

ORGANIZING A STUDENT WORKER UNION:  
PARTICIPANT ACTION RESEARCH AT THE  
UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

by

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Participant Action Research at the University of Oregon

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The University of Oregon Student Workers unionization is one of many campaigns led by undergraduate workers across the United States. The UO Student Workers also is the largest student-worker union drive ongoing in the US, currently, UO Student Workers seeks to represent over 3,000 workers at the University of Oregon. For this research, I use Participatory Action Research to explore how UO Student Workers reaches a majority of student workers to sign their union cards and begin exploring how the student organizers can form a lasting union for future years. The organizers were able to reach over 2,170 workers to sign cards and file for a unit to represent over 3,000 workers and are now continuing to fight for certification. Ultimately, through my research, I've found that the unionization campaign is feasible due to the tremendous amount of effort that a core group of organizers has put into the campaign. Most importantly, organizers in this campaign have learned the transformative power of organizing their workplaces and will leave the university with a new way of fighting for justice.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## Introduction

This research aims to be an exploratory investigation of best practices for effective labor organizing. This research is important as labor unions serve as vehicles for change for both permissible and non-permissible demands from workers. Other universities across the United States have undergraduate unionized labor forces; however, none of these schools have as large or expansive of an undergraduate workforce as the University of Oregon (UO). The UO is among many schools attempting to create a wall-to-wall union of undergraduate workers at this moment, along with other labor movements such as Starbucks Workers United and Amazon Labor Union.<sup>1</sup>

Very little research currently exists on undergraduate student-worker unionization, especially at public universities where the workers are public employees. This research will use Participant Action Research which is a method that involves the co-construction of knowledge blending the lines of researcher and participants which ultimately aims to create collective and/or social change.<sup>2</sup> This method can lead to the participants becoming the primary actors in the research and driving the research project.<sup>3</sup> This method was chosen so that I could contribute to the campaign through my research and in hopes that the research would be useful for the union after certification. Overall, this study set out to contribute to research on effective strategies for organizing, specifically for undergraduate workers both on campus at UO and for other large public universities. The questions the organizers from the UO Student Worker Unionization effort developed for this research are:

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1 “Starbucks Workers United,” Starbucks Workers United, accessed November 7, 2022, <https://sbworkersunited.org>; “Amazon Labor Union,” Amazon Labor Union, accessed November 7, 2022, <https://www.amazonlaborunion.org>.

2 Alice McIntyre, *Participatory Action Research* (SAGE Publications, 2007).

3 McIntyre.

“While being in direct opposition to a multi-billion-dollar institution, what are the most successful ways that undergraduate student organizers reach the majority of student workers to sign union cards with little time, money, previous experience, or precedent? Alongside, how do undergraduate organizers develop a union that ultimately sustains itself while maintaining healthy internal democracy and effective accountability-based organizing practices? Finally, while organizing, how should undergraduate organizers manage the tensions of non-student workers and student workers benefitting, depending on, and being exploited by the institution?”

Overall, the way that UO Student Workers reached most student workers to sign cards, over fifty percent of student-workers on campus, was through creating a team of organizers willing to dedicate many hours a week to the campaign, seeking outside help from more experienced labor leaders and building a vision for the union that allowed students to see the importance of a union. UO Student Workers struggled to always maintain effective accountability-based organizing practices and democratic procedures during the campaign, but this did not deter the organizing and card collection. Organizers also had to navigate the tensions of organizing ‘students’ and ‘workers’ since the organizing was occurring where non-workers also studied and lived. Ultimately, workers using the strategies discussed in this research were successful in reaching over 2,170 workers to sign cards and file for a unit to represent over 3,000 workers. Most importantly, organizers in this campaign will continue to fight for certification and hopefully, have learned the transformative power of organizing their workplaces and working alongside others to fight for a more just world after leaving the University. The organizing at the University of Oregon can serve as a way to help show that large undergraduate union efforts can be successful at another campus, ideally, so other students also organize on their campuses. This is important because this experience of organizing, finding dignity, and building collective power helps transform people to fight for better working conditions and organize for other types of liberation for humanity.

## Literature Review

Most of the current research on organizing does not focus on organizing undergraduate workers at universities, however, research broadly on organizing still applies with some caveats. Student workers at UO struggled with similar organizing issues discussed by many authors and researchers in the organizing fields. Like many other campaigns, student workers navigated democracy in organizing and decision-making power in organizing which has been discussed by many authors as well. Student workers also had to develop best practices for engaging workers and developing relationships with others across campus. Additionally, student organizers attempted to resolve tensions between too much centralization and decentralization in the campaign. Meanwhile, student workers also had to navigate the right about of organizing in solidarity with other groups and movements. Finally, other authors discuss the relevance of organizers' identity when organizing, this also is relevant literature to consider for this organizing research. While this overview of relevant literature is not encompassing all-encompassing, this literature helps show some of the perspectives, tensions, dynamics and struggles that organizers at the UO have to navigate.

### *Feminist Organizing Approach: Building Relationships*

In the mid to late 1900s, community activist, Saul Alinsky's organizing model was widely used and this model still stands today, especially for community organizers that are "paid organizer[s] from outside".<sup>4</sup> Saul Alinsky helped develop a discipline of organizing and is praised highly for some of his work and blamed for wrongdoing for a lot of his work. Mainly, Alinsky did not prioritize bottom-up organizing or cooperative approaches to organizing but

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<sup>4</sup> "Rules for Radicals - Saul Alinsky," accessed May 1, 2023, <https://www.citizenshandbook.org/rules.html>.

instead advocated for organizers from outside the community to participate in creating disruption before helping to find solutions for the community. For example a feminist critique, in the article, “Community Organizing Or Organizing Community?: Gender And The Crafts Of Empowerment,” by Stall and Stoecker offers a reformative approach to the standard community organizing model. Stall and Stoecker argue that organizing and organizers must come from the community itself.<sup>5</sup> They use a feminist analysis on organizing and stress the importance of internal community members organizing instead of outside organizers entering a space.<sup>6</sup> The authors believe that gender is often left out of organizing conversations even though it is incredibly important to the nature of the work, and the distinction between public and private. Stall and Stoecker spend a considerable amount of time discussing private-public dichotomy, or false dichotomy in organizing which provides another theory to understand how communities and relationships are formed. Alinsky does not address the private and public spheres concerning organizing, however, Stall and Stoecker believe this is one of the most important parts of building community and understanding how to improve the conditions of the community that one is organizing in. Overall, Stall and Stoecker disagree with Alinsky’s conflict model, creating disorganization before organization, and push forward a “women-centered model”.<sup>7</sup> Overall, many authors use Stall and Stoecker’s feminist critique of Alinsky’s as a building point because it is a more inclusive organizing theory that prioritized a bottom-up, women-centered, and critical approach to organizing. Concerning labor organizing specifically, Stall and Stoecker’s work can be applied to show the importance of labor organizing happening from within the

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Stall and Randy Stoecker, “Community Organizing Or Organizing Community?: Gender And The Crafts Of Empowerment,” *Gender & Society* 12, no. 6 (December 1, 1998): 729–30; Saul D. Alinsky, “Community Analysis and Organization,” *American Journal of Sociology* 46, no. 6 (1941): 797–808; Emma Fuentes, “Learning Power and Building Community: Parent-Initiated Participatory Action Research as a Tool for Organizing Community,” *Social Justice* 36, no. 4 (2009): 69–83.

<sup>6</sup> Stall and Stoecker, “COMMUNITY ORGANIZING OR ORGANIZING COMMUNITY?”

<sup>7</sup> Stall and Stoecker; Alinsky, “Community Analysis and Organization.”



group or community, and in the case of labor, within the group of workers. Additionally, a feminist lens to organizing can be applied to labor organizing by unpacking the private-public dichotomy. Building relationships is incredibly important for feminist organizers, including while labor organizing, and understanding how work and home labor are intertwined in public and private spheres. It is important to understand the value of relationship-building in organizing this research. This feminist perspective of organizing emphasizes relationship building and helps to answer how organizers can reach a majority of students and build connections with a majority of student-workers.

### *Components of Democratic Organizing*

On top of being guided by community, identity, and shared experiences, democratic organizing is important. In the book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, Adrienne Marie Brown advocates for creating shared principles, especially in circumstances where people are gathering to organize together.<sup>8</sup> Creating shared principles allows for an attempt to create a safe place for organizing, especially to expand the organizing to marginalized identities. Additionally, Marie Brown discusses the importance of democratic organizing principles in her work. She describes that democratic organizing includes an emphasis on inclusivity, bottom-up organizing, empowerment of individuals, solidarity work, relationship building, and self-transformation.<sup>9</sup> Marie Brown also advocates for consensus-based decision-making aids in bottom-up organizing as it helps include more voices in the decisions.<sup>10</sup> These organizing principles must continue to the end goal, so a labor union's organizing practices to mobilize workers to sign cards must be democratic just like the ultimate elections for leadership

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<sup>8</sup> Adrienne Marie Brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (CA: AK Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Brown.

<sup>10</sup> Brown.

and creation of the demands for the first contract. Elections, cooperation, representation, and efficiency in achieving the organizing goals are also all important for democracy.<sup>11</sup> While everyone may hope and ask for democracy, doing this in practice can be difficult.

Similarly, author, Gregor Murray, in his research “Union Renewal: What Can We Learn from Three Decades of Research?”, stresses the claim that “the increased complexity of structures, the greater heterogeneity of membership across industries, and the weight of top-down leadership in the merger process can diminish membership participation in union governance”.<sup>12</sup> Democratic governance, including bottom-up leadership and participation by rank-and-file (an empowered rank-and-file), is important to the functioning of the union as a democratic body. Both Adrienne Mari Brown and Gregor Murray, along with many more authors express different ways of understanding democracy. This research will use a combination of these two authors to define democracy to explore how organizers aim to build healthy internal democracy and accountability in their organizing.

### *Multifaceted and Multi-Theoretical Approach to Organizing*

Other authors also highlight the importance of decentralization, multiple strategies to target power, and solidarity in organizing practices. In “Power Relations in Grassroots Organizing: An Anarchist Dialectics,” author Nora Ziegler concludes that different types of ways to organize, such as through global organizations versus local informal groups, aid to destabilize power relations because they enable mass collective action and transform power relations simultaneously.<sup>13</sup> Ziegler asserts the importance of autonomous organizing and structural

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<sup>11</sup> Philippe C Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, “What Democracy Is. . . and Is Not,” *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 3 (1991): 75–88, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1991.0033>.

<sup>12</sup> Gregor Murray, “Union Renewal: What Can We Learn from Three Decades of Research?,” *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* 23, no. 1 (February 1, 2017): 9–29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1024258916681723>.

<sup>13</sup> Nora Ziegler, “Power Relations in Grassroots Organizing: An Anarchist Dialectics,” *Anarchist Studies* 30, no. 2 (2022): 55–78, <https://doi.org/10.3898/AS.30.2.03>.

organizing. Ziegler's work brings in more perspectives on power, as it uses a combination of 'anarchist, intersectional feminist, Black radical, critical, and Christian personalist theory'<sup>14</sup>. This combination of theories shows the importance of multi-strategy approaches to organizing. While highly theoretical, and practical this also shows the importance of overlapping ideologies and reasons to organize. On the scale of organizing a workplace, this may look like both direct and indirect organizing or larger broad-based coalition building. For example, in Bronfenbrenner and Hickey's work on "Changing to Organize: A National Assessment of Union Organizing Strategies," they found "that unions were more likely to win NLRB elections if they used rank-and-file intensive tactics such as person-to-person contact, active representative committees, member volunteer organizers, solidarity days, and building for the first contract before the election".<sup>15</sup> Transforming power relations, such as gaining legal bargaining authority, alongside informal relationship building fits Ziegler's theory on effective organizing. However, some tactics proved more useful than others, "such as representative committees, workplace job actions, and media campaigns have a statistically significant positive impact on election outcomes, other tactics, such as house-calling the majority of the unit, holding solidarity days, staging rallies, or running a community campaign, did not have a significant impact".<sup>16</sup> Ziegler's theory on organizing fits current literature on studies on labor organizing. Multifaceted approaches to organizing and multiple theoretical approaches to organizing all combined to one larger goal prove effective for organizing. Next, Brown also emphasizes the importance of creating work that is decentralized, but still in solidarity.<sup>17</sup> This work is not done in isolation but

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<sup>14</sup> Ziegler.

<sup>15</sup> Kate Bronfenbrenner and Robert Hickey, "Changing to Organize: A National Assessment of Union Organizing Strategies," *Articles & Chapters*, January 1, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Bronfenbrenner and Hickey.

<sup>17</sup> Brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. Pg 226

also should be done cohesively. She explains how “in the long run, it is more important for labor unions and community economic development projects include the issue of environmental sustainability in their strategies, rather than just lending support to the environmental organizations”.<sup>18</sup> This is an example of meaningful solidarity even though the efforts are decentralized, but also means there needs to be significant strategy, planning, and cohesiveness in communication among like-minded groups. Overall, Ziegler’s work helps lay the groundwork to show the importance of a multifaceted approach to targeting different types of power, this can be applied to understanding power dynamics and routes to organizing on a campus. Ziegler’s work also sets the foundation for exploring how student organizers navigate tensions of exploitation and benefits, alongside peers that are not workers but still get the benefits of the institution.

### *Organizing Based in Lived Experiences*

Lived experiences and practice organizing are important in how someone becomes an organizer and the practices that they use to organize their community. Someone who learns how to organize in an academic context versus someone who comes into organizing organically in their community operates very differently.<sup>19</sup> In the dissertation, “Pedagogy of Community Organizing: Lessons Learned from and With Formal Educators, Professional Trainers, and Community Organizers,” author Anderson uses “phenomenology” to explain the role of lived experiences and learned experiences that organizers develop over time in combination with grounded theory to meld two types of community organizing pedagogy.<sup>20</sup> In Anderson’s

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<sup>18</sup> Brown.

<sup>19</sup> David R Anderson, “Pedagogy of Community Organizing: Lessons Learned from and With Formal Educators, Professional Trainers, and Community Organizers,” *Education Doctoral Dissertations in Leadership*, UST Research Online, 2020, 348.

