

# (Re)Forming Unions for Social Justice

## A Critical Autoethnographic Inquiry into Racism, Democracy, and Teacher Leadership

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## *(Re)Forming Unions for Social Justice A Critical Autoethnographic Inquiry into Racism, Democracy, and Teacher Leadership*

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### **Abstract**

*Within the contemporary anti-union environment fueled by neoliberalism, teachers are organizing and educating each other in order to push back against the corporate reform agenda and envision a public education that supports all students. Using a critical autoethnography methodology, the author narrates her participation in social justice unionism through a series of episodes and then performs the analytical practice of co-reading with critical social theories. This article illuminates intersections of democracy and racism with neoliberal education reform and practices of teacher leadership. It concludes with implications for social justice caucuses and social justice unionism.*



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The door shuts out the December air as I proceed to climb three flights of stairs. An older Puerto Rican man opens the apartment door and ushers me in with a jovial greeting. Jose is the building union representative for the magnet high school where he teaches history and law. He has been an active member of the Newark Teachers Union (NTU) for 23 years. Sitting in the living room are two White veteran history teachers, Matthew and Branden, who are also union representatives at magnet high schools in the district. Branden invited me to this meeting. Our agenda is to organize a slate to run against the NTU president who has held the position for the last 15 years.

Within the contemporary anti-union environment fueled by neoliberalism, teachers are organizing and educating each other in order to push back against the corporate reform agenda and envision a public education that supports all students (Charney et al., 2021; Maton, 2016; Uetricht, 2014). Weiner (2018) remarks on the 2018 red state teacher walkouts: “By demanding recognition and respect for their labor and the rights of their students, teachers are reviving the most essential element of labor unionism: respect for democracy and the dignity of work” (para. 11). If we are to imagine a democracy for collective, productive, and active purposes (Mirra & Morrell, 2011), these purposes must be put to work as social practices (e.g., organizing, teaching, writing, protesting). Additionally, centering the leadership of those most affected by neoliberal reforms and decentering the issues of salary and benefits opens up possibilities for unions to be a driving force in bringing about critical democratic public education.

I invite you to discover with me how an “apolitical” teacher is re-constituted into a teacher leader committed to social justice unionism. I answer Packer’s (2018) post qualitative call to focus qualitative inquiry on how we are re-constituted for emancipatory interests. Packer (2018) argues further that we should view constitution as an ontological process where the experiencing subject conceives the world through “altered way[s] of being embedded” (p. 263) and orders reality through social practice.

With new purpose comes new ways of (re)presentation, so the reader may experience a disruption of reading habit. The discoveries reported in this article come from a critical autoethnographic (Holman Jones, 2016) study of teacher leadership development through political activism (Owens, 2020). First, I unravel thoughts and actions (episodes) as experienced at the time, thus utilizing the present tense. Then, I return to these episodes to map intersections of democracy and racism with neoliberal education reform and practices of teacher leadership using the analytical practice of co-reading (Jackson & Mazzei, 2017). I co-read with critical democratic theory (Mirra & Morrell, 2011), critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998), and Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000). I conclude with implications for social justice caucuses and social justice unionism.

I focus on my participation in social justice unionism from 2010 to 2016. Specifically, this includes forming a social justice caucus within the NTU, conducting a critical analysis of a proposed union contract, and organizing childcare center workers. These experiences have been co-created with fellow-participants; therefore, I employ member checking in the research process (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). I invited 57 people to member check one or more episodes, but only a handful read and gave me feedback. Specific names are included when the public record coincides or permission has been granted; otherwise, names are pseudonyms.

Identifying as an “apolitical” teacher stems from my lack of a civics education and is fostered by my five-week training from Teach for America (TFA). While TFA sees itself as

“build[ing] a true democracy...by channeling the talent and leadership of top recent college graduates” (Wetzler, 2010, p. 25) into classrooms for two years of teaching, others argue the organization applies neoliberal concepts to teacher preparation (Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017) by emphasizing management (Scott, Trujillo, & Rivera, 2016) over pedagogy. TFA is charged with outsourcing the public teacher workforce by placing corps members at nonunion charter schools and pushing out veteran teachers so that lower salaries can be paid (Brewer et al., 2016; Sustar, 2013). These practices marginalize the role of teachers unions and deemphasize the political nature of teaching. Unlike some other alumni who embrace management, entrepreneurship, and accountability as practices for achieving educational equality (Trujillo et al., 2017), I embarked on a search for explanations of and solutions to educational inequality that are grounded in critical social theory (Anyon, 2009).

