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### **Etiologies of Activism**

For the past eight years, grad employees at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) have been fighting for union recognition. Having affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers and been both authorized and elected by the 5000+ employees for whom they hope to bargain, the union has waged a now five-year legal battle with UIUC's Board of Trustees. At stake in this battle is the very status of TAs, RAs, and GAs as employees, for Illinois has a statute that continues to be interpreted to forbid most graduate assistants from qualifying as employees when their work status is understood to depend on or be unduly related to their status as students. Nonetheless, in the face of such legal intransigence, the union at Illinois, known as the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO), has continued its campaign, and, even in the absence of formal recognition, secured numerous benefits for its de facto bargaining unit.

As part of a larger project involving the history of that campaign and what it means to be an academic activist, I have interviewed core members of the GEO about their involvement. Many are union founders; all have been long term participants; some have served as officers or been employed as paid staff.

The questionnaire I use covers topics from family political background and/or union involvement, to interviewees' self-conceptions as academics, and how they imagine both their futures as academic activists and the future of their field relative to labor issues. I also inquire about other work and activist experience they might have had; why they decided to go to grad school; how they came to work for the union and what they derive from that experience; and how or whether they think their involvement has affected their academic standing.

While I cannot claim to have arrived at some default profile of the academic activist, I believe the various profiles my research has uncovered may be useful for at least two reasons. First, my results may help shape subsequent and more formal inquiries into this area. Second, and more importantly, knowing the indices I describe below may help those involved in the union movement to better activate their peers. Organizing is tough work, but the more we know about how people come to that activity, the better we may be able to bring more people to it. Moreover, since so few of those I interviewed had life paths that seemed to point at all toward the organizing they would do in grad school, we might allow ourselves to feel a little more confident that our colleagues are capable of greater collective agency. Finally, I hope to use this research to get some impression of how the academy may be changing due to the labor challenges confronting us. UIUC is a perfect laboratory for such a study because its grad employees do so much of the work, and because they have had to prosecute their campaign for recognition over such a lengthy period. These employees represent the new face of academic labor, and through their portraits I have tried to discern how their backgrounds and circumstances translate to action—both to document a specific campaign and to offer insights to those who face similar challenges elsewhere.

In terming the indices I have encountered "etiologies of activism," I am neither developing a formula nor

recommending a recipe. Nor, I hope, am I overly psychologizing the experience of activism, as though it were a response to early childhood trauma or other sources of distress; and I would agree with the colleague who—taking issue with my title—was quick to point out that it is apathy rather than activism that is the disease. I mainly hope here to capture, within what some have called the "crisis in higher education," a sense of how and why academics come to understand themselves as activists. As an organizer who has recruited across all disciplines at a major public university, I have a clear sense of what factors motivate someone to sign a union card and vote yes in an election. (I also know a good deal about why people abjure and resist such activities.) What I hope to better understand is how and why academics make activism a regular part of their lives *as* academics, and what that means for the future constitution of the academy. This should matter to us because our way of life *is* in crisis, and activism is both an obvious and necessary response to that state of affairs.

So—how did an assortment of grad employees at UIUC come to find themselves mounting a union drive? What, aside from systemic injustice (assuming you require any other causes) explains why certain people took time away from their scholarship to contribute to an effort which, for legal reasons to which I have alluded, was always an iffy proposition? What makes academics activists, what makes activism academic, and what can we learn about one specific instance of academic activism as we contemplate a climate that continues to exploit academic labor?

In beginning to answer those questions, I have encountered a dozen trends among the backgrounds and predispositions of early core activists. I subdivide these trends according to when in their lives they tended to predominate. Thus, three factors—conservative family politics, an absence of family involvement in unions, and religious upbringing—constitute the worlds into which these activists were born and the circumstances under which they were raised. The next five factors entail dimensions of their lives from the period beginning with adolescence, continuing through their undergraduate years, and culminating in their union activism as graduate students. These factors include experiences of failed activism; figures who served as mentors; time taken off between undergrad and grad school; episodes of physical labor; and an interest in interdisciplinarity. Finally, there are issues that speak to the immediate circumstances under which these individuals become active as unionists. These four categories are solidarity, ownership, service, and reclassification. By solidarity I mean the experience activists describe when they recognize the magnitude of peer support. Indeed, almost everyone with whom I spoke mentioned at least one instance of being tremendously energized when they saw they were not alone in their struggle. Ownership describes the sense of the cause being immediately meaningful. Many activists had participated in other movements, but this was often the first time they could work for an issue so personally relevant. In using a term like "service," I mean to convey that quality of obligation that, for some activists, distinguishes their participation in a union from a more casual engagement with causes whose meaning is less directly felt. Reclassification describes the experience whereby children of the middle class (as these activists by and large were) redefine themselves as workers and often find more in common with their grandparents' generation than with that of their parents. (Indeed, these activists have often learned a great deal about family union involvements as a result of their experience in the GEO. That such details were often unacknowledged suggests a definite discomfort on the part of their parents regarding these families' poor and working class origins.)