<sup>20</sup> Anderson.

dissertation, they focus on the pedagogy of community organizing such as how organizers are taught to be organizers, they study the curriculum, teaching methodology, and socialization.<sup>21</sup> These lived experiences that an organizer brings into their organizing are incredibly important in building relationships with others, understanding issues others are facing, and building their organizing skills. The act of organizing also builds into a transformational way of understanding reality, once someone begins to organize their communities they might continue to do so for the rest of their lives. Anderson's work helps show the significance of the UO Student Workers campaign, student organizers will leave ideally with a new understanding of how to participate meaningfully in their community and how to fight for recognition of their dignity as workers.

Not only are informal or organic organizing experiences important to understand, but other authors also discuss the importance of identity in organizing, in particular race. In "The Crucial Role of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous Leadership in Harm Reduction and Addiction Treatment," the authors Hughes and peers, use critical race theory and lived experience to inform their research and conclusions.<sup>22</sup> The authors' discussion of community-based movements, and the success of specific types of leadership, networks, policy on basic-needs meetings, and political organizing in tangent with the other action as important to community-based movements is emphasized. The authors explain that leadership roles filled by prominent members and members with diversity in identities help others connect and build relationships with the leaders. Having shared identities allows members to connect with organizers on more engaging levels and form relationships that are more holistic and less transactional. Overall, this literature which discusses the role of identity and leadership development is important to help

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<sup>21</sup> Anderson.

<sup>22</sup> Marcus Hughes et al., "The Crucial Role of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous Leadership in Harm Reduction and Addiction Treatment," *American Journal of Public Health* 112 (April 2022): S136–39.

answer the questions of creating a sustainable union that lasts past current organizers, a union with participation from lots of students, and exploring ways to make meaningful relationships and centering people with lived experiences relevant to the organizing.

*Holistic Approach: Feminist, Democratic, Multifaceted & Based in Lived Experiences*

Overall, when discussing how organizing has been done in the past and how organizing can be done in the future there is a wide span of literature. For this research for UO Student Workers, these theories are important to create a more holistic and person-centered approach to organizing. First, keeping in mind the feminist critiques surrounding the importance of deep relationships helps set the groundwork for the question of developing student engagement and outreach. Second, the organizers seek to build a sustainable democratic union, Marie Brown and Murray's literature on democracy helps show the different components that a 'democratic union entails. Next, Ziegler's work on overlapping theoretical and ideological reasons to organize is relevant to the UO since student-organizers all organize for different reasons, Ziegler's approach also shows the importance of combining strategies to try to connect with as many workers as possible. Changing power relations and relationships on the shop floor and at higher levels, including with the State Employment Relations Board of Oregon, is important in developing a strong and stable union. Lastly, the authors, Anderson and Hughes discussion on the importance of centering people with marginalized identities and lived experiences are important for meaningful student participation and developing a union. Meanwhile, Anderson's work also demonstrates the significance of this type of organizing in transforming the understanding of seeking justice and continued organizing for student-workers participating in this campaign.

## Background

### *Undergraduate Organizing Across the United States*

Across the country, there are ongoing union membership drives among undergraduate student worker populations and many certified unions, but no other large public university is undergoing a card check campaign. For example, in 2002, at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, a group of residential workers and tutors unionized.<sup>23</sup> Since then, Grinnell, a smaller college in Iowa, unionized their dining workers in 2016 and expanded in 2022.<sup>24</sup> Next, a group of admission workers at Hamilton unionized in 2021, and then a multitude of groups of undergrad workers at colleges unionized in 2022 including, Dartmouth, Barnard, Tufts, Mount Holyoke, and more.<sup>25</sup> The University of Oregon workers have the largest bargaining unit for student workers nationwide, some units are about 150-200 workers at other universities and colleges. While Grinnell has expanded to have a wall-to-wall undergraduate union, other schools also only have portions of their workers unionized, such as residential life workers, commonly referred to as “Resident Assistants” at the UO.<sup>26</sup> At the Young Democratic Socialists of America conference in April 2023, UO organizers were met with extreme amounts of praise for filing for the largest independent bargaining unit for student workers in the country and labor

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<sup>23</sup> “How Undergraduate Workers Transformed Their Union to Fight the Neoliberal University,” accessed February 26, 2023, <https://jacobin.com/2020/08/umass-amherst-undergraduate-union-residential-life>.

<sup>24</sup> “Contract – UGSDW,” accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.ugsdw.org/members/contract/>.

<sup>25</sup> Scott Jaschik, “Admissions Workers Vote to Unionize,” Inside Higher Ed, accessed April 22, 2023, <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2021/10/13/hamilton-colleges-admissions-workers-unionize>; “About Student Worker Collective at Dartmouth,” Student Worker Collective at Dartmouth, accessed April 22, 2023, <https://www.swcdartmouth.com/about>; Tori Morales and Abby Wilson, “Barnard RA Union to Meet with Administrators This Week,” *Washington Square News* (blog), October 12, 2022, <https://nyunews.com/news/2022/10/12/barnard-college-resident-assistants-union/>; “Tufts RA Union Wins Big in NLRB Election,” *Working Mass* (blog), January 17, 2023, <https://working-mass.com/2023/01/17/tufts-ra-union-wins-big-in-nlrp-election/>; “Mount Holyoke RAs Unionize for Better Working Conditions,” October 20, 2022, <https://theshoestring.org/2022/10/20/mount-holyoke-ras-unionize-for-better-working-conditions/>.

<sup>26</sup> “How Student Workers at Grinnell College Are Winning a Wall-to-Wall Union,” Labor Notes, April 4, 2022, <https://labornotes.org/blogs/2022/04/how-student-workers-grinnell-college-are-winning-wall-wall-union>.

organizers from around the nation congratulated the organizers from UO. The case at the UO is unique and significant as it is testing the practices used by organizers with smaller units at a large university and without the resources of a recognized union. If successful, the organizers at UO will set a precedent for other large universities to also set out to unionize their undergrads wall-to-wall. This is significant because this will show other schools that a union of this size can be feasible.

### *Oregon Public Employee Collective Bargaining Act*

At UO, in Oregon, some conditions have made reaching a majority of cards signed by student workers an easier process. Luckily for the UO undergraduates, Oregon ranks among one of the states with the most protections and rights to organize a labor union.<sup>27</sup> This ranking takes into account whether a state has a right-to-work law (laws that guarantee an employee's choice to participate in union dues), the rights of public and state employees to organize collectively and participate in wage negotiation, project labor agreements of contracted workers, and rights for protection from retaliation for organizing.<sup>28</sup> Oregon does not have right-to-work laws; however since the 2018 *Janus v American Federation of State, County, And Municipal Employees* (AFSCME), public employees cannot be required to pay union dues.<sup>29</sup> Oregon also has the Public Employee Collective Bargaining Act (PECBA) effective from October 1973.<sup>30</sup> PECBA “administers the laws governing employment relations and public employers and employees in the state, counties, cities, school districts, transportation districts, and other local governments as

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<sup>27</sup> “Best and Worst States to Work in America 2022,” accessed January 28, 2023, <https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/countries/united-states/poverty-in-the-us/best-states-to-work-2022/.b>

<sup>28</sup> “Best and Worst States to Work in America 2022.”

<sup>29</sup> “16-1466 *Janus v. State, County, and Municipal Employees* (06/27/2018),” 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Oregon Legislative Committee Services, “Background Brief on Collective Bargaining” (State of Oregon, September 2012), <https://www.oregonlegislature.gov/lpro/Publications/CollectiveBargaining.pdf>.



well as private employers not subject to NLRB jurisdiction”.<sup>31</sup> The laws covered under PECBA span discuss the permissible bargaining issues, including “matters concerning direct or indirect monetary benefits, hours, vacations, sick leave, grievance procedures, and other conditions of employment”.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, PECBA specifies that “[a]ll employers under a collective bargaining agreement are required to act in” good faith” with the certified labor organization that represents the employees” to find an agreement.<sup>33</sup> Another relevant law to unionize public employees, such as the undergrads at the University of Oregon, are protected against retaliation for organizing. In Oregon, “[a] public employer may not [u]se public funds to support actions to assist, promote or deter union organizing”.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, a public employer may not “[i]nterfere with, restrain or coerce employees in or because of the exercise of rights” of ORS 243.662.<sup>35</sup> ORS 243.662 states that “public employees have the right to form, join and participate in the activities of labor organizations of their own choosing for the purpose of representation and collective bargaining with their public employer on matters concerning employment relations”<sup>36</sup>. So, overall, a public employer may not interfere in the process of public employee unionization efforts, this is written out by PECBA which is enforced in Oregon by the Employment Relations Board (ERB).<sup>37</sup> Due to these strong protections for organizing, Oregon is a somewhat labor-friendly state, especially for public employees. The accessibility of a card check makes large-scale campaigns for public employees easier than having to undergo an

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<sup>31</sup> Oregon Legislative Committee Services.

<sup>32</sup> Oregon Legislative Committee Services.

<sup>33</sup> Oregon Legislative Committee Services.

<sup>34</sup> “ORS 243.670 - Prohibition of Actions by Public Employer to Assist, Promote or Deter Union Organizing,” accessed January 28, 2023, [https://oregon.public.law/statutes/ors\\_243.670](https://oregon.public.law/statutes/ors_243.670).

<sup>35</sup> “ORS 243.662 - Rights of Public Employees to Join Labor Organizations,” accessed January 28, 2023, [https://oregon.public.law/statutes/ors\\_243.662](https://oregon.public.law/statutes/ors_243.662).

<sup>36</sup> “ORS 243.662 - Rights of Public Employees to Join Labor Organizations,” accessed January 28, 2023, [https://oregon.public.law/statutes/ors\\_243.662](https://oregon.public.law/statutes/ors_243.662).

<sup>37</sup> Oregon Legislative Committee Services, “Background Brief on Collective Bargaining.”

election for a union. For student organizers, this is incredibly important due to the high turnover rate and the ability for administrators to wait until students leave the city for summer or graduate. For example, undergraduates at Kenyon have been waiting for over a year after filing for an election in October 2021 with the NLRB.<sup>38</sup> This stalls the ability of students to act collectively and lose momentum, and ultimately lose their union election.

### *Labor Movement in Oregon*

While union drives are happening across the country in corporations and other private universities, Oregon as a state also has had an inspirational movement in progress for workers. In months leading up to the launch of the campaign of UO Student Workers, the Oregon legislature passed progressive labor legislation. In February 2022, the Oregon state legislature passed that “employers will be required to pay overtime to agricultural workers after they work 55 hours in one workweek”, Oregon is the eighth state to have passed this overtime pay for farmworkers.<sup>39</sup> Farmworkers were originally left out of overtime laws in the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1939, “the exclusion came under pressure from Southern U.S. lawmakers who employed Black farmworkers”.<sup>40</sup> This was a long overdue change. The farmworkers' bill was passed by a large coalition of organizations and legislators and spearheaded by Pinieros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN). PCUN is an organization focused on action against exploitation and all of it creating safer workplaces, advocating for fair wages, and pushing for enough economic security”

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<sup>38</sup> “K-SWOC Files with NLRB for Union Certification Election,” The Kenyon Collegian, October 21, 2021, <https://kenyoncollegian.com/news/2021/10/k-swoc-files-with-nlr-for-union-certification-election/>.

<sup>39</sup> “BOLI : Minimum Wage and Overtime in Agriculture : For Employers : State of Oregon,” accessed January 28, 2023, <https://www.oregon.gov/boli/employers/Pages/minimum-wage-and-overtime-in-agriculture.aspx>; Shea Swenson, “Oregon Becomes Eighth State to Pass Overtime Pay for Farmworkers,” *Modern Farmer* (blog), March 10, 2022, <https://modernfarmer.com/2022/03/oregon-farmworker-overtime-pay/>.

<sup>40</sup> Lynne Terry, Oregon Capital Chronicle March 3, and 2022, “Oregon Legislature Passes Bill Mandating Overtime Pay for Farmworkers,” *Oregon Capital Chronicle* (blog), March 4, 2022, <https://oregoncapitalchronicle.com/2022/03/03/oregon-legislature-passes-bill-mandating-overtime-pay-for-farmworkers/>.

for farmworkers and Latinx people in Oregon.<sup>41</sup> This advocacy was connected to the excessive heat, smoke, and changes to the climate that workers had to endure during work hours and in their housing so a coalition including the “Oregon AFL-CIO, Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN), The Oregon Environmental Council, Northwest Workers’ Justice Project, and Climate Jobs PDX” came together to advocate for better workers’ rights in part due to recent surge of wildfire disasters in the area.<sup>42</sup> The combination of dire environmental factors and an urgent need for more economic security has increased labor rights movements both in the state of Oregon and out. Some democratic constituencies in Oregon are also generally sympathetic to organizing and workers’ rights as US Senators Merkley and Wyden, both from Oregon, have prioritized federal legislation such as the “Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act”. Senator Wyden advocates for expanding rights and protections to organize because “child labor laws, sick leave, and even weekends – exist due to the tireless efforts of unions in Oregon and all over this country”, additionally, this advocacy comes due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.<sup>43</sup> Overall, leaders across the state in the legislature and federal representatives from Oregon, as well as advocacy groups, are pushing for more labor rights in Oregon. This creates an overall more sympathetic environment in Oregon, in some areas, for labor organizing.

### *Campus Unions at the University of Oregon*

At the University of Oregon, three other large unions on campus help create a more receptive environment to labor rights. The Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation (GTFF)

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<sup>41</sup> “PCUN | Pineros y Campesinos Unidos Del Noroeste,” accessed January 29, 2023, <https://pcun.org/>.

<sup>42</sup> “PCUN | LABOR AND ENVIRONMENTAL COALITION ASKS OREGON OSHA TO STRENGTHEN HEAT AND SMOKE RULES FOR WORKERS,” accessed January 29, 2023, <https://pcun.org/labor-and-environmental-coalition-asks-oregon-osha-to-strengthen-heat-and-smoke-rules-for-workers/>.

