehan & Strauss, 2015; Vosko, 2000). When seen through this lens, "sustainability" becomes about the right to good jobs, healthy environments, food, and all of the other resources required to safely and adequately sustain oneself and one's family. This more just conception of sustainability stands in stark contrast to the corporate and apolitical version of sustainability that restaurants and grocery stores deploy to maintain their ethical veneer, which—as I demonstrated in Chapter 2—masks the exploitative labor practices that would be unpalatable to conscious consumers. The BVWU counters this profit-motivated faux sustainability by cultivating a critical revolutionary praxis, through which workers develop a collective vision of "sustainability grounded in justice," according to one worker-organizer, that accounts for struggles against white supremacy and colonization. Critical revolutionary praxis, and the coalition building and radical political education that fuels it, reject binaries and a narrow-focused politics in favor of a more strategic and relational vision of change.

Conclusion: Towards (Re)production Politics

It's a warm early spring day in Portland. Around 200 fast-food workers and supporters have gathered in Couch Park in Nob Hill, one of the city's most expensive neighborhoods in which to live, eat, and shop. We're here to take part in the next chapter for low-wage service worker organizing in the city—and in the nation, for that matter. Another fast-food worker union is going public. It's March 16, 2019, just under three years since the Burgerville Workers Union (BVWU) publicly announced their union to the world. In that time, the BVWU made history by becoming the first federally recognized fast-food union in the U.S. in 40 years. They've challenged Portland's foodies—and the broader public—to abandon a version of sustainability built on the faux democracy of “vote with your fork” consumer politics. They've also inspired fast-food and other low-wage workers across the city to organize in their own workplaces. Workers have flooded the Portland Branch of the IWW with phone calls and emails asking how they can organize their own version of the BVWU. Among them were Little Big Burger workers, who began seeking support from local labor unions two years ago. It should come as no surprise that the only union willing to help them was the IWW. “Since our founding,” says BVWU and IWW member Jimmy through a megaphone in Couch Park, “we've always been willing to organize those deemed ‘unorganizable’ ... You're white, Black, unemployed, a prisoner, a sex worker, a fast-food worker? It doesn't matter! You're in the working class and you have a place in the ‘One Big Union’!”

The Little Big Union's struggle is indicative of a great failure of the mainstream labor movement: the unwillingness of business unions to support workers who are most in

need of collective bargaining power. The Service Employees Union's (SEIU) Fight for \$15 was a well-intentioned effort to engage in organizing strategies better suited for the growing foodservice industry; SEIU eschewed workplace-based campaigns and instead targeted the entire fast-food sector in cities across the U.S. They launched high-profile fast-food strikes, which brought much needed attention to the plight of low-wage workers and convinced progressive voters and politicians to support higher minimum wages. While the Fight for \$15 program helped raise the wages of thousands of workers in cities across the U.S., it was not enough to build the power of fast-food workers to fight for the change they want and need in their lives.

In some ways, the Portland IWW has picked up where Fight for \$15 left off, making strides towards realizing SEIU's bold vision of unionizing fast-food workers. Although the BVWU campaign is very much rooted in the workplace, the IWW's goal is to organize Portland's fast-food workers into one city-wide sectoral union, with the ultimate vision of organizing the entire working class into "One Big Union." The Portland IWW has moved beyond the symbolic mobilizing characteristic of Fight for \$15 and is engaging in member-driven direct action to build worker power. These efforts represent a "Fight for \$15 2.0," according to some BVWU worker-organizers. But it's not a new approach for the IWW, which has always aspired to an industrial union model. While the decline of organized labor since the 1950s has wiped out the IWW's industrial unions, making the model untenable, there are signs that building a union of fast-food workers in Portland is possible today.

Portland is at the forefront of fast-food worker organizing in the U.S., serving as an example of what can happen if workers are trusted and supported in building their own

power. But the IWW cannot do it alone. This is why mobilizing the support of organizations like Jobs with Justice, other union locals, community organizations like the Community Alliance of Tenants, and the Portland Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) is critical to building working class power in Portland and beyond. “Pretty soon,” proclaims Olivia Kabi Smith, co-chair of the Portland DSA—which has been inspired by the IWW to organize its own salting programs—“there won’t be a burger flipped in this town that isn’t flipped by a union hand!”