## Background

Within 24 square miles, nearly 282,000 people call Newark home. According to New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) (2018) data, Newark Public Schools (NPS) has enrolled close to 36,000 students in the 2017-2018 school year (the last year the district is under full state control); the two largest racial and ethnic categories are Black and Hispanic at 42.4% and 48.2%, respectively (a mirror of the city’s racial demographics); and 85% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. NPS budget projections for the 2017-2018 school year show an almost three-fold increase in public funding to charter schools in less than a decade, from \$91M in 2010 to \$242M in 2018, and just over a third of all public school students would be enrolled in two dozen charter schools (NPS, 2017).

I grow up in a majority White, lower middle-class community in upstate NY as a Black girl in a working-class family. I attend an elite university with the goal of becoming a pediatrician because I want to have a positive impact on the lives of children. Unspoken messages have told me that smart people become lawyers or doctors. To pay for college costs, I hold a number of part-time jobs, including being a tutor and afterschool program instructor. Working directly with students creates a new possibility of what it means to “help” children and I am inspired to become a teacher. I am accepted into the TFA-Newark 2004 corps and placed at a high school to teach English.

In my second year of teaching, a fellow TFA corps member tells me about Abbott Leadership Institute (ALI), an organization that holds Saturday classes to educate parents about school reform and build their advocacy skills. I learn about the ground-breaking Abbott legacy, a series of court cases heard in the New Jersey Supreme Court that brought near-parity funding to property-poor districts around the state (Yaffe, 2007). I learn NPS has had a contentious history in terms of governance—there were transitions from mayoral to state control with an elected school board in between (Rich, 1996). When the state took over the district in 1995, the school board remained elected, retaining citizens’ power in that respect; however, the board’s governing powers were given to the state-appointed superintendent, thus placing the board in an advisory capacity (Morel, 2018). ALI membership compels me to learn all I can about Newark’s education history and to take on a leadership role at my school.

Abbott and state control bring in waves of school reform, with none implemented long enough to sustain rises in academic achievement across the district. My school has been reformed into career-based academies. One academy is aerospace. Some students graduate with a pilot’s license. In my fourth year of teaching, I learn through my master’s degree internship with the

scheduling vice principal that the reform is not being carried out with fidelity. Teachers assigned to the same academy are supposed to have the same prep period so they can plan together, but this rarely happens. I see an opportunity to organize teachers into a professional learning community based on solutions-oriented policies. Our proposed tardy policy that allows students to arrive to their first period class late rather than sit in the auditorium is implemented but soon after abandoned.

The majority of the student population at my placement school is Latinx, mostly Puerto Rican. Seeing curriculum as another strategy to affect educational change, I co-create an elective course on Puerto Rican and African American literature with another English teacher—herself Puerto Rican and Chilean—and infuse culturally-responsive teaching units into the district curriculum (Owens, 2020).

In June 2008, I create an organization, Teachers as Leaders in Newark (TaLiN), with the following vision statement: TaLiN seeks justice and equality for all students through empowering Newark educators to be catalysts in the creation of social and educational alliances. TaLiN opens space to be an education activist and organizer and to develop relationships with teachers within the district who also want to bring radical change to public education (Owens, 2020). Two months later, I decide to pursue graduate studies full-time. My request for a leave of absence from NPS is not approved, so I reluctantly resign.

Now in a doctoral program, I learn how the Great Migration of Blacks from the South, followed by urban decline, political corruption, failed revitalization, and racial tensions, precipitated a rebellion in Newark in 1967 (Mumford, 2007). These forces served to undermine the viability of the local system of public education (Anyon, 1997). I pay specific attention to texts written about the Black radical tradition (Carruthers, 2018; Ransby, 2018). Amiri Baraka is at the center of this tradition in Newark; his leadership in the arts, politics, and community building helped to shift power relations in favor of the local Black and Puerto Rican populations and position Newark on the national Black Power stage (Woodard, 1999).

In the spring of 2010, Governor Chris Christie proposes a slew of budget cuts, the most damaging to education. Underfunding public education is a predominant practice of neoliberalism, which drives contemporary U.S. education policy with its goal of privatizing public functions (Russom, 2012). Abbott districts, Newark being one of them, feel a disproportionate impact as a significant amount of their funding comes from the state. Hundreds of students from high schools in Newark walk out of school and onto the steps of city hall in protest of cutting programs and school staff. TaLiN organizes rallies and marches during budget season to demand full funding of the public schools. Branden and I meet at one of these actions and start working together.