<sup>43</sup> “Wyden, Merkley Sponsor Bill to Protect Workers’ Right to Organize and Make Our Economy Work for Everyone | U.S. Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon,” accessed January 28, 2023, [https://www.wyden.senate.gov/news/press-releases/wyden-merkley-sponsor-bill-to-protect-workers-right-to-organize-and-make-our-economy-work-for-everyone\\_](https://www.wyden.senate.gov/news/press-releases/wyden-merkley-sponsor-bill-to-protect-workers-right-to-organize-and-make-our-economy-work-for-everyone_).

represents over 1,500 graduate educators.<sup>44</sup> They began their membership drive in 1975 and negotiated a contract in 1977.<sup>45</sup> The faculty union, United Academics, represents over 1,900 faculty on campus and began its organizing in 2009 and negotiated its first contract in 2013.<sup>46</sup> The third group of unionized workers is commonly referred to as classified staff, over 1,500 staff members represented by the SEIU “perform a wide range of important functions in areas such as health care, facilities, administrative support, dining services, and information technology”.<sup>47</sup> The only large body of non-unionized workers on campus are officers of administration and student workers. Officers of administration have supervisory and managerial roles and they cannot unionize. At the on-campus Starbucks location workers also voted for a union and have been active on campus with labor rights demonstrations.<sup>48</sup> Overall, the sentiments around more economic justice and workers’ rights are sympathetic on campus.

### *Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Many organizers highlighted the significance of the COVID-19 pandemic starting in 2020 as a reason that unionizing became more appealing to workers. Jordan described that the “inflation [from COVID] is really making it so that students are feeling a lot of pressure, their job being harder because of deadly disease, and they make less money because of inflation”.<sup>49</sup> Essentially, Jordan elaborates that students have worse working conditions, such as working through “understaffing”. Students at the University also have to work with other students who

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<sup>44</sup> “About Us,” *Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation* (blog), August 24, 2017, <https://gtff3544.net/about/>.

<sup>45</sup> “Our History,” *Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation* (blog), September 16, 2010, <https://gtff3544.net/about/history/>.

<sup>46</sup> “United Academics | Human Resources,” accessed January 28, 2023, <https://hr.uoregon.edu/united-academics>.

<sup>47</sup> “Service Employee International Union | Human Resources,” accessed January 28, 2023, <https://hr.uoregon.edu/service-employee-international-union>.

<sup>48</sup> “Starbucks Workers Strike Back! – Eugene Weekly,” accessed March 17, 2023, <https://eugeneweekly.com/2023/03/02/starbucks-workers-strike-back/.s>

<sup>49</sup> Jordan, 2/23/23 Interview with Jordan, February 23, 2023.

have COVID symptoms, Amelia rehashes that “[they] had co-workers who had covid symptoms and would still be required to come in” by their management, and that they had to tell other students to follow COVID guidelines.<sup>50</sup> Overall, Amelia added that “the pandemic highlighted the issues of everything coming out in the world, and that was especially true in the workplaces”. Organizers described that students became more aware of lower pay as inflation hit, put in more places of hazardous work having to work alongside students with COVID, and also being tasked with more roles outside of their job descriptions. Even since more return to work and a reduction of COVID policies, from January 2022 to January 2023, the percent changes for urban consumers for food as gone up 9.7%, housing costs have gone up 8.1%, utilities have gone up 15% in Western US urban areas.<sup>51</sup> The last minimum wage increase for the Oregon standard was 5%.<sup>52</sup> COVID also highlighted one of the instances where student-workers experience sometimes different needs than non-worker students. Jordan describes that “students were pissed at paying the same price for online school, student workers were put at risk” to resume in-person operations, similarly to GEs, and other campus staff.<sup>53</sup> Overall, COVID-19 increased the severity of working conditions without more benefits to workers, this exemplified the need for a union for workers that may not have seen the poor working conditions in previous years.

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<sup>50</sup> Amelia, 2/24/23 Interview with Amelia, February 24, 2023, 2.

<sup>51</sup> “Consumer Price Index, West Region — January 2023 : Western Information Office : U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics,” accessed February 26, 2023, [https://www.bls.gov/regions/west/news-release/consumerpriceindex\\_west.htm](https://www.bls.gov/regions/west/news-release/consumerpriceindex_west.htm).

<sup>52</sup> “BOLI : Minimum Wage Increase Schedule : For Workers : State of Oregon,” accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.oregon.gov/boli/workers/Pages/minimum-wage-schedule.aspx>.

<sup>53</sup> 2/23/23 Interview with Jordan.

## Methods

In this research, I rely heavily on the Participant Action Research (PAR) method. Sociologist, Orlando Fas Borda, is credited with developing PAR “combining research and theory with political participation”.<sup>54</sup> Researcher Kurt Lewin also set the foundations for developing action research and the importance of cooperation and collaboration with the community and the researcher.<sup>55</sup> Professors and Psychologists, Dr. Vaughn and Jacquez, in “Participatory Research Methods – Choice Points in the Research Process” describe that PAR creates “results that can be more effectively translated into community and non-academic settings” because PAR centers on systematic analysis and “inquiry in direct collaboration with those affected by the issue being studied for action or change”.<sup>56</sup> The authors also describe that PAR has been applied to many different disciplines and the direct involvement of participants in the research varies by study and by discipline. They describe a model that shows a range of participant involvement, from informing community members, input gathering of community members, community collaborating as partners, and finally, empowering the community by shifting the leadership onto the community.<sup>57</sup> For this study, using the terms of the model illustrated in Vaughn and Jacquez’s work, I attempted to shift the leadership of the research to the direct community, the organizers, but ultimately, I believe my research sits between the community as the partner in the research and community as the leader in the research. Since I started organizing with UO Student Workers before preparing to conduct my research, I am

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54 Richard Gott, “Orlando Fas Borda,” *The Guardian*, August 25, 2008, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/26/colombia.sociology>.

55 Clem Adelman, “Kurt Lewin and the Origins of Action Research,” *Educational Action Research* 1, no. 1 (January 1993): 7–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0965079930010102>.

56 Lisa M. Vaughn and Farrah Jacquez, “Participatory Research Methods – Choice Points in the Research Process,” *Journal of Participatory Research Methods* 1, no. 1 (July 21, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.13244>.

57 Vaughn and Jacquez.

directly a part of the community, but I do not speak for the whole group. To attempt to make this group-led, I implemented ways that other organizers made decisions on what the research focused on with the intent to make this research process helpful for the card collection campaign itself. My research intends to provide valuable research for future undergraduates at UO and other universities on undergraduate labor organizing, document the campaign, and directly help win the card check campaign for UO Student Workers through conducting research. PAR fits these goals as my research is in direct collaboration to seek social change and PAR is a vehicle for creating research that is generally more applicable for non-academic uses, for example, creating research that is applicable for other organizers at other large universities.

For this research, I conducted participant observation, interviews, and focus groups with organizers of UO Student Workers. For participant observation, I attended public meetings for the UO Student Workers campaign and other events related to the Student Workers campaign. The research also includes non-public meetings for organizing with the consent of the organizers involved. One of the weaknesses of this participant observation is that it allows room for bias of the author and conversations might have happened differently since the author was present in the room. I could not stop meetings to ask for clarification of happenings of the meetings, however, I had been part of meetings for the campaign for over nine months before official research began so minimal clarification was needed on substantive parts of the meeting. Some strengths of this type of research are that it allows for a large amount of qualitative data, insight into decision-making processes, and first-hand observation of conversations.

This research was conducted through eleven interviews of organizers, all students over the age of eighteen, most with current employment on campus. All participants are given different names than their legal or recognizable names in this research. The organizers

interviewed all frequently attended Leadership meetings for the UO Student Workers campaign. During the interview process, I had already established relationships with each of the organizers interviewed. This provided space for organizers to be more open in the research, but this relationship also creates a bias for the organizer and the researcher as I was also part of the organizing team. Organizers may have responded in ways that they knew would appeal to me based on personal and organizing relationships, however, I attempted to dissuade this from happening by acknowledging that organizers should not answer questions to appeal to my perspective and specifically tasked organizers to respond to questions with their perspective. The interview method allowed the researcher to gain insight into organizers and ask clarifying questions. This interview method also aided my ability to organize, and therefore helped the campaign, as these interviews served additionally as one-on-one conversations and continued to build trust between us. Trust and relationship building in labor organizing is the most fundamental part of successful organizing.

Lastly, this research also used focus groups as a method of research. These focus groups happened before slotted meetings to best accommodate the schedules of the organizers. Organizers voted on the topic of the discussion and each organizer was asked to contribute to the focus group. This provides the group the ability to have open discussions about the campaign in a format both beneficial to the campaign and beneficial to the research. One weakness of focus groups is that organizers may have responded differently to others in the room. Focus groups allowed organizers to discuss problems with the campaign as a collective, this aired out concerns and issues that needed to be resolved immediately so that the campaign could be successful. These focus groups, along with the one-on-one interviews were an important part of fulfilling the intent that the act of the research was directly helpful for the active card-check campaign.



Overall, PAR was fundamental to my research process and was the baseline that I brought organizers into the leadership and decision-making of the direction that the research should go. For example, throughout the research period, organizers were involved in creating the guiding questions of the research. After the first interview, organizers were asked to provide me with a question that they had about the campaign that needed to be solved. Then, I combined the answers of the individual organizers to formulate the research question of the paper. This question was then shared with the organizers during a focus group and generally, the organizers agreed through consensus that this was a productive research question for the campaign and future undergraduate unionization efforts. Another way that organizers were given leadership in the research was through the focus groups. To hold focus groups that best suit the needs of the campaign at the time I collected issues that organizers were facing or felt that the campaign was facing and then presented these issues anonymously back to the group and the group discussed the most pressing issues. They then voted on the most pressing issue they found as a group, and we discussed that and ways to solve this issue. Focus groups were intended to be very solution focused. Ultimately, the largest issue that I ran into with PAR was that I “simultaneously inhabited positions as insider-participant and outsider-researcher with regards to the field of study.”<sup>58</sup> While everyone was very comfortable with my presence in meetings as I was another organizer, this inherently alters our dynamic as organizers and my role as a researcher. Throughout working together for over a year on the campaign I had developed personal and professional relationships with other organizers, and this may have altered some of the responses of the participants.

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<sup>58</sup> Ivy Scurr and Vanessa Bowden, “‘The Revolution’s Never Done’: The Role of ‘Radical Imagination’ within Anti-Capitalist Environmental Justice Activism,” *Environmental Sociology* 7, no. 4 (October 2, 2021): 316–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23251042.2021.1916142>.

## Explanation of Focus

The focus of the research was determined through introductory interviews with each organizer. When the organizers were asked, “If you were describing the biggest question in your mind, e.g. ‘How do we solve (Blank)? How should we (Blank)? Why are we failing/succeeding at (Blank)?’ What would it be?”, many of the questions that organizers developed were similar.

Organizers brought up questions on how the union would be sustained, for example, “How do we create a long-lasting democratic, rank and file militant union?”. Other questions focused on the importance of democracy and forming a union that “brings in a broader and more diverse group of volunteers and leaders in [the] space”. Essentially, all the organizers were looking toward the future of the success of the union they are building. Organizers are concerned about bringing in new voices, the relationships that this union has with other unions on campus, and generally the lack of resources and opposition that a union may face. This particular union faces another dynamic that can be difficult to organize through, students (non-workers) and student-workers inhabiting the spaces together and both benefiting and depending on the education, resources, and community, but also the student-workers experiencing exploitation. Overall, the combination of the questions that organizers were thinking about regarding the union can be summarized as:

“While being in direct opposition to a multi-billion-dollar institution, what are the most successful ways that undergraduate student organizers reach the majority of student workers to sign union cards with little time, money, previous experience, or precedent? And how do undergraduate organizers develop a union that ultimately sustains itself while maintaining healthy internal democracy and effective accountability-based organizing practices? And meanwhile, how should undergraduate organizers manage the tensions of non-student workers and student workers benefitting, depending on, and being exploited by the institution?”

## *Argument*

A dedicated nucleus of organizers reliant on low-cost grassroots tactics and in collaboration with more experienced labor leaders and certified undergrad unions reached a majority of student workers on the UO campus to sign cards by focusing on workplace organizing, recruitment through mass member meetings and mass outreach, and leadership development training to form organizers. Organizers also used grassroots tactics to reach students to sign cards, however, workplace organizing and developing organizers is more sustainable and furthers the end of a democratic rank-and-file union for undergrads. This success in reaching over 2,000 workers was because of a small core group of organizers committed to large amounts of hours each week to organize. Many reasons led organizers to stay engaged, for many it was ideological reasons.

Next, organizers navigated democratic decision-making when possible as organizers were committed to forming a democratic union, however, there were few real checks on the decisions of core organizers by rank-and-file workers. Leaders were self-selected which created an organizing team lacking in diversity at a PWI. Large decisions were voted on by leadership groups during weekly meetings, but day-to-day organizing decisions were not always voted on. Organizers throughout the campaign attempted to grapple with democracy and efficiency but ultimately a solution was never found, however, this tension with democracy did not jeopardize the campaign's reach of a majority of student workers on campus. Meanwhile, organizers also drafted bylaws for after certification to prepare once they are an established labor union to help ensure democracy.

Additionally, navigating a campus, organizers had the most success in appealing to non-workers by expressing the potential of bargaining for students as a whole and attempting to show

non-workers the conditions of student workers, however, many students did not understand the necessity of a union. This continues to be an issue; students are being on-boarded into the campaign but large amounts of miseducation or lack of education surrounding unions exists. To help students, gain confidence in opposing a large institution, organizers relied on building strong relationships, attempting to build legitimacy through getting support from established unions on campus, education on labor law, and leadership development of student organizers. Ultimately, many questions remain about the future of UO Student Workers, maintaining a healthy democracy, student engagement, and navigating campus tensions but the committed organizers continue to grow and develop solutions to new problems daily.