So to start with, there are the circumstances of activists' backgrounds. If one pattern emerges here, it is that the individuals I interviewed were not Red diaper babies. They did not grow up in left-politicized households, ride their parents' shoulders during protest marches, and go to school with *Lenin and Philosophy* lunch boxes. Their parents tended to be either Republican or otherwise self-identifiably conservative; and if they were Democratic or liberal, these parents were almost never actively so. "My Mom grew up in the sixties," explained one colleague in English, "but missed the whole march and parades thing." "My parents were both good liberals," offered another, ". . . definitely politically progressive, but in a sort of post-Cold War" sense. A physicist summed up his background this way: "My family, I think, at least as far back as I know about, is just Democratic—reasonably liberal Democrats, but

not activists."

Many activists, though, came from families whose politics were decidedly conservative. "I was born in the Chicago area," one activist told me. "I basically grew up in the Chicago suburbs, notoriously Republican Chicago suburbs, from a fairly solid yet anxious middle class family who identified as Republican." "I come from a fairly middle class or affluent background," said another, whose parents are Republican. "I grew up in a suburb of Detroit called Grosse Point (which is famous for the movie now). My parents were not terribly politically involved." Others used phrases such as "traditional Republicans" or "solidly Republican" to describe their parents' political persuasion. "There really isn't much of a history of activism [in my family]," one colleague in Communications told me. "My family's actually pretty conservative, mostly Republican, and also rural. And very consumerist, as well. So I don't know how I turned out the way I did." "[P]ro-management, kind of trickle-down Republican," is how another described his family's politics. "[N]ot extremists, but . . . sort of unthinkingly Republican" is the way a historian characterized his parents' political makeup. "All I remember was seeing lots of little glass elephants on the mantelpiece," a physicist told me, describing the trinkets his father would receive in recognition of his donations.

That detail speaks to a larger phenomenon I detected, which was that for the most part politically conservative parents were also more likely to express their politics actively. One activist recalled accompanying her father, a Thatcherite, as he campaigned door-to-door and put up posters. Another mentioned his mother's activism within the Republican party. "There aren't many of them left," he admitted, "but she's a liberal Republican: very much pro-choice, interested in feminist issues of the kind, you know—equal pay, pro-choice on abortion, women in politics—things like that." Another individual recalled parental activism on the opposite side of this issue. "The history of activism in my family," she said, "is around pro-life issues. The only marches we ever went to were pro-life ones."

It is important to note that these unionists remembered such practices, especially those cases where they don't today sympathize with the issues animating their parents. Most of these contemporary activists did not come from actively left-liberal families with recent histories of union involvement, but some did witness their parents' political participation. Such anecdotes suggest that they were raised with models of social action they could one day translate in terms of causes, issues, and organizations considerably different from those supported by their families.

But in general their models did not include instances of union involvement. One respondent, who described his parents as being good liberals who were educated and politically progressive, went on to add that while his mother always spoke of having come from a union family, she never supplied any details. Another activist, whose father did belong to a union, recalled an incident where her mother, a nurse supervisor, had to cross a picket line at the hospital where she worked. But even though this same person described herself as having grown up in "blue collar land," she also characterized hers as a family that did not talk politics, or speak of unions in other than historic terms. Thus she recalled nothing about an event—the strike at her mother's hospital; her mother crossing the line—that one would think must have been a source of friction, or at least interest, within a family that contained union members and had ties to the labor movement in generations past. Nor did the physicist whose family comprised "reasonably liberal Democrats" recall until the end of our interview that his mother is a member of the Screenwriters' Guild. For the most part, either activists came from moneyed and conservative backgrounds, or their parents were politically liberal and didn't belong to a union, or they did belong to a union, but didn't talk about it much (and behaved in ways that made you wonder how they understood this involvement). Even the exception to this trend grew up with a conception of unionism considerably different from the one on which she acted as a grad unionist. Her father was a member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers in New York. "I was very much aware," she said,

of union as a very important, good thing that people should do, and I had no idea that

people wouldn't do this, and I was from a working class neighborhood on Staten Island, and this was very much just normal. And it wasn't until I became politically conscious that I realized that my Dad and my Mom were very much pro-union for very conservative reasons—that in fact it wasn't the things that attracted me to unions at all, that was attracting them to a union.