A pact between Mayor Cory Booker and Governor Christie—a Black Democrat and a White Republican, respectively—to reform education in Newark becomes public when they appear on *Oprah* in October 2010 with Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg to announce his \$100M donation to Newark public schools (Russakoff, 2015). The story below begins shortly after this announcement.

*Episode #1: Running for Union Leadership*

Press Release  
February 8, 2011

**Newark Teachers Union Faces Electoral Challenge**

...Calling themselves “*United For Change*,” the group...is calling for new leadership to emerge that is more diverse and reflective of the NTU membership... Furthermore, noting that the NTU has been slow to react to the enormous challenges faced by Newark teachers, United For Change is calling for the membership to join efforts to renew the NTU in the face of politically motivated attacks on teachers.

Troubled by increasing erosion of support for public education, United For Change is calling on the Newark Teachers Union to play a leadership role in school reform and transformation...At the same time, United For Change is calling for major internal reforms within the Newark Teachers Union aimed at strengthening union democracy and revitalizing the NTU’s voice in public forums...

Everyone on the United For Change (UFC) slate is fed up with the business style unionism (Hagopian & Green, 2012) of Joe Del Grosso, NTU president since 1995. The campaign literature focuses on the lack of transparency and democracy in the union, citing no access to the NTU Constitution and a financial report to the membership consisting of a one-page statement. UFC calls for social justice unionism, described by editors at *Rethinking Schools* as having three elements: defending public education and the rights of teachers, strong emphasis on professionalism, and commitment to children and community (Peterson & Charney, 1999). Weiner (2012) notes this style of unionism promises to “spearhead development of the broad political and social resistance needed to reverse the tidal wave destroying public education” by “mobiliz[ing] its members to struggle on their own behalf” (p. 36). Although Hagopian and Green (2012) assess the ability of unions to withstand neoliberal attacks on teachers’ working conditions as weak given union leaders’ collaborative relationship with management and complacency with both the Democratic Party and Corporate America, they also contend unions hold the possibility of being a springboard to authentic democratic participation in society at large. It is this possibility that anchors my commitment to UFC.

We have only five months until the election, but we believe the membership is ready for change. Jose and Matthew top the UFC slate as our presidential and secretary-treasurer candidates, respectfully. There are 16 vice presidential candidates (just over half of a full slate)—half men and half women, four White and 12 people of color, mostly high school teachers and a couple of attendance counselors. Through TaLiN, I play an organizational support role to the slate. We set a weekly meeting schedule and begin attending school board meetings, public forums, and local protests as a group.

At the same time that we launch UFC, a secret plan for school closures and charter school expansion is leaked to the press. The company that created the plan was hired by Mayor Booker and founded by Acting NJ Education Commissioner Chris Cerf, a White man and graduate of the Broad Academy, a center established by philanthrocapitalist Eli Broad to train superintendents for

large school districts. Cerf denies having anything to do with the plan, insisting his only role was allowing the company to use his home address. This discovery foments an uproar from the community. Attendance at the school board meetings goes up.

To: UFC slate; LZOWens@TaLinNewark.org  
From: Branden  
Date: March 22, 2011  
Subject: (no subject)

Tonight's Advisory Board Meeting:

...

- When [NTU President] Joe D. was speaking, he was cut off at 3 minutes...Jose, however, stood and protested that, by contract, the NTU is allowed 10 minutes at all Advisory Board Meetings. Jose...got the contract from his car, and...went back in and forced [Board President Shavar] Jeffries to read it and allow Joe D. 7 more minutes to speak.

ie: Jose is fighting for the rights of the NTU more than our president, who barely knows the contract or barely cares enough to speak. (fyi - Joe and his supporters left the meeting after that, never to return).

- Later, the Advisory Board, although it was not on their agenda, put forward a motion to...raise the acceptable average NPS class size to 30!!! Again...Jose stood and protested. He criticized them for 2 things: their violation of the sunshine law and Roberts Rules of Order by attempting to bring something to the floor that was not on the agenda and that was not properly agreed to.

And, Jose was SUCCESSFUL in stopping them!!!

...