Organizing a city-wide fast-food worker union will also require shifting the consciousness of the urban dwellers. That reality is evident on this sunny Saturday as we march through the heart of Nob Hill and form a picket line outside of a Little Big Burger location, where several passersby turn their noses up at workers who are ruining an otherwise perfect shopping day. One shouts, “You all are a bunch of *kindergarteners*!” Our chants of “Hey! Hey! LBB! Every job needs dignity!” and “We tussle for the truffle fries! Now it’s time to organize!” are designed to convince consumers that being anti-union is not “friendly, local, or sustainable.” However, if conscious consumers continue to identify primarily as consumers, they will never understand that their efforts to buy their way to sustainability—and clear their conscience through ethical consumption—are in vain if they come at the expense of workers. Further, these consumers will never understand that their own workplace struggles—and they certainly have them—are wrapped up in the struggles of those who make the local burgers and seasonal shakes they eat on their lunch breaks from their own jobs, which could become just as precarious in today’s turbulent economy. A significant challenge moving forward will be to convince consumers that they, too, are workers.

A major task at hand for progressive movements is to abandon consumption politics—which reinforce our identities as individual consumers leveraging our perceived purchasing power to make change. In Chapter 2, I demonstrated that an alternative food movement that is organized around consumption politics not only fails to build power for workers, but further tips the balance in favor of employers, who benefit from an “alternative” market narrative that masks worker exploitation and champions consumption as a means to environmental sustainability. In Chapter 1, I demonstrated how the mainstream labor movement’s preoccupation with the wage assumes that workers can earn their way to economic security, which, I argue, is another form of consumption politics. Higher wages are vitally important, but for many poor people, they are not the only—or even the primary—antidote to precarity. Access to housing, childcare, healthcare, education, transportation, clean drinking water, food, and an end to police brutality, incarceration, and the criminalization of immigrants are critical, too. All of these issues contribute to the wellbeing of workers and their families.

Instead of organizing around consumption politics, I argue that we—as workers—must organize around what I have termed in this dissertation *(re)production politics*, which are fundamentally about how work is organized and how people care for one another and the planet. (Re)production politics account for the dialectic relationship between production and social reproduction and offer a framework for uniting a divided working class. Whereas consumption politics reinforce people’s identity as individual consumers and drive a wedge between those who can afford to “vote with their dollars” and those who cannot, (re)production politics can galvanize people to identify collectively as workers in order to challenge the structural inequality embedded in the food system—and the broader

political economy. Politicizing not what people buy, but the labor, locations, and practices of (re)production the landscape of struggle, I have demonstrated, can enable social movement groups to create more liberatory practices of care based on solidarity, mutuality, and interdependence (Lawson, 2007; McDowell, 2004).

Through research on low-wage worker organizing, I have investigated three empirical questions:

- How do sustainability-branded institutions deploy values-based discourse and how does this relate to labor practices?
- How do worker-organizers understand and expose the contradictions of sustainability branding?
- How do worker-organizers engage with social reproduction as a terrain of political struggle, and to what ends?

I have attended to these questions through activist scholarship aimed at informing my broad theoretical concern: *How might social reproduction—as discourse and practice—be marshaled to generate more inclusive organizing strategies, forge more just conceptions of sustainability, and build worker power?* By drawing on a large body of critical food studies literature, putting feminist political economy (Federici, 2004; Katz, 2001; Swidler, 2018b) in conversation with labor studies (McAlevey, 2016; Peck, 1996; Tait, 2016) and social movement theory (Choudry, 2015; Di Chiro, 2008), and investigating the strategy and practice of a small radical social movement group, I have argued that social reproduction is a necessary terrain of political struggle, not only for low-wage workers, but for any progressive social movement fighting for economic, reproductive, racial, or environmental justice. I have mobilized the concept of social reproduction because it carries analytical weight that feminist political economists have developed through decades of debate. Social reproduction offers power, rigor, and nuance that moves us beyond

mainstream productivist framings that shroud the extent of capitalist exploitation and stymie the labor movement. The concept of social reproduction helps us envision a more broadly conceived working class that includes not only traditional waged workers, but unpaid domestic workers, social welfare recipients, sex workers, prisoners, workers in the “gig” and other informal economies, and more. Articulating a broad class consciousness helps to build solidarity across seemingly disparate issues and positionalities, push back against capitalist exploitation in its myriad forms, and envision alternative ways of caring for one another. This is especially challenging in a neoliberal climate of individualized responsibility, where artificial divisions within the working class serve to create individual subjectivities grounded in what we do and do not consume.