This dimension of what we might call conservative solidarity comes through as well in the religious backgrounds of several of these activists. One, raised a conservative Lutheran, described her family's investment in its faith in terms that might serve as well to define the ideal dynamic of a union. "We definitely had a sense," she related, "that you are the church, and it's your responsibility to go out and talk to the people in the community, and the church is the people who are invested in it." Another activist, raised in a conservative evangelical household, directly compared his parents' faith to the practices he engaged in as a unionist. He juxtaposed his mother's joining a Bible group at age 70—"it's like, c'mon Mom, you don't know the Bible well enough?"—to our union members' on-going efforts to train themselves to be ever better organizers: each, he claimed, is consistent with evangelical tradition. "Throughout my involvement in the GEO," he told me,

I've been reminded again and again and again of the world I grew up in. A lot of the language is even the same. I mean, the way we talk about [it], you know—it's all about witnessing, and it's conversion, and it's the same shit in a lot of ways; it's just a different faith.

(This same person confided that as a kid he would try to convert his friends by asking them whether they wanted to go to heaven or hell; never having organized with him, I can't be sure he isn't still using that tactic.)

Two unionists with Catholic upbringings also located their activism in the context of the faith in which they were raised. Their faith-based activism, however, took a decidedly leftist shape. One had done a considerable amount of human rights work in Latin America. Both before and during those experiences, he engaged with elements of liberation theology. When asked what got him interested in that practice, he replied,

The Jesuits, probably more than anything. I was taught by the Jesuits in high school and in college. There were always a few radical fringe leftist types—social justice type Jesuits—in my high school and in Creighton University, and I resonated with those folks. And I just think the whole Catholic upbringing—you can go either way with it. At least in my schools and in my family, there was such an emphasis on good works, as opposed to just hanging out and reading the Bible, that there was a commitment, which I took seriously, growing up, to do good things. And normally, most Catholics end up doing nothing—just making money in the society, and they rationalize not doing anything community-wise. I don't know how they rationalize it, but they tend to. Maybe they do a little work at the school. Or you find that they do a lot of good works, but it's kind of charity, poverty work; it's not really very political. It's not bad work, but it's not gonna really help people make a difference in their lives or empower themselves. There's that whole genre. And luckily, I was taken a level further, which is where, of course, you have to go, if you're gonna do meaningful political work. And I think [it was] probably just the Jesuits, and reading people like Daniel Berrigan—I read a lot of his diaries and poetry. I met some really good people in the Dominican Republic, and they pushed me in that direction. So I quickly understood the difference between charity, and concern for the poor, and work that showed respect for where people were at.

The other Catholic activist identified a more local stimulus for her interest in social justice:

I did some work with the Catholic Worker house in L.A. [after college]. I used to work in the soup kitchen. And I got interested in Dorothy Day, 'cause I was teaching at a Catholic school, and I had to teach this religion class, and I was trying to figure out how to make the class into a social-issues-and-get-kids-interested-in-changing-the-world-in-a-progressive-way thing. So Dorothy Day was someone I came across who had this stamp of approval from the Catholic Church in some way, but was radical, and I could talk about her in class.

(In effect, this colleague endeavored to be the kind of teacher who helped shape the previous figure's education; that exemplary model she tried to enact speaks to another index of activism I will discuss presently.)

As the above stories indicate, even though many activists did not come from *families* with a history of left social activism, almost all, by the time they began organizing for the GEO, had participated in some activist or social justice work—often in areas relating to environmentalism, weapons control, opposition to apartheid, feminism, and reproductive rights (these last two were especially common). Surprisingly, many of their experiences were failures or disappointments—these were not individuals able to build a union based on the organizing success they'd enjoyed elsewhere. The Dorothy Day fan described a project in which she was involved as an undergrad. Called the Racism Hotline, and modeled after similar services designed for victims of sexual abuse, it was intended to offer counseling to both victims and perpetrators of racism. The problem was, no one from either category ever called. "Our intentions were good," she admitted, "but the energy was kind of misspent."