## Results

### *Developing an Organizing Nucleus*

To start out answering how undergraduates can reach a majority of workers, the organizers had to find an organizing nucleus to account for the limited time that students have attempting to navigate a full course load and a job. Multiple organizers expressed that they believe that this card check campaign was in part successful in getting a majority of workers to sign on because there was a nucleus of organizers that dedicated at least twenty-five hours a week to organize. One of the obstacles that student-workers in particular face is a lack of time to organize. Student-workers range from part-time to full-time students, between eight to twenty-one credit hours as well as an additional ten to twenty-five hours on the job, plus other extracurriculars. While this isn't unique for solely on-campus student workers, this is true for students that work generally. Other components that may limit someone's time further are caregiving for another person, having more than one job on campus, having another off-campus job, or even transportation time as student-workers may live farther off campus due to needing cheaper rent. To attempt to remedy this issue, UO Student Workers needed to find a nucleus of organizers that could dedicate substantial amounts of time to organizing. Two organizers interviewed remarked about a group of five organizers, four of these five organizers mentioned were participants and the fifth was me. Each of the four organizers interviewed expressed that on average during the six months of the card check time and briefly before, they spent at least twenty to thirty hours a week organizing, on top of their time directly organizing while at work. Overall, this meant that at least 125 hours were spent each week on the campaign. During the first half from September 2022 to December 2022, about twelve additional organizers were spending 5-10 hours a week organizing. From January to March 2023, about twenty-five other

organizers spent between three to ten hours a week organizing. For an estimate of the amount of time spent on this card check campaign, the average is calculated based on the number of organizers and average time spent. For September 2022 to December 2022, this average is 215 hours a week spent on organizing, for January to March 2023, this average is about 288 hours per week. For a bargaining unit of this size and comparable demographic and decentralization of workers, finding a group of core organizers that can dedicate cumulatively at least this amount of time (200-300 hours per week during the card-check campaign) is the most important part of having a successful card check campaign.

This nucleus mainly came out of the Young Democratic Socialist of America (YDSA) of the UO student chapter. Jordan believes that “YDSA helped to some extent to form a significant part of that nucleus of dedicated organizers”.<sup>59</sup> The campus YDSA chapter created a committee the previous year at the University of Oregon focused on labor rights for student workers.<sup>60</sup> Since this committee has been established it has developed into a union membership drive. Of the five organizers that dedicated the largest amount of time during the campaign, four of the five started working on the campaign through YDSA, the fifth came out of adjacent campus organizing groups. To start this committee in 2021, Participant 11 remarks that they decided it would be possible to use “UOYDSA to serve as the nucleus for the union effort”.<sup>61</sup> Participant 11 explained that they met with David in October of 2021 at a bar and “UO Student Workers began with a conversation between them and [David] in October 2021”. Since then, the group evolved into a union membership drive about a year after the conversation. The five nucleus organizers, including myself, identified as the organizing nucleus by self-identification, and other

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<sup>59</sup> 2/23/23 Interview with Jordan.

<sup>60</sup> Willy, 2/6/23 Interview with Willy, February 6, 2023.

<sup>61</sup> Participant 11, 3/2/23 Interview with Participant 11, March 2, 2023.

organizers identify them as a nucleus of organizing. These nucleus organizers remark that ideological reasons for unionizing, such as socialist and leftist politics, help prevent their burnout from organizing. The other four organizers and I were committed to unionization as a step towards a more just society and improving higher education, this maintained the dedication of the organizers for the 20-30 hours a week throughout the campaign. As the direct day-to-day organizing is not reliant on the ideological predispositions of the organizers, and other core organizers are not all socialists or communists, this is not necessarily a requirement of a successful unionization campaign, but it was incredibly important in developing a committed group of organizers. Overall, multiple organizers remark that YDSA was significant in finding this group of organizers willing to dedicate hundreds of hours a time per week. In this campaign at UO, without YDSA or this conversation between Participant 11 and David in October 2021, there would not have been this union membership drive. Other ideological reasons for organizing or groups that could create a nucleus of organizers and maintain a nucleus and core group of organizers could also result in ways to create a core or nucleus of organizers.

### *Grassroots Strategy for Organizing with Few Resources*

Next, organizers pointed out the issue of navigating an independent unionization campaign with access to few resources. The unionization effort is mainly reliant on individual or other organizations and unions donations. As of March 2023, UO Student Workers raised just over \$4,500 from donations.<sup>62</sup> These funds are set aside for, “student workers taking collective action to win” the card check campaign and first contract. Money is the primary avenue to gain access to resources, so during the card check campaign organizers were asked, “If UO Student

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<sup>62</sup> “Solidarity & Relief Fund for UO Student Workers, Organized by Ella Meloy,” gofundme.com, accessed March 19, 2023, <https://www.gofundme.com/f/relief-organizing-fund-for-uo-student-workers>.

Workers had more money, could you collect cards more easily?” The answers varied but generally, organizers agreed the money would not win the card check campaign. Elizabeth expressed “I think money can help us with a lot of things, but I don’t think it can help us with card collection”.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Jordan, David, and Robert mentioned offloading tasks to paid staff or buying supplies as helpful, but ultimately not direct funds could not actively support card collection. One example from Robert is, “[I]f we had more money we could probably host events much more easily, food is definitely a thing that would help us to maintain the organizing committees and draw people into the events”.<sup>64</sup> Similar sentiments from Lucy were also displayed, they said, “I think we could do more outreach but I can’t guarantee we’d get more cards out of that”.<sup>65</sup> Lastly, Johnny also described the most useful place for money, the “legal sphere”.<sup>66</sup> Getting access to lawyers is necessary for organizing, such as when it comes to bargaining or even “filing an Unfair Labor Practice”. For example, on February 11th, the organizers had the first experience of the need for legal help when one of the lead organizers was discriminatorily fired for union organizing. While attempting to file with the Employment Relations Board, protect the jobs of the workers that walked out, secure funds for the fired organizer, and seek legal advice on how to file an expedited ULP, the organizers also had to maintain focus on continuing their card collection campaign. However, this question was asked with five weeks left of the organizing campaign for card check, at this point organizers did not believe that with five weeks left in the card campaign funds for organizing would solidify a campaign win. Direct workplace organizing was more important than any amount of money. However, money did help with some needs so fundraising for the resources the campaign needed

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<sup>63</sup> Elizabeth, 2/23/23 Interview with Elizabeth, February 23, 2023.

<sup>64</sup> Robert, 2/23/23 Interview with Robert, February 23, 2023.

<sup>65</sup> Lucy, 2/23/23 Interview with Lucy, February 23, 2023.

<sup>66</sup> Johnny, 2/23/23 Interview with Johnny, February 23, 2023.



was done through the press such as the Nation article, “Inside the Campaign to Unionize the University of Oregon” which helped reach other sympathetic donors from outside of Eugene.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, fundraising was also done, through social networks and Democratic Socialist of America networks.<sup>68</sup> Democratic Socialist of America networks (DSA) have been helpful for this campaign in Oregon as there are set-up chapters in Eugene and Portland. Peter, an organizer who moved to UO from the East Coast described that he’s never seen as “militant campaigns as there are on the west coast”, he also believes that Oregon is “[a]lready pretty open to extremism from both sides”, generally the “west coast has strong union presence, Portland is well known for left political activism and there are established DSA and YDSA chapters in Eugene”.<sup>69</sup> These established chapters have helped UO Student Workers also fundraise. Ultimately, the fundraising is helpful and necessary for essentials such as printing physical cards, and posters and providing food for meetings and legal help, however, organizers do not believe that additional funds to other resources would guarantee a card check campaign win. Ultimately, grassroots tactics and worker organizing is the winning campaign route. A campaign that did not unionize independently would have access to more resources and most likely access to funds. The student workers continued to struggle with where to find funds throughout the campaign and how to use them properly, but this ultimately did not inhibit their ability to collect cards in support of a union from the majority of workers on campus.

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<sup>67</sup> Porter Wheeler, “Inside the Campaign to Unionize the University of Oregon,” February 10, 2023, <https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/university-oregon-undergraduate-labor-union/>.

<sup>68</sup> “Participant Observation” (Student Worker Union Campaign, University of Oregon, 2023).

<sup>69</sup> Peter, 2/23/23 Interview with Peter, February 23, 2023, 2.

### *Navigating Lack of Organizing Experience*

As the union drive was independent, in addition to a lack of time and resources, UO Student workers also lacked organizers with previous organizing experience. No core organizer has ever organized a union before the UO student-worker card check campaign, some had a few months of experience with general labor organizing, and some had a few years of experience with campus and community organizing. Organizers had to find guidance outside of themselves; they found guidance from local staff organizers in Eugene, Portland, and across Oregon, from local leadership of members in unions nearby and on campus, from labor movement leaders across the country, and student undergrad unions across the country. These staff organizers provided help, Johnny says that the organizers play the role of “teaching the world that people don’t understand at all”, that they are essential, “[e]xplaining what the fuck to do” and uses the metaphor that the experienced organizers are “[e]ducating a kindergartener on math”.<sup>70</sup> David and Johnny were asked about the role of outside experience together while we were sitting in the organizing office, David added that they are “[p]laying a catalyzing role” and explains that they have provided “[d]ifferent kinds of help, like necessary context for the existing unions on campus, how they operate, the context for how to organize a union generally”. This includes training, but also “how to carry out concrete organizing assignments”. Overall, Johnny also believes that local labor leaders have played a “[p]olitical element of swaying existing [labor unions] to back us instead of staying neutral”.<sup>71</sup> The role of volunteer staff organizers has not only been educational for the student organizers but also has helped legitimize the campaign to other unions and to student workers who may not understand the importance of unionizing. This legitimizing impact of having outside help and support from recognized unions and people with

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<sup>70</sup> David, 3/9/23 Interview with David, March 9, 2023.

<sup>71</sup> Johnny, 3/9/23 Interview with Johnny, March 9, 2023.

experience helped show workers outside of the organizers that what the organizers were doing was incredibly important and real. Without help from volunteers with labor organizing experience, organizers on this campaign would have had a harder time navigating current best practices of organizing and would have had to rely solely on books such as “Secrets of A Successful Organizer”.<sup>72</sup> The in-person help was extremely beneficial to have in tangent with the books, videos, and other non-human help.

The other group that has helped the organizing team are other unionized undergrad unions, however, they deal with the National Labor Relations Board instead of PECBA, but collaboration with these campus unions and expertise from these organizers have been important. The earliest and ongoing union is from 2002 at the University of Massachusetts. At Amherst, the Resident Assistant & Peer Mentor Union at The University of Massachusetts Amherst fought for “free COVID testing for the whole campus, the right to workers’ compensation, remote work options for PMs, a \$450 cost-of-living adjustment to help staff pay for meals, a commitment to provide all staff with seven masks”.<sup>73</sup> Other unions such as the work of Resident Assistants in Barnard and Columbia dorms have won raises worth thirteen-thousand dollars in 2022.<sup>74</sup> Other unions such as the Wesleyan Union of Student Employees were the first voluntarily recognized union by a university<sup>75</sup>. Mount Holyoke College Resident assistants increased their semester pay from roughly four thousand to eight thousand.<sup>76</sup> Dining workers at Grinnell have also increased

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<sup>72</sup> Alexandra Bradbury, Mark Brenner, and Jane Slaughter, *Secrets Of A Successful Organizer* (A Labor Notes Book, 2016).

<sup>73</sup> “How Undergraduate Workers Transformed Their Union to Fight the Neoliberal University.”

<sup>74</sup> “Columbia’s Undergraduate Resident Advisers Have Won Some of the Largest Raises in the Country. We Still Want More. - Columbia Spectator,” accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.columbiaspectator.com/opinion/2023/01/19/columbias-undergraduate-resident-advisers-have-won-some-of-the-largest-raises-in-the-country-we-still-want-more/>.

<sup>75</sup> “Undergraduate Student Workers: We Unionized. You Can, Too.,” accessed February 26, 2023, <https://jacobin.com/2022/06/wesleyan-university-undergraduate-workers-union-organizing>.

<sup>76</sup> “Mount Holyoke RAs Unionize for Better Working Conditions,” October 20, 2022, <https://theshoestring.org/2022/10/20/mount-holyoke-ras-unionize-for-better-working-conditions/>.

their wages to three dollars above minimum wage and secured sick pay for COVID absences.<sup>77</sup> Most of these student-worker unions have representatives that discuss organizing through a WhatsApp chat and cross-country Zoom meetings, here organizers help answer questions from students at non-unionized campuses who are starting their membership drive, and also workshop ongoing issues with organized campuses.<sup>78</sup> This chat helps organizers with a span of strategy and tasks such as day-to-day issues, mass national outreach, and long-term planning goals. Johnny describes that these unions play a “[s]imilar role to staff organizers in that they are teaching us what’s going to happen”.<sup>79</sup> For example, Johnny clarifies, “[w]hat to expect from union busting and what to expect going forward”. David also adds that they “gave us a model that we had to scale up”, and also is a way to show student workers on the fence or who haven’t signed, real wins that could be made through unionization, “The 21 dollars an hour thing from Dartmouth is so good for us, that is something that is an easy thing to show student workers here”.<sup>80</sup> Overall, these unions also showed the organizers that there was a chance that they could be successful and organizers remark that this is one of the reasons that YDSA attempted this project too. Without other unions in the country already established, student organizers would not be able to look to a vision while organizing which is an important part of getting buy-in from workers. Organizers were also able to use the wins that these other unions won to help legitimize the organizing happening on the UO campus. This also helped get similar buy-in from workers that the staff also brought, by legitimizing the campaign and goals of the organizers.

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<sup>77</sup> “Contract – UGSDW,” accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.ugsdw.org//members/contract/>.

<sup>78</sup> “Participant Observation.”

<sup>79</sup> 3/9/23 Interview with Johnny.

<sup>80</sup> 3/9/23 Interview with David.