The NTU election is held in May by mail-in ballot. Del Grosso runs for re-election to the presidency. A third slate runs as well. Both challengers are crushed; Del Grosso gets three times as many votes as Jose and nearly 10 times as many votes as the third slate candidate. Only about a third of the membership votes. At the beginning of June, we host a post-election rally to share the future plans for continuing to build a countermovement within the NTU.

Although the election is lost, it's not a loss to me. We have built a foundation for the movement I had imagined TaLiN to be: a diverse group of teachers fighting collectively for social justice. While we were campaigning, a committee orchestrated by the governor and the mayor was interviewing candidates to be the next state-appointed superintendent. Cami Anderson, a White woman, is hired for the job. She is a transplant from New York City and another Broad Academy graduate.

*Episode #2: Forming a Caucus*

Over the summer, TaLiN and UFC co-host a reading group on teachers and the labor movement. We read four books, including *The Newark Teacher Strikes: Hopes on the Line* (Golin, 2002). We invite Carole Graves, president of the NTU during the strikes, to join us for this session. Carole provides intimate details about the union and its development during her time as president from 1968 to 1995, along with her perspective on these matters as a Black woman. She expresses some distrust in Golin's account, possibly because he includes how her participation in graft led to her end as union president. Branden and I take the lead on organizing another set of sessions on union history for the fall. College students preparing to be teachers and community members attend alongside UFC members.

To: Branden

From: Leah

Date: October 7, 2011

Subject: Re: Meeting space for new NTU caucus

... I was reading over some notes I wrote a couple of years ago in preparation for teaching and I saw things I didn't get then but now I do because of your lecture! ... And then I was talking with one of my students as to why I support unions and I could explain the inherent conflict between workers and owners. I felt worthy of being a doctoral student.

A steering committee is formed to develop a social justice caucus within the NTU. Nine of us deliberate over the name, vision, and mission of the caucus in weekly meetings. The five males are White except Jose, and all four women are of color. Only one is a non-high school teacher. Wanting to distinguish the campaign slate from the caucus, we agree to New Reform Caucus as the name. The inaugural meeting of the caucus is scheduled for December and the call reads, in part: "Consequently, The NEW REFORM CAUCUS will be a working group whose goals will be to bring about greater democracy and transparency within the NTU, while working to strengthen our union's ties to the greater Newark community."

Six more teachers join the steering committee as a result of the meeting—three women and three men, three Black and three White. The group becomes more diverse in not only teaching area and number of years teaching but also in political activism experience. At the January steering committee meeting, concerns about the name of the caucus are discussed. Alan, a White male history teacher, suggests a change to Newark Education Workers (NEW) Caucus in order to show solidarity with the class nature of the majority of Newarkers. All agree—except Jose who resigns from the group citing a lack of political trust and, as a person of color, a longtime inability to work with those who consider themselves part of the White Left.

With the launch of NEW Caucus, TaLiN becomes a duplication in effort to organize teachers, so I suspend it. I want to teach in the district again, but who will hire such a "troublemaker"? I ask Ras Baraka, son of Amiri Baraka and then principal of Central High School. Coincidentally, an English teacher has just resigned. I start teaching at Central in April 2012. A union member again and now an "official" member of NEW Caucus, I'm chosen to be its first chair.

At the meeting that we select me as chair, the discussion includes emphasis on how the chair and vice chair positions will be mostly in name. Decisions will continue to be made



collectively and by consensus. Though I am honored to be selected as chair, I don't feel the most qualified. Participating in our sessions on union history has grown my confidence in my political activism, but the internal racial dynamics of our group Jose pointed out when he left are lost on me. Should I have left too, in solidarity? Is my Black female face being used to bring viability to the caucus? I move forward with the caucus, determined to grow into the position, inspired to be as strong a union leader as Carole Graves.

### *Episode #3: Defending Public Education*

In October 2012, after three years of being out of a contract, the NTU leadership presents the membership a proposed contract. NEW immediately meets to analyze the contract line-by-line. It contains common neoliberal education reforms, including a new pay scale that eliminates higher pay for teachers with advanced degrees, an allowance for how many schools can be closed each year, and merit pay to be funded by the Zuckerberg donation. We type up our analysis and create a cover page that reads: "VOTE NO (Emphatically)." It concludes, in part:

NPS has rushed this contract because they wanted NTU ratification in time to make the deadline for Race to the Top, the very federal law that coerces states with billions of dollars in aid in return for closing schools, removing entire staffs from struggling schools, opening more charter schools, and increasing the use of standardized tests...