Many of the activists had participated in rallies against the Gulf War, and one recalled being turned off by the event he attended, which began with people denouncing the war but then moved on to calls for the overthrow of the U.S. government. "People were idealistic," he told me, "but they weren't smart about their idealism." What he came to realize, he said, was that activism is about persuasion, not issuing platforms. This sentiment was echoed by another of our organizers who had participated in anti-war efforts: "You kind of have to meet people where they're at, in terms of organizing," she suggested.

A few of our organizers had worked on union campaigns that had fallen short, such as the drive at Temple in the late eighties and early nineties. Another remembered a conversation she'd had with her adviser, who had worked on a failed campaign at Pitt. Although he later came to be an important faculty supporter, his initial response to her interest in organizing at UIUC was a rueful "Good luck." A third activist had been on the fringes of an earlier version of the GEO, which died in part because it didn't take the step from being a voice for grad employees to becoming a formal union.

But my favorite account of failed activism came from someone who, as a twelve year-old, fought to keep the field behind her house from being turned into a parking lot by organizing a "Save Our Field" rally. "I didn't think of it as a political thing at all," she told me,

I just thought it would be fun. I don't know where I got the idea, but I made all my friends go, and I passed around a petition for people to sign, and nobody signed it. I made phone calls for people to show up, and nobody came. Then I called the paper and they didn't come, but I have photographs of us holding up signs in the street, and that was pretty cool.

The other commonalities of activists that date from adolescence to the beginning of grad school are, while less anecdotally rich, significant for their consistency across the population. First, many activists recalled a mentor who facilitated their political awakenings, either by example or exhortation. Second, many of the people who would come to be the most active in our union took time off between undergrad and grad

school. Third, in those years between school, a number engaged in physical labor, working as, among other things, janitors, carpenters, and corn detassellers. Fourth, and finally, many of the activists, when they came back to school, did so with an eye toward interdisciplinary work.

From such indices we might detect a pattern, which is that people who become active in grad employee unions do so in part because they've had occasion to get outside of the academy and gain a perspective on it, one informed by their experience as workers elsewhere. When they return to school, they're able to make those connections—between inside and outside the academy; their home discipline and other domains—and making connections is the basis of organizing, a behavior further facilitated by the memory or proximity of an activist mentor.

The occasion and meaning of that behavior structure the last set of factors common to UIUC unionists: solidarity, ownership, service, and reclassification. Regarding the first, many activists described pivotal moments in which they began to recognize the potential for a union. They mentioned how surprised they were at the size of the first meeting they attended, often the first time they connected with students from other parts of campus. "I felt like I'm meeting other people that have the same concerns," said one. "I knew it was gonna happen then, as opposed to when we had our conversations among ourselves—I never had that certainty." "The first meeting was great," said another. "That was the first time I'd laid eyes on someone outside of the English department . . . and the conversation was really exciting."

For some the experience was dramatically persuasive. "I thought probably most people didn't realize how hard it was gonna be to do this," one told me:

And so I wanted to give my opinion that this is kind of too hard to do, and we shouldn't do it. . . . But there were so many other people there. At that time, I had never really met anyone from outside the History department. Seeing people in other departments basically saying the same things that we were saying, or even worse, actually was quite a revelation. And that totally changed my mind in terms of the possibilities of doing it.

"It was really nice to see solidarity developing across disciplines," another said. "People talking to each other, really smart people with a really good understanding of the working conditions coming together and talking about them."

What grows out of these conversations is a sense of ownership toward a cause that is compelling and meaningful because immediate. When I asked a unionist who had traveled outside the country and been radicalized by that experience how he connected his politics to the union cause, he replied, "It was there. It was one of the things that I knew was needed. And it was something that I felt I could actually do something to change." Another compared his union organizing to other efforts he described as "distant." "In some ways," he said

it seems odd to be a white middle class person in the Midwest engaged in trying to overthrow apartheid in South Africa. . . . But this is sort of the thing that I would say affects my life: it's about my work life now, it's about what being a graduate student is. . . . So I feel it's much more near and dear to my heart, which makes it easier to do organizing around, makes it easier to sort of give my whole self to the movement. I don't have too many doubts about whether or not graduate assistants should be unionized or whether I'm sufficiently connected to the group be organized. I certainly don't feel as though I'm an outsider coming in to organize this community; I feel that I'm an organic element of the community. So that's what I would say: it's given me an opportunity to organize more organically, as it were, and that's a very good experience.