## *Organizing at a Workplace Full of Non-Workers*

Labor organizing in the context of student-workers at a university creates a different set of conditions than the average business or corporation, or even other staff at the same university. Many organizers describe how student workers directly benefit from the education the university provides and rely on the university as their landlord and as their employer. David describes that a large portion of “people who are receiving their education, in large, already have a negative relationship with the university because of tuition and cost of housing”.<sup>81</sup> For a student worker Jordan argues “It’s a double exploitation as a student worker, you are getting screwed by having parents spend huge savings or the student is taking on debt and student workers on top of that are not compensated or treated fairly”.<sup>82</sup> Specific jobs also have additional dynamics, Jordan adds that a student in “dining, [is] working to give food to other students who are [their] classmates”, these classmates do not have to work a dining job which creates an unequal dynamic between students sitting next to each other in their classes and then having to provide for each other in the dining hall. Student-workers are at a disadvantage in their time commitment to work imposing on their education. If a student follows the twelve-hour per four credit class per week rule then the full-time student is spending from a range of thirty-six hours to sixty hours a week on classes.<sup>83</sup> A student that also works, would spend at least eight additional hours, up to twenty-five additional hours.<sup>84</sup> This puts a student-worker at a disadvantage in education and in a class dynamic while serving their classmate in the dining hall. A worker potentially going on strike could mean leaving another student without an operating dining hall or leaving their classmate

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<sup>81</sup> David, 2/23/23 Interview with David, February 23, 2023.

<sup>82</sup> 2/23/23 Interview with Jordan.

<sup>83</sup> “Credit Hour and Student Workload Policies (Policy) | Office of the Provost,” accessed February 26, 2023, <https://provost.uoregon.edu/credit-hour-and-student-workload-policies-policy>.

<sup>84</sup> “Increase in Hours Worked for Student Employees | Human Resources,” accessed February 26, 2023, <https://hr.uoregon.edu/increase-hours-worked-student-employees>.

without food. While the Employer is at fault for a strike for not complying with the demands of the workers, the average student may not understand the complexity of the situation and blame workers. Organizers have not had to work through this issue yet as a team but are attempting to combat this sentiment by bargaining for the public good, such as bargaining for tuition decreases, rent control in Eugene, and other permissive demands.<sup>85</sup> With the sympathy of non-workers with student-workers, strikes, bargaining, and demands will be more effective at winning demands for student-workers and will not alienate student-workers from their non-worker peers.

Organizers face challenges in unavoidable interactions with non-workers in the process of reaching workers, some of these interactions are positive, some negative. Non-workers are not necessarily aware of the conditions, but organizers stress the importance of getting non-worker students' sympathy with the unionization efforts. During an interview, Johnny stressed the importance of attention to making sure that organizers are not "off-putting" or irritating to other students during the midst of an organizing drive.<sup>86</sup> On a campus of over eighteen thousand students, finding the workers among the mix can be difficult without the sympathy of the rest of the students for the workers to form their union.<sup>87</sup> Amelia also stresses that they believe that students broadly would be beneficial to bring in, during an interview they said, "I think it would be really valuable for us to start talking about this intersection between students and workers and the power a union gives us to make change on campus" for everyone.<sup>88</sup> As an example, student-workers could withhold their labor as a fight against tuition increases, or as a fight against defunding of departments. This messaging has mainly gone to student-workers but not the

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<sup>85</sup> UO Student Workers, "Organizing Training 101" (University of Oregon, February 28, 2023).

<sup>86</sup> 2/23/23 Interview with Johnny.

<sup>87</sup> Registrar Office University of Oregon, "Facts at a Glance," Text, August 24, 2020, [//registrar.uoregon.edu/statistics/facts-at-glance](https://registrar.uoregon.edu/statistics/facts-at-glance).

<sup>88</sup> 2/24/23 Interview with Amelia.

general student body and many organizers believe this broader messaging after the card check process completes will make the student body at large more receptive to the union.

Organizers also navigate student-workers working in labs alongside students that receive credits or volunteer hours instead of pay. Research assistants experience a unique dynamic, this job is “more parallel to the student dynamic, it's a natural offshoot of your studies and it is the kind of argument that people use to invalidate the legitimate work that research assistants do because it is aligned with their studies and professional careers”, yet organizers remark that these students still experience poor working conditions, unfair wages, while also being told that they are lucky to have this job, especially if it is paid since many students do similar jobs that are unpaid because they are necessary to move on to graduate-level education.<sup>89</sup> Students fortunate enough to have time to do unpaid work as research assistants are in different social class positions than students who may need a research job for their professional pursuits but cannot afford to dedicate hours of their day to an unpaid endeavor even if they need it for their career. Peter also describes as an additional understanding between being a consumer of the services and education while also helping to provide them, they describe that “[b]eing a student, the faculty and education has been content that is pro-workers, anti-establishment” but at the same university, Peter feels mistreated as a worker, and exploited for their labor.<sup>90</sup> Even though workers are experiencing professional development and gaining knowledge from their work, they are still performing labor. If they were not students, the University would not be able to employ workers at this rate of pay to do the jobs across all departments, dining halls, and research. This ranges from students doing the same jobs as classified SEIU, full-time staff, for \$2-3 less an hour to students doing the role of professional staff for student support services

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<sup>89</sup> 2/23/23 Interview with Jordan.

<sup>90</sup> 2/23/23 Interview with Peter.

while making minimum wage. The tensions between student and worker never stopped existing throughout the card check campaign and there were not yet consistent patterns that emerged on how to fully navigate organizing a worker that does not always see themselves as a “worker” but rather a student who works.

### *Leadership Development: Taking Risks*

When discussing the dynamic between student-workers and the university, there is also another type of student-workers who depends on the University for housing and food. Jordan explains that for these workers, the University plays a multifaceted role “It is the students’ employer, they are the tenant, and [they] are supposed to be receiving public education but a lot of people are going into debt” to receive the public good.<sup>91</sup> Jordan believes that public goods are supposed to be accessible to the public, students should not be going into debt, and working hazardous jobs to maintain access to this. The tenant-landlord relationship adds a layer to the connection that the worker has with their employer. Union organizers attempted to adjust to this dynamic of student-workers, both as students who benefit from the education or housing provided by UO and are being exploited. Lucy describes that for Resident Assistants, “this [dynamic] makes people hesitant” in taking action.<sup>92</sup> Lucy describes their first meeting with other organizers and that they were hesitant at first, but Lucy began to trust the other organizers because they felt like they were “actually being listened to for the first time” and they started to organize “when [they] started to feel a sense of faith with the union”.<sup>93</sup> Since then, Lucy has taken many visible actions and has been at risk of retaliation from their management by being so visible. Lucy trusted the other organizers and saw the union as legitimate enough to risk their job

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<sup>91</sup> 2/23/23 Interview with Jordan.

<sup>92</sup> 2/23/23 Interview with Lucy.

<sup>93</sup> Lucy, 2/1/23 Interview with Lucy, February 1, 2023.



and housing for organizing a union for their peers. In building up the confidence of organizers to take action, organizers had to understand that students taking a stand against their employer also meant that students were standing up to their source of education and doing so, possibly risking future economic security and a degree. Students living in dorms and working on campus, and especially students working on campus to get room and board were also putting themselves in a position of risk with their housing provider by visibility supporting the unionization effort. For example, when students were planning to do an action, Lucy was called by management and informed that they could not do the action. However, Lucy was not involved with the planning and is just a known union organizer. Lucy felt threatened and told other organizers about it. To reassure organizers, and reassure Lucy, organizers double-checked the legality of the action and made sure to prepare citations from the Oregon statute if the organizers were told to stop. Reinforcement that the organizers were abiding by Oregon law made Lucy feel more confident and other organizers proceeded with these additional resources in case they were told to stop. For workers who are risking more of their livelihood such as Resident Assistants or for example, workers relying on the University for scholarships to pay for school, organizers had to build immense amounts of trust with these workers so that the workers would feel like they could take on the additional risk. Organizers also sought help from volunteer staff organizers and other forms of appearing to be legitimate so that the workers would also build trust and take risks.

The dynamic between students relying on housing as a payment for their work is a similar tension that all student-workers experience but more exaggerated. Student-workers, regardless of their housing situation theoretically could risk their education if they were deemed as violating the code of conduct. During multiple meetings, organizers would bring up how the University has used a code of conduct against campus activists disproportionately so that they

would stop pushing for reform such as the disarmament of campus police. Because of this, organizers and workers were instructed to follow the code of conduct rules extremely closely to not allow the university to use any rules disproportionately against them for union organizing.<sup>94</sup> If expelled or disciplined, student-workers would lose their jobs and their social networks possibly since as students all of this is tied closely to their education. While these jobs are temporary for most of workers, this could drastically uproot a student's life and education pathway. Throughout the campaign, the risks of being visible union organizers were not discussed often however some of these tensions were described in interviews and subtly during meetings. Overall, organizers were able to move past these risks by building trust with the workers, and part of that was building legitimacy as a group on campus.

### *Combating Misconceptions about Unions*

Sentiments about who should unionize and who should not are prevalent across Oregon, and this may be the reason that sentiments about privilege and unionization remain on campus. The 2023 Oregon Labor Commissioner, Christina Stephenson, describes during a talk at the UO Law School in February 2023, people have expressed to her that only some people deserve unions, such as the coal miners, or railroad workers but not the caretakers. Stephenson described that blue-collar workers, especially in Oregon, see unions as a part of their identity, but for other workers across Oregon, this is not a part of their identity.<sup>95</sup> This dynamic is carried out at the University of Oregon, where classified staff such as janitors are doing physical labor but student-workers are a different dynamic and some are doing office work, educational work, or are considered as fortunate to have the job they have because they are fortunate to be able to attend

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<sup>94</sup> "Participant Observation."

<sup>95</sup> Christina Stephenson, "Oregon Labor Commissioner Christina Stephenson" (University of Oregon, February 15, 2023).

the University of Oregon. Organizers had to work through the concerns of workers feeling like they were not as bad off as other groups of workers and therefore did not deserve a union.

Through mass member meetings, training, and social media organizers attempted to display the wins of unions of other undergrads, the bad conditions of UO, and visions of possible wins to attempt to work through these sentiments of workers and students on campus.

During the 2023 February “State of the Unions” panel at the University of Oregon, representatives from SEIU Sub local 085, UAUO, GTFF, and UOSW came together to discuss the future of union solidarity on campus. Professor Pedro García-Caro, a UAUO member and tenured faculty at the UO describes that unions are incredibly important and that it should not be out of fortune that a student can attend a public university.<sup>96</sup> Unions are a step towards de-privatization, giving more governance back to the students, and workers on campus. García-Caro reminded the audience of union members from across campus that, with “[e]very interaction with the administration we should remind them they are public employees, not management”.<sup>97</sup> Like the organizers, García-Caro sees unions as important in maintaining public education and making public education more accessible.

One of the organizers, Lucy, describes grappling with privilege and unionization. Even if students are in college, their working conditions and compensation should be fair. Lucy describes the immense privilege that higher education is, education is “a way to get ahead in life” but it is hard to explain the dynamic of privilege and exploitation to someone who hasn’t had this experience, “[they] are still being treated poorly and still being exploited”.<sup>98</sup> They especially see this among RAs, “they are the first gens and this is an opportunity to go and be in college” but

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<sup>96</sup> García-Caro Pedro, “State of the Unions Panel 2023” (University of Oregon, February 23, 2023).

<sup>97</sup> Pedro.

<sup>98</sup> 2/1/23 Interview with Lucy.

also experiencing horrible working conditions. For example, in January 2022, “so many Resident Assistants got COVID, if one more person got covid the University wouldn't have anyone on call” able to assist residents.<sup>99</sup> Even though college and higher education carry an immense amount of privilege with it, it is also a way to a better life for many students and higher education should not be a privilege. Additionally, a labor union should not be a privilege, student-workers also have the right to have representation and safe workers’ rights even though they are in college.

Student-workers are also more likely to be from working-class families, a portion of student-workers also receive Federal work-study, which is “awarded based on a pre-established level of student financial need determined by the Financial Aid Office” and often includes a student being eligible for a Pell-grant which is awarded to students who experience “exceptional financial need”.<sup>100</sup> A portion of student-workers are deemed in an especially unfortunate economic state and therefore are working these jobs to pay for their education. Other students that are working these jobs are international students on visas, they cannot get a job off campus and must work on campus. The misconception that all students are privileged while attending college further creates gaps between students relying on their wages and taking on debt with students who are relying on family money or outside resources. One way that student organizers attempted to combat misconceptions about the privilege of college students was through Instagram, the post from the UO Student Workers Instagram discussed basic needs and food insecurity on campus, the post centered that “more than 70% of UO undergraduates were

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<sup>99</sup> Lucy, 2/24/23 Interview with Lucy, February 24, 2023.

<sup>100</sup> “Work-Study FAQs | Career Center,” accessed February 26, 2023, <https://career.uoregon.edu/workstudyfaq#q1>; “Federal Pell Grants | Federal Student Aid,” accessed February 26, 2023, <https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types/grants/pell>.

worried about food access during the 2021-2022 school year”.<sup>101</sup> Based on participant observation in the communication teams meetings, the post aimed to spread awareness about low wages and as a result food insecurity on campus. Johnny describes that this was a key messaging point as some workers are happy with their job, “[p]eople have told me that they are signing because even though they like their job, dining workers have it really bad”.<sup>102</sup> However, Johnny and other organizers have expressed the sentiment that “[t]here are reasons that every worker should sign, there are probably some people out there that only think it's for [the benefit of] dining workers, so it's important to emphasize that everyone can benefit”. During card collection, communication that debunks the myth that all college students have the privilege and high levels of well-being was important to show the need for a union campus-wide and encourage more workers to sign cards even if they are not food insecure or if they are wealthy.

Mainly, organizers had to reframe unions and why there are necessary on campus for students that were not experiencing the worst working conditions. Overall, national membership with unions is low and unions are not seen as the norm anymore. Pointing to other campus unions and having professors and graduate educators discuss the importance of militant unions was important for workers to start understanding that unionization is not just about pay or working conditions but also about improving the university. Reframing who attends university and who should be able to attend university helped with reframing the need for unions. Pointing out to students that it is not just wealthy students and that university should not just be for wealthy students was important to increase the buy-in of workers that may be in higher socio-economic class positions. Students often discuss issues on campus such as food insecurity, but

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<sup>101</sup> “UO Student Workers Union (@uostudentworkers) • Instagram Photos and Videos,” January 27, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/uostudentworkers/>.