This is not a social justice contract that views public education as a sacred duty that the state and local governments owe to all students, parents, and education workers. This is a cut-throat BUSINESS contract that will bring the forces of the market to public education. It turns education into a business which does nothing to directly address students [sic] needs. In fact, many of these provisions will ultimately hurt students.

We spend a couple of weeks promoting the contract critique, and the response to our analysis is favorable. However, Hurricane Sandy causes a postponement. By the time the vote occurs, we have lost momentum. The contract passes.

This loss feels like a loss. Two-thirds of the membership who voted are in favor of the contract. We don't receive a demographics breakdown of the votes and don't conduct a post-analysis. Several post-voting interviews in the media confirm our suspicions that members feel the terms are the best we can get (Mooney, 2012). Still, we view this sense of hopelessness as a desire to have something different, even if members do not know what this difference can be.

In the spring of 2013, NEW organizes a "March for Strong Schools, Strong Communities" with the goals of heightening the awareness of the damage corporate education reform is causing to NPS and promoting a new set of policies for public education that will address the socioeconomic conditions in which students and their families live. We both praise and critique our effort in the monthly newsletter, pointing out how so few education workers joined as we marched past several schools that were slated for closure or co-location with charters. We also run another campaign for election to the NTU leadership and again create a distinct slate, NEW Vision, so as to separate it from the caucus. Branden is the presidential candidate. I serve as the campaign manager as I am not eligible to run; the requirement is NTU membership for two consecutive years. A third member runs for president without a slate. The mail-in ballots are counted at the end of June 2013. The results are gut wrenching. Del Grosso receives 589 votes, Branden receives 580

votes, and the other member 40 votes. We are not able to mobilize many members for protest actions, but members are paying attention to us.

Come October, I am mentally, emotionally, and spiritually drained. I have overcrowded classes. I never get to teach an elective writing course for which I wrote the curriculum because the core English courses need to be staffed first. Furthermore, I agree to teach an extra period within the contractual day but only get paid the hourly wage instead of one-fifth of my salary as per the contract. On my last day at Central, I use a Home Depot cart to move my personal belongings from my classroom to my car as the rest of the faculty engages in a staff development session in the library. Only a year and a half back into teaching, I quit.

I am heartbroken. And I feel like a phony. I cannot figure out how to be both an effective teacher for my students and an organizer for social justice unionism. Defending public education is exhausting. How can I be the critical educator I want to be if I have to exist in the reality of neoliberal education reform while fighting against it?

#### *Episode #4: Becoming an “Official” Organizer*

In March 2014, I start working as a community organizer with New Jersey Communities United (NJCU). NJCU, a nonprofit about two years old, is new to Newark and has a close connection to a Communications Workers of America (CWA) local. NJCU also has developed a partnership with the Newark Students Union (NSU) to assist the students with strategic planning, meeting space, and other needed resources. NSU describe themselves as: “an organization founded by and for Newark students with the goals of protecting student rights, ensuring we receive a quality education, and empowering the student voice in the political process” (NSU, n.d.). One of the co-founders of NSU also works at NJCU part-time as a student organizer.

A coalition of labor and community organizations, the Alliance for Newark Public Schools, has also been created as a counter to the neoliberal education reform experiment being conducted in Newark through the most common tactics—charter school expansion, merit pay for teachers, and public school closures (Kumashiro, 2020). The NTU supplies meeting space in addition to material resources. The Alliance takes up the charge of increasing the number of community schools in Newark and foregrounds the return to local control as the way to achieve this plan. Principal Baraka is elected mayor in May 2014 largely as a result of these same reforms being centered in his education platform.

My work at NJCU focuses upon improving the quality of and access to early childhood education and care by organizing working parents and unionizing childcare center workers. It is an ongoing campaign called Better Beginnings that started with the unionization of in-home childcare providers. I learn that some years ago, CWA and another non-teacher union co-organized the in-home providers in New Jersey. In-home providers in half the counties became CWA members and the other half went to the other union.

At weekly staff meetings, I join with my co-organizers in debriefing the work of our campaigns, which include housing justice, immigration justice, bank worker organizing, and education. Immersed in a world of social justice beyond the education struggle, sociopolitical theories and history of the urban context I learned in graduate study play out in front of me. My first nine months at NJCU are spent base-building for a childcare center workers union. I conduct dozens of one-to-one conversations with childcare workers to assess their interest in forming a union at their worksite.