The BVWU is politicizing social reproduction by challenging the neoliberal discourse and practice that justify the systemic violence of capitalism with mutual aid programs. They are countering capitalism’s destructive tendencies with collective resistance (De Angelis, 2003). As they bring their homes, buses, kitchen cupboards, bodies, and children into the scope of their struggle, they take these ostensibly apolitical spaces where individual families, mothers, and other caregivers are perceived to be failing at providing for themselves, and instead define these spaces as important terrains of political struggle. However, as they demand that their employer take responsibility for reproducing its workforce, they risk ceding control over how social reproduction is organized, thereby losing the solidarity-building inherent to the framework of mutual aid. The battle over who is responsible for social reproduction—the state, the employer, the community, or the individual—and how it is organized—whether through employer-sponsored benefits,

social welfare, workfare, or mutual aid—are critical questions for progressive social movements to take up.

I argue that social movements need a radical re-envisioning of the organization of (re)productive labor—a vision for how to meet basic human needs outside of commodified market relations. This vision must necessarily merge the productive and reproductive and offer a path towards collective caring and liberation—not just from class, but from racial and gendered divisions of labor. Taking mutual aid seriously, both within the labor movement and other movements for social and economic justice, I have demonstrated, is a step towards envisioning what a collective re-organization of social reproduction might look like and then building that alternative.

The connections between workplace and home, production and social reproduction, and humans and nature become increasingly clear as neoliberal policies and practices continue to degrade our jobs, eviscerate our social safety nets, justify violence against women, immigrants, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, and escalate environmental destruction that threatens our ability to reproduce ourselves on this planet. Single-issue campaigns are no match for the interconnected struggles we are up against. The BVWU's efforts to ally with decolonial, immigrants' rights, tenants' rights, and environmental justice organizations offer an example of a budding *coalition politics* (Di Chiro, 2008). Their critical revolutionary praxis is transforming worker-organizers' consciousness, enabling them to draw connections to other anti-authoritarian, decolonial, and anti-capitalist movements. Fighting for a collective vision of “sustainability grounded in justice,” in the words of one worker-organizer, means fighting for the right to good jobs, childcare, healthcare, housing, food, natural environments, and all of the other resources

required to safely and adequately sustain everyone—regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, citizenship status, ability, etc.

The IWW, in coalition with other radical social movement groups, has the potential to turn the neoliberal tide, because “we have something more powerful than money, something freely exchanged that grows the more it is shared,” continues BVWU member Jimmy to the crowd of fellow workers, “What I’m talking about is solidarity....Solidarity is the fundamental essence of working-class power. Solidarity means love and common commitment, it means recognizing each other in our common need and suffering. It means that when things get tough, we stand together, because an injury to one is an injury to all.” Indeed, solidarity is key to the IWW’s vision of abolishing capitalism, and this radical vision for a liberated world has merit on its own.

When discussing my research with people I meet—many of them academics—they often ask something along the lines of “What has the BVWU won?” or “How have their working conditions changed?” People want to know what material gains workers have made and whether their working conditions are tangibly different now that they “have a union.” These are important questions, and the truth is that things *are* materially different for workers—they’ve seen three wage increases in just as many years since they began organizing. One was an attempt on the part of Burgerville to placate workers without, of course, crediting their organizing efforts. The other two were the result of wage increases won at the state level—one went into effect in Washington in 2017 and another in Oregon in 2016. Both states have also passed paid sick leave laws. These concessions were won in part by the organizing efforts of social movement groups—including \$15 Now Oregon, a

coalition whose campaign for a state ballot initiative for a \$15 minimum wage was undermined when the Oregon Senate passed an incremental tiered minimum wage bill.