<sup>102</sup> Johnny, 3/13/23 Interview with Johnny, March 13, 2023.

unionization is not often the route that students see as a solution, even though there are clear ways that if all students withheld their labor the university would most likely figure out a way to meet the demands of the students.

### *Organizing Before the Official Campaign Launch*

From the onset, UO Student Workers had a group of primed workers to recruit to the unionization effort because of the work of past student groups and agitated student workers who've discussed unionization with their peers. Elizabeth explains there have been "multiple years, at least five, of work that student labor activists and the Young Democratic Socialist of America (YDSA) UO chapter have been putting in to get [the union] to the point where" it is currently. They elaborate, that "the conditions just so happen to be right, and we pushed them, and then they lined up".<sup>103</sup> Elizabeth adds that one of the organizers has been working in the dining hall for five years and has explained that they have watched and participated in multiple small attempts to unionize, such as creating a map of workers in their dining hall. Additional to this student worker, there have been other actions such as protests by workers in tangent with the Student Labor Action against the removal of the free shift meals in 2017.<sup>104</sup> Historical work and documentation of organizing from groups such as the Student Labor Action Project has been kept in the Radical Organizing Activist Resource Center at UO which has helped maintain some knowledge for organizers as students have graduated.<sup>105</sup> These past efforts have created a space for organizers now to have more success organizing because students are more primed to hear about labor concerns.

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<sup>103</sup> 2/23/23 Interview with Elizabeth.

<sup>104</sup> Andrew Field, "From Free to Fee for Student Workers: Controversy Surges over Shift Meals," Daily Emerald, November 7, 2022, [https://www.dailyemerald.com/archives/from-free-to-fee-for-student-workers-controversy-surges-over-shift-meals/article\\_a635249f-825d-517d-bbae-5350b41746d5.html](https://www.dailyemerald.com/archives/from-free-to-fee-for-student-workers-controversy-surges-over-shift-meals/article_a635249f-825d-517d-bbae-5350b41746d5.html).

<sup>105</sup> "Participant Observation."

The actions of the 2020-2022 school years helped the most to prime student workers and non-workers for a unionization effort. In 2020-2021, a different group than the initial organizers of UO Student Workers, the student government of UO, Associated Students of the University of Oregon, attempted to increase the wages of student workers in the building working in that building, mostly student services. The Erb Memorial Union (EMU) Board, supervisors in the building, and the ASUO Student Senate body in 2021 all agreed that it was a good idea to raise the wages. While originally enough funding was allocated for a 20% increase in wages for student workers, instead the workers got their minimum wage increase, as there were “legal and university policies to consider”.<sup>106</sup> Noted concerns were that student workers would be making more than the classified staff in the building. Ultimately, it was never clear the legal issue with providing wage increases even though the funding was available through ASUO. This attempt to increase wages, however, did that non-worker student have sympathy for student-workers. Next, in the spring of 2022, YDSA attempted to pass a ballot measure through the ASUO to create positions in the student government that represented the interests of workers, they successfully got “enough signatures for it to be approved”, but the “constitutional court did not get back in time to do the ballot initiative”.<sup>107</sup> This was both an intent to create more institutional ways to protect labor rights for students working on campus and also to avoid union busting from the UO administration while driving up interest in improving workers’ rights on campus. David also explained that the group during the time also was surveying “student workers about working conditions and grievances”, conducting outreach such as through a May Day Labor rally, agitating student workers over their working conditions, while building up their organizing base

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<sup>106</sup> “EMU Board Documents - Engage,” accessed March 19, 2023, <https://uoregon.campuslabs.com/engage/organization/emu-board/documents>.

<sup>107</sup> David, 2/6/23 Interview with David, February 6, 2023.

by having initial student-worker organizing meetings. They had general meetings to understand the conditions of the university, such as small cross-campus meetings to discuss grievances, which helped increase the interest in helping to organize. This foundational base of data collection of over 150 student workers, agitation, and past attempts of securing worker rights made the launch easier for the organizers in October 2022. The past attempts of smaller actions and processes involving the student government served to escalate to a larger unionization campaign that also appeals to students that may be less agitated or not inclined to support unionizations. Without this work, the organizers would have had to undergo this base building while also launching their union campaign which would have made the start of the campaign harder and possibly unviable. These smaller steps also went less noticed by the administration and protected the organizers from union busting while they were still allowed to prepare for organizing. Escaping some of the union-busting helped give organizers a head start. The preliminary data collection done in the spring of 2022 also served as a way for organizers to test the feasibility of the campaign and test the overall sympathy of non-workers. This helped the organizers understand if it would be a viable campaign. Overall, UO Student Workers did have to do incredible amounts of groundwork in a short amount of time, but this work that other activists and organizers have done in the past was helpful to an extent in making it easier for UO Student Workers to start strong. Overall, the buildup to the unionization campaign was necessary not only to gain legitimacy but also to understand the interests and conditions of workers all around campus.

### *Building Allies with Supportive Unions*

Directly leading up to the public launch of the unionization campaign, UO Student Workers had summer meetings and a strong core team of organizers already focused on



attempting to unionize, this was essential to starting the campaign strongly. In early September, Johnny describes, “We invited the campus unions, SEIU, UA, GTFF, representatives from those unions, and some community groups such as Eugene DSA and Eugene-Springfield Solidarity Network, essentially to announce campaign formally to all those unions...” give everyone “broader context to what was happening”, and identify allies in the meeting.<sup>108</sup> The meeting was also incredibly political in making sure that no union felt left out of the efforts on campus, however, Johnny adds that still some local union leadership “has a narrative that UO Student Workers did not include them in their planning of the unionization of undergrads”. As the Fall term began in October, the core organizers had primed the student body and now allies from campus unions and community leaders with experience in organizing. This was crucial in making a smooth start to the process of unionization and starting to gather rank-and-file worker interest and community buy-in with the campaign. Without having this meeting with local unions, UO Student Workers would not have later been able to get the resources such as donations and training that the connections with these unions brought. Having allies early on was necessary for the campaign to run smoothly when collaboration from other campus unions was needed.

### *Expanding Worker Engagement*

At the start of the Fall Term, at least seven core organizers had received initial workplace organizing training and were attempting to recruit other workers to attend these training sessions on effective one-on-one conversations, mapping, and general PECBA procedures. At the beginning of the Fall term, organizers reached their workplaces, social circles, and mass outreach through social media. This brought in some organizers from across campus. After the November

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<sup>108</sup> 3/13/23 Interview with Johnny.

Mass meeting, there were lead organizers from multiple Dining Halls, Resident Assistants, Housing staff, the EMU, Student Recreation Center, and Research Assistants.<sup>109</sup> Each of these organizers began a workplace organizing committee. These lead organizers and additional organizers from the workplaces formed a weekly Friday meeting. During Fall 2022, workplace organizing committees met irregularly however they were working on recruiting organizers to get cards. The group met weekly as a group to discuss updates from over twenty workplaces, discuss finances, actions, rallies, training, and anything related to the unionization effort. Organizers began to get overwhelmed; they could not discuss everything that needed to be discussed once a week and could not solely meet once a week during such a large campaign. Over winter break, organizers formed a group with a staff organizer volunteering their time and worked on weekly organizing meetings and training curriculum and strategy. This split the workplace organizing “Campus Organizing Meetings” from the campaign and union leadership discussions “Leadership Meetings”, allowing more time and focus on both.<sup>110</sup> This distinction and separation were necessary for creating assignments and accountability procedures for organizers juggling multiple tasks. This was an essential strategy in also distributing the workload as student-workers were also organizing other workplaces within the University of Oregon since there was not a student-worker representative yet from every workplace.

At the organizing meetings, student-workers would conduct tactics assessments to make sure that they were continuously shifting and reacting as the campaign evolved. Tactical assessments would be held as a discussion where each organizer would report back if they got a card through the specific strategy, and the total number of cards would then be summed up. For example, during the fifth week of the Winter Term, organizers conducted worksite visits and got

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<sup>109</sup> “Participant Observation.”

<sup>110</sup> “Participant Observation.”

sixty-four cards in this manner. The following week, they got forty, and two weeks after that they got four.<sup>111</sup> As worksite visits decreased efficiency in card collection, Workplace Organizing committees increased in cards from twenty-two cards one week and then with more focus, fifty-five cards the next week. This signaled to organizers to shift focus onto developing more Workplace Organizing committees and organizers would then be assigned to the tactics that were most effective at that time. This strategic assessment on the efficiency of inside and outside tabling, clip-boarding, event tabling, class announcements, club announcements, Workplace Organizing committees, Home Visits, Worksite visits, and social media helped organizers dedicate their time to the most efficient way to collect cards at that moment in the campaign. With limited time and organizers, organizers had to prioritize the most effective ways of card signing through these assessments of tactics.

Most organizers attending these Campus Organizing and Leadership meetings, additionally lead Workplace Organizing Committee meetings for smaller sections of the bargaining unit. Near the end of the campaign, these Workplace Organizing Committee meetings were the most efficient way to both bring new student-workers into the organizing, understand grievances of student-workers, and collect cards from the workplaces by direct mapping and assigning individuals to reach out to. After exhausting other measures of collecting cards, Workplace Organizing Committees became the main route of significant and sustainable card collection as workers were able to meet to discuss exactly who needed to be contacted to sign their cards.

Throughout the campaign, UO Student Workers also had three public mass member meetings, these were essential in bringing in new organizers to the workplace organizing

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<sup>111</sup> "Participant Observation."

committee meetings. At each meeting, midway through the Fall Term, the beginning of Winter Term, and midway through Winter Term, student-workers would learn about the progress of the campaign and then get put into a breakout group with their designated workplace, such as a specific dining hall, department, or the EMU. The facilitators of the meeting would then hold a workplace organizing committee meeting by going through grievances, and action steps, and would then create a method of communication. This aspect of involving workers in committees that met again after the meeting was incredibly important in increasing worker engagement. Workplace organizing committees would increase in members directly after the larger mass member meeting, the larger member meetings were necessary to conduct outreach to a mass number of workers even though they directly did not get cards at a high amount.

New organizers, recruited to the Leadership, Campus Organizing, Workplace Organizing, or Mass Member meetings were all invited to training on workplace organizing and effective one-on-one practices. This training onboarded new organizers and gave them confidence and legal information on unions. Through a combination of training from outside staff and labor leaders, core organizers of UO Student Workers developed a ‘one-on-one’ strategy that was effective for engaging student workers.<sup>112</sup> First, an introduction, organizers suggested student-workers introduce themselves and the campaign in under a minute. Then, student-workers were encouraged to find something that the worker did not like about their job. While giving this training, I would always assure the workers that everyone has something they do not like about their job. Workers were also encouraged to find out what the worker cares about by asking questions surrounding other issues that workers face that they’ve heard of. Generally, all workers complained about only being paid once a month. Organizers were encouraged to try to

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<sup>112</sup> UO Student Workers, “Organizing Training 101.”

understand how the issue impacted the life of the worker, or how the issue that the worker was experiencing impacted their job. For example, if a worker complained they never had time to do their homework, the organizer was encouraged to figure out if the worker was scheduled too much or at bad times. If the worker complained directly about their schedule, the organizer was encouraged to understand how their work scheduling impacted other parts of their life. The goal of these one-on-ones is to help students develop meaningful relationships with other workers, both to build community and to strengthen engagement and buy-in with the union. The next most prominent part that organizers found was to affirm the issues that workers experience and attempt to help them understand that they should not have to deal with issues in their workplace simply because it is a job. An organizer in the dining hall, Monica, describes that the union organizers “excel at creating relationships between other students that you probably would not have ever met because the university is so large”.<sup>113</sup> Building meaningful relationships all across workplaces is one of the productive ways to organize, but also the most productive way to build community. Overall, one-on-ones are important in creating relationships, but organizers also emphasize the importance of this aspect of a one-on-ones that makes it so student-workers do not feel isolated in their problems and feel a sense of community. This has an agitating effect in itself where organizers help the worker see that what the worker is going through or what other workers are going through is not okay. The one-on-one then ends with a direct ask such as “Can you come to our organizing committee meeting tomorrow at 7 pm?” and working through the specific next steps together so the worker feels confident and supported. Working through the next steps is important, David describes that “people are hesitant to take initiative because of imposter syndrome, or feeling like they don’t have authority [or] withholding a little because

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<sup>113</sup> Monica, 2/1/23 Interview with Monica, February 1, 2023.

they think they are not experienced enough to be a lead organizer”.<sup>114</sup> Helping other student-workers learn to organize is the main role of an organizer, so working through steps in the plan with the student-worker and then following up after the one-on-one and after the worker completes the task or attempts to complete the role assigned to them is incredibly important so that the worker feels supported and the two workers begin to develop a relationship. During organizing meetings, workers remark that this follow-up is incredibly important in making them feel appreciated and helps students stay engaged and motivated. Once workers are engaged, generally they stay engaged as they have found some meaning in the organizing.

Student worker organizers also excelled at many other tactics of reaching students, such as workplace organizing committee actions and petitions, small rallies and kickoff events, and general mass outreach. General mass outreach included announcements in classrooms, sending out mass texts to all signed workers with reminders, mass emailing, banners, social media, and information spreading with legitimate press such as campus, city, statewide and nationwide media. These mass outreaches were public, and organizers understood that the Administration would have seen them, but they were attempts at engaging as many students as possible in the campaign. Organizers also reference the importance of having a physical space, the Radical Organizing Activist Resource office on campus provides a community building space, a space for impromptu meetings, and general organizing and coalition building. Even with all of this, student workers still struggled with student engagement. During a focus group session on increasing worker engagement during the last few weeks of the card check campaign, organizers also suggested “[w]e need to make our organizing as accessible as possible”, and that organizers should “tap into [their] networks” and bring members to the Organizing meetings.<sup>115</sup> Organizers

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<sup>114</sup> David, 2/1/23 Interview with David, February 1, 2023.

<sup>115</sup> UO Student Workers, Focus Group Interview, February 10, 2023.

also stressed the importance of “follow[ing] up with people who are a little bit involved but not involved recently”. Additionally, organizers stressed that having one-on-ones and pushing the urgency of the campaign were also methods to increase engagement. Overall, organizers stressed the importance of making concrete direct requests to anyone that shows interest in helping, such as asking “[s]omeone to [provide] a list of their coworkers” or inviting someone to a meeting and adding someone to one of the group chats for communication. Each week more organizers were brought in and from Fall Term to Winter Term the group of core organizers was doubled.