The final factors, service and reclassification, suggest lessons some have derived from their organizing. On the former, one unionist said of his relationship to UIUC, "I felt a duty that if I'm going to be part of that enterprise, I have to make it better." The latter category reconnects to the family circumstances with which I began—specifically, the idea that many activists' families have labor histories that don't get told, and which only come to light when the current generation recognizes its bond with that history. Of her mother's unwillingness to acknowledge such a working class history, one activist told me, "She fought to get rid of that label, and I want to retain that label."

Consonant with regaining old labels is a practice of recovering one's family history, and at times even postulating alternative pasts. A colleague in English, whose own parents were not active in unions, did mention a "grandfather . . . who was involved in labor organizing." He and his brothers, she went on to say,

were active in bringing the UAW to the Kohler company in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. And they were involved in the Kohler strike, which I think has the distinction of being the longest strike in American labor history.

This individual is one of only two activists I interviewed who seems to have grown in a vocally pro-union environment, albeit one informed more by her parents' parents, than those parents themselves. "[U]nions," she told me,

are something that I've been hearing about all my life, and my grandfather has kind of reiterated the refrain, "The union is good for us, and the solidarity is good for us," and stuff like that—got taught how to sing the songs, and stuff, as a kid.

More common, though, are experiences of activists connecting with their grandparents after working in the GEO. One historian put it this way:

[M]y Mom and Dad are probably less sympathetic to unions . . . as opposed to my grandparents' generation (they're 80 now, and it's 1997, so you figure out the chronology). They seem to be much more understanding of what we're trying to do. When I talk to them about unionism and its meaning and its history, they in fact remember when it was happening in the early part of this century.

Others report a similar disjunction between their parents' and grandparents' stance on unions. One of the many activists who described her family's politics as "very conservative," noted that her maternal grandparents, "however, are sort of FDR Democrats, and [her maternal grandmother] was active in the Democratic party," adding "two generations back, they're pretty active union people." Finally, one activist whose family was left-political but not engaged in unionism, remembered his mother "always talk[ing] about being from a union family, because her father was active in some kind of union." He admitted, though, that he "actually [didn't] know the details of all this."

The pattern that emerges here, albeit incomplete, comprises a cyclical history, whereby unionism skips a generation. Most of the grad students who built our union have parents who came of age during the post-war boom, which, as one friend once put it, was always a good career move. By and large, they enjoyed a level of prosperity—largely disseminated by unions—that made organizing irrelevant to their lives. Their children, though, encounter a world the economics of which are far less progressive. Unable to assume financial well-being, even with extraordinarily high levels of education, they find themselves fighting battles like those of an earlier era. Occasionally, they enjoy direct access to that era, in the person of a grandparent. More often, though, they just have the stories, or know, however, sketchily, that such stories exist.

I myself grew up in a household where I only heard about unions when my father was blaming them for this or that ill. After I became active in the GEO, though, I began to notice other details in his stories, such as when he told me about using his father-in-law's union card to get a discount on a lamp. This was when he and my mother were young, and, though they would never use the phrase themselves, working class. But entering the job force just after World War II, my father was able to stay with the same firm for over thirty years. Eventually, he moved into management, and retired a millionaire, in part because of a lucrative profit-sharing plan.

But he has seen, in the work lives of his six children, how differently the world operates now: the benefits he enjoyed that we don't receive; the job security we'll never know; the longer hours all of us work. He never finished high school, and most of us have at least post-undergraduate credentials, yet it's possible none of us will enjoy my parents' standard of living—well, I know *I* won't—in part just because it takes two incomes for us to achieve what they could manage with one, on which they were also able to raise the six of us.

So, to paraphrase that colleague of mine, many academics of my generation have found themselves looking for the union label lately. Not because we were raised in labor households, but because, with histories of service, the examples of our mentors, occasions to understand our status as workers, and the solidarity of our peers, we come to own the responsibility to improve the enterprise we constitute. Activism is the means by which the academy most fully engages that enterprise.