Let me be clear: the questions that yield answers about material gains and quantifiable measures of success are not the questions I set out to investigate. In fact, I'm arguing that they are the wrong questions altogether. I have spent much of this dissertation illuminating how far beyond the wage relation capitalist exploitation has spread. The labor movement's and the broader public's preoccupation with the wage as a measure of working-class power obscures the multitude of struggles facing the working class. This singular focus on the wage obscures the extent of capitalist exploitation. It also obscures the intangible, but nonetheless transformational, gains that workers make when they stand together with their coworkers and in solidarity with other struggles against injustice. My focus was not on measuring success, but on investigating the myriad intersecting issues affecting workers and how they are uniting to fight back despite being immersed in neoliberal rhetoric that positions them as individuals facing separate problems.

As I step back to reflect on my role in the BVWU, I find it challenging to articulate the specific ways that my positionality as an activist scholar shaped my research, because it did so fully and completely. What questions might I have asked, what methods might I have used, what data might I have collected, what conclusions might I have drawn had I not been embedded in the IWW and BVWU? While it is difficult to imagine what research on labor organizing in Portland's sustainable food industry might have looked like from a non-activist scholar lens, one path might be to seek out the perspectives of employers and customers through interviews and surveys. But I was not interested in documenting employers' perspectives, in part because plenty of celebratory research has been done on

the sustainability practices of “socially responsible” businesses. Similarly, the voices of consumers are also quite well documented in the vast body of literature on green consumption. Workers voices are often left out of discourse around sustainability, and so my goal was to prioritize their perspective. Further, investigating how worker-organizers engage with social reproduction as a terrain of political struggle required taking part in their organizing in a meaningful way. My identities as an organizer with the IWW and as a scholar are intimately connected and in service to social movement building. Activist scholarship and the “situated knowledges” (Haraway, 1988) it relies upon enable, returning to Hale, “privileged insight, analysis, and theoretical innovation that otherwise would be impossible to achieve” (2008, p. 20). My positionality as a Wobbly and my theoretical background in Marxian feminist political economy no doubt converged to produce the theoretical and political positions that I take in this dissertation. My role as an activist scholar has enabled me to analyze, critique, and unsettle a complicated organizing campaign that has faced significant challenges to living out radical anti-capitalist visions of change.

The BVWU has proven that it is possible to organize “unorganizable” fast-food workers through bottom-up worker-led organizing, but it is not easy. In fact, it is messy and laced with contradictions. While the IWW has a radical vision for abolishing capitalism and the BVWU is cultivating alternative forms of caring for one another, they have no long-term vision for how to reorganize social reproduction in a way that is collectively controlled and liberated from racialized and gendered divisions of care labor. While they have a radical, anti-racist, decolonial vision for building cross-movement coalitions, they sometimes reproduce the very oppressive racist and sexist social relations that they are

fighting against. And while their efforts to stand in solidarity with Water Protectors exemplify an important decolonial analysis missing from most non-Indigenous led organizing work, this was also a one-time symbolic effort rather than part of a long-term commitment to supporting the liberation of Indigenous peoples.

Documenting the BVWU's organizing efforts along with the above contradictions and limitations, I hope, will enable both current and future generations to learn from and build upon their struggle. However, like most inquiries into complex social movement organizations, this research generates new questions. How might workplace struggles like the BVWU's link up in more strategic and material ways to the struggles of other precarious workers—unpaid and underpaid domestic workers, prisoners, sex workers, and workfare “recipients” and other unemployed workers? How can mutual aid programs be deployed by these other precarious workers? Perhaps these workers are already engaging in their own mutual aid practices, and if so, what can we learn from them? Most importantly, how can mutual aid practices be scaled up to create alternative systems of caring for one another outside the state and capital within our local communities, cities, states, nations, and globally? How can the BVWU's own mutual aid programs be redesigned to be more liberatory and logistically sustainable?

The tensions and shortcomings of the BVWU's organizing should not be glossed over, but neither should the importance of their radical vision for a liberated world. The success of social movements is often measured by whether or not they've achieved their vision. By this measure, the IWW has so far failed, but so too has nearly every other radical social movement, because the power relations they have fought against remain largely intact (Choudry, 2015). But in spite of such limitations, the efforts of the BVWU and others

is vital, because “it is precisely these alternative visions and dreams that inspire new generations to continue to struggle for change” (Kelly, 2002, p. ix).

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