Overall, organizers found the multitude of techniques necessary and effective at reaching different students. Generally, one-on-ones and workplace organizing meetings got more student engagement that lasted past attending one meeting than larger outreach tactics. However, since the unit is large, mass outreach was still necessary and did recruit some students. For example, I was recruited from a general email and then got involved in the organizing. But generally, it was more effective to retain organizers by building relationships through one-on-ones and escalating tasks, such as starting to attend workplace organizing committee meetings and then larger campus-wide meetings.

### *Implementing Accountability in Student Volunteer Organizing*

One issue that organizers were not able to solve was the necessity of volunteer organizing during the campaign. This was brought up at first by individuals during the interviews and then during a focus group organizers were asked to vote on a problem the campaign was currently having and then attempt to find solutions as a group. The organizers decided to discuss some issues with accountability.<sup>116</sup> First, organizers discussed general organizational principles, navigating meetings where people do “not show up on time”, organizers are not always all

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<sup>116</sup> UO Student Workers.

“caught up in the grand scheme of things”, and also bureaucratic tasks of checking to “see if we have enough cards on time”. Another issue was a fallthrough when lead organizers got sick from COVID-19. In one instance, action coordination such as clip-boarding fell through because the head person coordinating had COVID-19 and there was not a systematic way for someone to take over, organizers described that “when someone does drop the ball once, an entire branch falls through”. Essentially, there is not always a backup, and it becomes hard to predict since the organizers are still working through a pandemic. The last main issue that organizers brought up was the level of intensity needed involved. Students attend multiple meetings a week and participate actively in group chats, tasks, and strategies throughout the week, or they are not attending meetings regularly at all, or very few. The main tension that was brought up was “[w]e have a lot more kind of things of what we need to do and what we could do” and overall, “all of us need to be doing more at all times as organizers” but there is not enough time in the day. David explains this during an interview too, they said there was a “lack of structure and accountability which [has to do] somewhat with the downsides of quickly” attempting to build an organizing base. David also expressed that there was a “contagiousness in people dropping things”, while organizers feel ownership and responsibility in the campaign, there is nothing to encourage effort and work than personal and collective drive in the prospects of a union.<sup>117</sup> The group was in consensus that there were no proper systems of accountability in organizing a volunteer-based campaign, but there was a lot of discussion surrounding this accountability.

When the organizers were asked about possible solutions to these issues with accountability, they proposed many ideas. One included being “honest about our capacity” and how much work they can take on so that they can stay accountable to their goals.<sup>118</sup> The

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<sup>117</sup> 2/6/23 Interview with David.

<sup>118</sup> UO Student Workers, Focus Group Interview.



organizers believe that this will change once the organizing is out of the card-check process, “hopefully after this sprint this can reorganize and set up accountability that is sustainable and meets people where they are at with capacity” but until then the organizers will continue to attempt to bring more students into the labor and task distribution so that the campaign can remain successful.<sup>119</sup> Overall, the organizers concluded that if there was more worker engagement and less emphasis on the workload of lead organizers then there could be more accountability and assigned roles. Due to the volunteer nature of the campaign, organizers agreed that this is an ongoing tension as there are no assigned leadership roles. After certification, and even before going through the contract negotiation process, organizers plan to develop a leadership system where “there are our leadership roles and have these certain expectations”, but the organizers are waiting to create formal leadership roles until the democratic membership can vote workers into these positions. Overall, this discussion focused on the tension of the number of tasks that need to be done in a short period, the lack of formal union democracy in assigning responsibilities, and the difficulty in trying to develop organizers in such a short time. After discussing, many organizers concluded that acknowledging these issues as a group about accountability was important even though they cannot be changed. This helped create more accountability even in a short turnaround. For example, during the Leadership Friday meeting where this discussion took place, almost a third of the organizers were about 10-15 minutes late, however, less than an eighth of the organizers were late to the Campus Organizing meeting three days later. Even though not all these issues can be solved during this card-check process or after, the group discussion may have helped create some norms of accountability. These focus groups ideally served as ways to benefit the campaign during the research process, it is unclear how

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<sup>119</sup> UO Student Workers.

successful this goal was but the change in norms surrounding tardiness was one small success. Ultimately, organizers continued to have tensions with accountability and volunteering, as well as the amount of workload and high context needed to participate.

### *Issues with Self-Selected Leadership*

Similarly, the leadership question was also not resolved during the card check process. Students were self-selecting as leaders by stepping up to become leaders and helping other students organize, none of the leadership during the campaign was elected. Jordan describes that issues developed in the campaign, the campaign leadership lacked “diversity”, and a lot of “white men” since it was capacity-based there were not “as many BIPOC or non-men organizers as would be proportional to the working population”.<sup>120</sup> He believes it's a weakness of the organizing team because those interests are less accounted for and “as it stands it is a capacity-based leadership campaign, the people with more time and initiative become leaders”. This means that people who are less historically marginalized can take on more work, put themselves at more risk, and spend more of their time organizing. However, this also means that the leaders are predominately white men. Organizers introduced a BIPOC caucus during the last Mass Member meeting of the term in hopes of recruiting BIPOC student-workers to the caucus to intentionally create a space for the needs and wishes of BIPOC student-workers. However, even after the card check, this BIPOC caucus has not started successfully yet.<sup>121</sup> The lack of diversity in the organizing team started from the nucleus of YDSA, a very predominantly white club at the University of Oregon.<sup>122</sup> Organizers initially focused on recruiting a diverse group of organizers from workplaces across campus but did not intentionally focus on recruiting a diverse group of

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<sup>120</sup> 2/2/23 Interview with Jordan.

<sup>121</sup> “Participant Observation.”

<sup>122</sup> “Participant Observation.”

organizers by gender, race, age, or other demographics. Effective organizing principles emphasize the importance of leadership development of new members, organizers should be training new people to be organizers. This principle has been executed in part through engaging student workers in the training, meetings, and one-on-ones, and the team has expanded from the YDSA nucleus to now a larger organizing team that is predominantly queer, ranges in ages from eighteen to over thirty and many workplaces the committee is not predominantly white men<sup>123</sup>. However, out of the nucleus of organizers for the campaign, they are majority white men, and this core group of organizers remains predominately white.<sup>124</sup> This was of constant discussion by the group but unsuccessful changes were made. As of the week after submitting cards to the Employment Relations Board, a leadership position is being developed to specifically address diversity and social justice-related concerns in the union, but this has not yet been resolved.

None of the leaders are elected, they are self-selected or have taken an opportunity to step up presented by another organizer. In the formation of the union, there are no bylaws, but core organizers are committed to democratic institution-building, and attempt to use democracy when able to some organizing decisions cannot be done in democratic ways, such as time-sensitive decisions. All organizers interviewed stress the importance of democracy and worker engagement as essential elements to building a sustainable and democratic union but there are no real checks on individuals' power of democracy. One way that the organizers make decisions is through Leadership meetings. During a leadership meeting on January 13th, the Leadership body decided that Leadership meetings would have decision-making authority and the Organizing meetings with volunteers from other labor organizations would not have ultimate

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<sup>123</sup> "Participant Observation."

<sup>124</sup> UO Student Workers, "UO Student Workers Instagram Post Card Check Filing," April 7, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cqwfpv2L0Za/>.

authority over decisions, but still would have day-to-day involvement or weekly involvement in strategic decisions. However, organizers concluded that their influence must be acknowledged as a possible problem to the democracy of rank-and-file workers while the union is not yet certified. At a leadership meeting on March 3rd, organizers discussed that “All students, after attending three meetings of any kind related to the union, can have a vote in Leadership meetings”.<sup>125</sup> For other workplaces, such as the EMU Organizing committee, “any EMU worker or if the worker has worked in the last six months in the EMU, that comes to the committee meeting may have a vote regardless of the number of meetings the worker has attended”. When asked about the votes in meetings, Johnny and David discuss that most votes are talked through enough with the entire group in the Leadership meetings that there is consensus and there has never been a close vote.<sup>126</sup> Lucy also adds that “It is consensus-driven more than anything else, but that means it takes a long time to get to a decision”.<sup>127</sup> Elizabeth agrees with this part, “We haven't had a single contentious vote”.<sup>128</sup> Lucy also brought up the concern of social pressure when voting, “anonymous voting might be better”, Elizabeth agrees that social pressure is there as well. Overall, Lucy states that “even if I know people disagree, they still listen to my suggestion, and I do feel like people took the time to hear out my concerns”.<sup>129</sup> This tension of democracy in the Leadership body was brought up often.

However, the democratic decision bodies have not been tested much as most decisions were made with consensus and little disagreement. Additionally, Jordan describes that “[w]e don't have a functioning [leadership] group that is settled, so we don't have a democratic group”

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<sup>125</sup> “Participant Observation.”

<sup>126</sup> Johnny and David, 3/15/23 Interview Johnny and David, March 15, 2023.

<sup>127</sup> Lucy, 3/15/23 Interview with Lucy, March 15, 2023, 3.

<sup>128</sup> Elizabeth, 3/15/23 Interview with Elizabeth, March 15, 2023.

<sup>129</sup> 3/15/23 Interview with Lucy.

but “[w]e have worked as democratically as we can”.<sup>130</sup> Organizers described the importance of elected leadership roles but then also discussed that the leaders elected now without a certified union and a vote from the general membership would not be democratic either. This tension was never resolved in the campaign. Overall, organizers express sentiments that they are uneasy about the democracy in the union but there are no current solutions presented to make the campaign efficient and more democratic. Mainly concerns about elections and leadership were brought up in meetings, this goes in line with authors Schmitter and Karl from the Journal of Democracy, the article titled, “What is Democracy...and is not”. The authors describe that, “[t]he most popular definition of democracy equates it with regular elections, fairly conducted and honestly counted”, however, this does not always ensure that democracy is present even if there are elections for leaders.<sup>131</sup> Other concerns that organizers brought up with the ‘democracy’ of the union included representation, accountability, and transparency. There was tension throughout the card check campaign about efficiency, the nucleus of organizers had to make quick decisions, and this meant sometimes not running by the decisions of all the workplace organizers. Schmitter and Karl discuss this tension in their article too, the capacity to make decisions may be slower the more people that the decision involves.<sup>132</sup> Nucleus organizers were not able to always navigate this line and it left some other organizers with sentiments that others were not being transparent. The nucleus organizers tried their best but there were some mistakes made, the other organizers did not have more solutions to address this issue.

However, ultimately the majority of the organizers seemed to trust each other. If the organizers were not set on creating a democratic rank-and-file union, there would be less trust in

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130 Jordan, 3/15/23 Interview with Jordan, March 15, 2023.

131 Schmitter and Karl, “What Democracy Is. . . and Is Not.”

132 Schmitter and Karl.

leadership without formal bylaws. During the campaign period, there can be times of extreme urgency and tasks need to be completed by whoever has the capacity and time to take on the tasks. In some ways this means that students are spread extremely thin, in other ways this helps ensure that multiple people are allowed to take on tasks. This does not ensure an even distribution of workload. Author Leondar-Wright describes a comparable issue that arose with the unionization effort at UO in their dissertation when comparing working-class activism with upper-middle-class activist groups. They claim, “that to run a group without hierarchy, many agreements about procedures must be forged and observed with rigorous discipline”.<sup>133</sup> There was no strict procedure or rules observed during the campaign process, mainly norms. This was seen in the UO campaign, if no one is assigned to specific roles, the roles that students fall into naturally due to societal patterns emerge, for example, women and people of color are predominately the ones in charge of preparing things like getting food, figuring out carpool logistics, and preparing the meeting space and rooms. This was the case for the campaign, two organizers took on this role even though it was not assigned. Designated roles early in the campaign would have solved this issue, however, roles and tasks were always in flux so this may not have truly been a sustainable solution. This tension was not resolved before the card check process.

Overall, the group spent more time during meetings discussing potential issues with democracy than time discussing actual issues regarding anti-democratic issues since very few organizers brought issues of democracy to light during these meetings. For example, Elizabeth stated in an interview, “[w]e do talk a lot about democracy and how to make rank and file democracy a part of our values, but it's a lot less frequent that we bring up issues of

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<sup>133</sup> Betsy Leondar-Wright, “Missing Class: How Understanding Class Cultures Can Strengthen Social Movement Groups,” Boston College University Libraries, 2012, <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/3697>.

undemocratic practice”.<sup>134</sup> Additionally, the main issue that is undemocratic is the nucleus of organizers having additional information and resources than the larger organizing body, while the nucleus of organizers attempted to transmit information to the larger organizing body, some information did not always make it through to all.<sup>135</sup> This is where the issues of transparency arose. Furthermore, with the setup of the Leadership meetings, organizers theoretically have an equal vote on decisions, but it is unclear if organizers outside of the nucleus feel like there is democratic decision-making. When Lucy was asked if the Friday Leadership team has authority over the organizing, they responded that “Yes, for the most part, and workplaces are fairly represented” in those decisions, but they wished that “more people from departments that are not represented at those meetings” and more were more involved. Lucy believes the Friday Leadership body does a “fairly good job of handling day to day things”, and they leave the “big stuff to mass meetings”.<sup>136</sup> Alternatively, Elizabeth thinks that “Friday leadership meeting is people saying the things that people want to do” and “[t]he executive body is the five [nucleus] organizers”, they add that “[m]ost of our decision making is tactical about where we get cards” and this happens in the Organizing meetings.<sup>137</sup> Neither Lucy nor Elizabeth thinks that the decision-making power must change before certification and the organizers of the campaign repeatedly mention planning of bylaws for the union after certification, with mentions of elected stewards, elected e-council, workplace committees, open bargaining, and more. However, the lack of unelected positions has created many discussions, but no solution was ever found by the organizers for the time before certification. Ultimately, these tensions felt by organizers

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134 3/15/23 Interview with Elizabeth.

135 “Participant Observation.”

136 3/15/23 Interview with Lucy.

137 3/15/23 Interview with Elizabeth.

regarding how to address democracy did not inhibit the campaign to get the majority of workers to sign their cards, but it may cause issues further along for the organizing body.

### *Dealing with Union-Busting*

While being in direct opposition to a multi-billion-dollar institution, organizers had to find ways to build the legitimacy and trust of students, as well as attempt to put a stop to the union busting. Organizers interviewed expressed that there was little precedent for public universities on how to respond to union busting so they believe that this ultimately helped them. However, there is a record that the University of Oregon used monitoring software for student activists up until 2020. After 2020, the University used an internal team of Officers of Administration tasked with monitoring Demonstrations, referred to as the “Demo Team”. This team was revealed through a public records request and monitors student communication platforms and tracks students involved in activism on campus.<sup>138</sup> Other union busting relating tactics included the University of Oregon misleading public records requests surrounding numbers of students and ad-hoc union busting by supervisors around campus.<sup>139</sup> Organizers expressed that they knew they would be watched by the administrators closely as this would shift the power of about 3,000 workers on campus. Organizers attempted to have the discretion of whom they told the information to but also assumed that most information being spread to workers would get told to the UO administrators. For example, one of the organizers asked a worker to supply a list of student dorms to avoid knocking on when canvassing the dorms, this worker asked to supply a list instead of telling administrators that organizers were doing this.

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<sup>138</sup> “Correspondence | Public Records,” accessed March 19, 2023, <https://publicrecords.uoregon.edu/content/correspondence-319>.

<sup>139</sup> (@uostudentworkers) UO Student Workers, ““We Believe the University of Oregon Is Breaking Labor Law” Instagram Post,” Instagram, January 18, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CnkgP1Jy7kL/>.



The organizer was then threatened by their boss, even though they were not involved in the planning and the act of canvassing the dorms was legal by labor law.<sup>140</sup> The organizer threatened by their boss had been organizing for a few months and had to confidence to rely on their knowledge of labor law after checking in with trusted organizers. This was not always applicable to everyone as student workers not involved in organizing would also receive threats or hear lies from their employers.

One of the strategies used to inoculate workers was one-on-one conversations with organizers and workers. Elizabeth describes “Now that we’ve started to high levels of incidents of union busting, we’ve shown pretty well that if you face repercussions for organizing, the union will back you up. The best way to inoculate people is by public fighting against union busting and targeting of organizers”<sup>141</sup>. After union-busting incidents happen it is easier to see actual examples and that there is a threat of it happening again, but organizers should not be scared. David stated that to inoculate people you can “build strong relationships through deep organizing”, distributing “social media posts and having a unified response to various potential concerns around unionization”<sup>142</sup>. David clarifies that some of these concerns that organizers formulated responses to are “student-workers aren’t workers”, “tuition increases”, “dues”, and if the administration “can assert that UO policy supersedes labor law”. David adds that “our best responses are to act extremely confident about labor law” and check with legal authorities to make sure that organizers are backed. Overall, organizers build up the trust of other students and verify their knowledge of labor law to combat union busting. One of the most successful ways of

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<sup>140</sup> 3/15/23 Interview with Lucy.

<sup>141</sup> 3/15/23 Interview with Elizabeth.

<sup>142</sup> 3/9/23 Interview with David.

inoculating workers was by being confident in the understanding of labor law and being confident in the union's ability to protect a worker after being threatened or fired.

Other actions that organizers have done are to build coalitions of recognized unions and leaders on UO to show that there is community support against union busting. For example, the organizers wrote a letter and released it to the administration and students with major incidents of union busting for example, “managers and supervisors have prohibited, or attempted to prohibit, student workers from talking about the union during work time, when they are otherwise permitted to talk about non-work-related subjects” and “managers and supervisors in multiple dining venues have told student workers that they cannot wear union pins at work. The Employment Relations Board has stated that wearing union insignia is “settled law”.<sup>143</sup>

Additionally, “on February 11th, one of the most high-profile union organizers, Will Garrahan, was illegally fired from Global Scholars Hall Fresh Market Cafe” after a national magazine highlighted him as an organizer. Organizers also filed a ULP and held a rally to hand a petition to management. This letter calling on the university to stop union busting was endorsed by SEIU sub-local leadership, the GTFF, United Academics, Teamsters 206, other local unions, and other campus leaders. The support of these unions helped develop the legitimacy of the organizing on campus and based on the September meeting with campus allies, this letter was more successful. Overall, even though PECBA law clearly states that the University must remain neutral, the organizer still had to manage union busting.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> “Sign on to Support Anti-Union Busting Statement,” Google Docs, accessed March 19, 2023, [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdIrWkxF5Ywtd3hN0BUHK\\_NaeKHZi3T7WuPxlmWDHvhlgOYA/viewform?usp=embed\\_facebook](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdIrWkxF5Ywtd3hN0BUHK_NaeKHZi3T7WuPxlmWDHvhlgOYA/viewform?usp=embed_facebook).

<sup>144</sup> “ORS 243.670 - Prohibition of Actions by Public Employer to Assist, Promote or Deter Union Organizing,” 243.

Overall, one of the biggest hurdles for organizers was responding to claims that “student workers aren’t workers”, in other words, a union is not possible, and organizers leaned into building legitimacy with other unions, relationship building with workers, and building knowledge of Oregon labor law.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Participant Action Research was the most effective tool to allow me to continue to organize and meet my requirements to graduate. As a student and worker, writing my thesis and dedicating twenty hours a week to organizing, was the optimal method. In some ways, this is the intended result of PAR, conducting research and aiding in social change. However, the method did not fully achieve its intended results of directly creating social change through the research since most of the research focuses on past processes for UO Student Workers. However, this research will also serve to keep as documentation for the UO Student Workers Union card check process. Documentation of efforts is still important for organizations. Ideally, this will help with institutional knowledge from the card check process carry over as current student workers graduate. Hopefully, this research will also serve to provide some analysis of what works well for a campaign for other undergraduate unionization efforts.

Through this method, I was able to collect information to answer how student workers can reach most students to sign their union cards. To combat student-workers having less time than the average student to involve themselves in extracurriculars, UO Student Workers had to find a group of student-workers that would dedicate extra hours of their free time. During the campaign, 200-300 hours a week were needed, and this was spread across a group of committed organizers. The core group of student organizers, especially the four students that dedicated twenty to thirty hours a week each to the campaign, are the reason that the UO Student Workers union was able to reach a majority of workers to sign their cards. Additionally, money was not as relevant to beating their goal as the overall organizing including, workplace organizing, grassroots tactics, and daily engagement with workers, especially relationship building. Building trust with workers, building up organizing skills, reframing the importance of unions, and the

hours and hours of strategy talk all took time, not necessarily fundraised money. Next, the students had to seek some outside expertise for organizing, this was incredibly important especially to build legitimacy and allies with other unions. Without this outside expertise, it would have been much harder for the organizers to maintain momentum and build their skills. Lastly, student-workers had to be confident in their understanding of labor law and vision for the future to combat any fears that this would not be possible. This was incredibly important in helping other organizers stay engaged and motivated. Over and over, the idea of how to form legitimacy as a new union was brought up. More research into this specific aspect of the unionization drive, the role of creating legitimacy, with a special focus on the audience of this ideal of legitimacy, would be another route for further research.

Next, there are no conclusive results on how to develop a healthy internal democracy or an effective accountable organizing drive run by volunteers. However, the norms and practices used by UO Student Workers sufficed for the campaign and the organizers are on the track to implement more sustainable leadership roles. The main challenges were navigating who was involved in decisions and who was left out. With urgent questions, often the nucleus would make rapid decisions, with large questions the entire core would debate for hours. There were no policies in place but there was trust, most of the time. Another challenge was the division of workload, some roles and tasks were necessary and with urgent issues, they had to be taken on quickly, this meant that the leadership was self-selecting. The people who had the time, and chose to spend their time organizing, developed leadership roles. There also were issues with some organizers taking on tasks they did not necessarily want to do but felt they had to take on, such as the roles of getting food or logistics which are often roles taken by women. During a portion of the campaign, the focus group on accountability improved the accountability of the

organizing. Discussing issues as they emerge openly helped ease some tensions. Meanwhile, it is also possible to talk through decisions and hypotheticals too much at the expense of organizing so it is important to maintain focus and efficient discussion. PAR, and the time constraints of the campaign and thesis, did not allow me to do much research into future accountability and leadership structures. Further research should be done on the continuation of an independent unionization drive and ways to sustain democracy after certification.

UO Student Worker organizers were not always successful at managing this balance of organizing on campus both with students and student-workers. The main tension was the student-workers don't always see 'student-worker' as their primary identity, so the unionization efforts had to focus on creating this identity for student-workers. More research on the ways that workers form identities and this relationship to unionization would be beneficial. Overall, organizers had to reframe the idea of a union, both for workers and non-workers. Not all student-workers are of middle class, even though they are attending higher education and organizers had to work through breaking down this assumption. First, creating sympathy among students who did not work helped ease some of the tensions between annoying workers and non-workers, such as showing the poor working conditions of dining hall workers. Overall, organizers had to learn to balance the messaging surrounding agitating workers and improving the university. Another way that organizers managed all these issues was through building relationships with workers and truly connecting on the intersections of living, working, and benefiting from an institution. This also allowed organizers to feel more comfortable taking risks and possibly risking their jobs, school, housing, and social connections. Building relationships takes time and was not possible for most workers, UO Student Workers were able to start early with some built-up connections. More research on ways that workers unionize in workplaces where workers also

directly benefit from the workplace, such as education from the University, would be applicable and helpful to this question too.

The certification is not complete. UO Student Workers continues to organize to win their certification, currently hopes are high and organizers are on the ground daily fighting for their union. However, they have already made some history and gained national recognition, especially from other students nationwide organizing on their campuses. The majority of other undergraduate unions as mentioned before are hundreds not thousands of workers. UO Student Worker organizers show a pathway to unionization for larger undergraduate groups of workers. The values driving the union, rank-and-file, militant and democratic are part of a larger movement to reform unions such as Teamsters.<sup>145</sup> These values are about empowering people to understand their power and to ask for their labor to be valued. Student organizers are leaving higher education with a transformative experience and a new understanding of a more positive way to view work. Empowering workers to have dignity in their work and to ask to be respected and acknowledged should be the goal of every organizer. Student workers are learning to ask for respect and dignity before completely entering the workforce, all over the country, which will continue to transform the way society views labor and jobs. Student workers also have learned the power of deep relationship building, gaining trust, developing confidence, and encouraging others to do the same which is incredibly important as young people enter the workforce as well. If UO Student Workers encourages more students to attempt to unionize and take collective action, a new possible way of understanding someone's position and power in society will be

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<sup>145</sup> "Participant Observation"; "After 41 Years, The Teamsters Reform Movement Is Finally Building Power," In These Times, October 26, 2017, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/teamsters-for-a-democratic-union-reform-labor-workers>.

spread across more campuses and more students going into the workforce after college. Even if certification isn't successful, that is incredibly powerful.

The most important part of this union is not the certification, but the dignity and transformation that student workers feel when they are building their collective community, improving their education, and learning how to shift the way that they will think about their connection to labor. Paola Freire, in the “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” explains the importance of this feeling of transformation, “through that transforming action [people] can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity”.<sup>146</sup> Freire explains that this act of pursuing collective change with others experiencing the same reality sets people up to continue fighting for liberation for the rest of their life. Hopefully, for students, this means that they continue to organize and build a community for the rest of their lives.

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<sup>146</sup> Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Penguin Modern Classics, 1993).



## Discussion

Organizers are currently waiting for certification and rebuilding bylaws and more policies to help ensure a transfer of leadership, democratic practices, and sustainability into the next phase of organizing. Now, organizers must continue to build the vision of the type of union that they wish to have and that they wish to sustain. During one of the last meetings of the campaign the organizers participated in a visioning session, the organizers at the Leadership participated in a consensus process to demonstrate how they feel about ideas for requirements for the union while organizers suggested ideas important to them. Organizers expressed the Workplace Organizing committee leads need to be elected, shop stewards elected, the unit must be its sub-local, there must be open bargaining, a staff organizer that is fireable by the elected union leadership, and more.<sup>147</sup> The group then discussed the importance of workers engaged in this bylaw creation process, the use of the mass member meeting to vote on bylaws and elect leaders, and the use of workplace committees to be set up before the first bargaining for democratic processes for the first contract. The organizers who have been in this fight for months agree on most of the necessities in their union. New workers will have to go through education and training to better understand the importance of a union, the processes of unionization, forming a democratic union, bargaining for a first contract, and more. Constant education, training, and onboarding will be needed for this union to function. More research could be done into the best ways to reach the average undergraduate worker on a large public university campus.

During the certification process, organizers will also begin to prepare for contract negotiation. As no student has direct experience in this in the current organizing body, students will most likely have to rely on more experienced organizers for help from outside the union. For

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<sup>147</sup> "Participant Observation."

this union specifically, organizers will have to consider the turnover of students and how to convey the importance of bargaining to workers that are not as involved. Bargaining team members must be able to stay engaged and a part of the process for the contract negotiation or the union will have to develop ways to continuously train organizers to participate in the bargaining team to join midway through the process, on top of continuously training bargaining team members as the students graduate. After certification and bylaws, organizers will also have to navigate collecting dues from student workers and maintaining the buy-in of workers even if the union has not made large wins. During these processes, organizers will also be seeking to affiliate with statewide unions to increase the number of resources available to help with bargaining and winning a contract. This may happen before or after a contract, or not at all, but currently UO Student Workers filed independently. Organizers in Leadership meetings express the concern that the union would not survive without affiliation.<sup>148</sup> However, organizers and leaders also express they could not make a democratic decision to affiliate without inclusion and education of the general worker body.

The organizers staying at the University of Oregon next year will continue to have to work hard at building a strong union that has adequate representation, and democratic procedures, is accountable to the larger body of workers, and wins good contracts. The very first step was filing for a card check. Now, the more difficult work of maintaining and fulfilling the promises of a union will be a real test for the organizers.

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<sup>148</sup> “Participant Observation.”

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