I continue to be a part of the leadership of NEW Caucus and attempt to apply the strategies and tactics I learn at NJCU to organizing education workers. Though we remain active—speaking at advisory board meetings, participating in protests, and organizing political education sessions—we aren’t building a base, which is imperative because we have plans to run again in the June 2015 NTU election. With the failing health of Del Grosso, it is unlikely he will run for another term; however, two of the union leaders under him are vying for the top spot. We predict there will be three slates again. The ballot count for the NTU election occurs the day after Cami Anderson’s last day as superintendent; the sustained public pressure contributes greatly to her resignation. We lose again, the winner being the candidate who most resembles Del Grosso and his business unionism leadership. Matthew, who had run with us under United For Change, is elected as the secretary-treasurer under this new president. He had left NEW Caucus shortly after the contract vote.

Frustrated with our inability to prioritize organizing conversations with individual NTU members, I conclude this is the reason for our stunted growth. All of the training and networking from being a part of UCORE, the national network of social justice caucuses, has shown us direct organizing of the membership is key (Stark, 2019).

#### *Episode #5: Building a Union*

“I know who you should talk to. Her name is Maria.”

By May 2015, I have 29 union authorization cards signed by workers—primarily women of color from working-class and low-income backgrounds—across 14 childcare centers; however, two workers per center is nowhere near enough to get a union started. I call Maria and explain I am an organizer and received her phone number from one of her colleagues at La Casa. La Casa is located in the North Ward of Newark, where the majority of the population is Latinx. She wants to talk and gives me her address. A Puerto Rican woman in her 60s, Maria has worked at La Casa for more than 20 years, most as a teacher’s aide in preschool classrooms. She is interested in organizing and allows us to use her house for a meeting. Kim (my co-organizer) and I plan for 10 or so workers. Six or seven are already at Maria’s when we arrive. Within half an hour, there are at least 25 workers—the vast majority Latina—filling up Maria’s small dining room, spilling into her kitchen and the hallway. Issues they want to fight for that come out of this and subsequent conversations include increased pay as well as equal pay for the same work, fully funding Pre-K, increased childcare subsidies for parents, and improved quality of learning by providing training for childcare workers.

Kim and I continue to make house calls. The second center at which we gain traction is Unified Vailsburg Services Organization (UVSO). UVSO is located in Newark’s West Ward, one of three predominantly Black wards. A NEW Caucus member connects me with one of the preschool teachers, Pamela, who comes to the NJCU office in August to meet with us. Pamela tells us how she co-organized a previous work site, a local nonprofit agency, some years ago under CWA. Soon after, we hold a meeting with a few of her co-workers—three other Black women—at a local IHOP. We bring together the organizing committees of both La Casa and UVSO and they motivate each other.

We strategize to get 80% of workers at each center to sign authorization cards. La Casa reaches the goal first. Mid-December, a delegation of workers hand delivers the cards and the petition for a union vote to the executive director. The group emerges from the door triumphant and we all cheer. The picture we take is full of beaming faces and fists thrust high. A month later, a union election is held and a majority of the workers vote “yes.” In March 2016, UVSO also files

for a union election and a majority of the workers vote for a union. Another win occurs in April when I am elected to the Newark school advisory board as a result of running on a slate supported by Mayor Baraka (Owens, 2020).

As we get the center workers geared up for bargaining, I shift focus to organizing working parents so that we can have representation from both groups inside the Better Beginnings campaign. We create a “Declaration of Rights by Working Parents” which is prefaced in part:

As working parents, we value the support systems and safety nets meant to provide for our communities. In the past, we could rely on our neighborhood public schools to be community centers where wrap-around services provided before school and after school programs to accommodate the often chaotic work schedules of working parents...Unfortunately, budget cuts to education and other social services have put us back at a disadvantage, while the expansion of charter schools have also drained the public schools budget.

Now a successful organizer, I authentically wed theory with practice. In building a union from the ground up, I realize how I take NTU for granted. In conducting all of those organizing conversations, I realize the need for union protection of all workers. I realize, as I write in my notebook at one NJCU staff meeting: “democracy = control over the resources in our neighborhoods.” Education is a resource and so is childcare. I refocus on my doctoral studies, empowered by my changed embeddedness as a result of intra-action between political and educational theory and organizing practices.

### **Thinking with Theory: Social Justice Unionism and Democracy**

A thinking with theory approach to analysis asks “what?” and “how?”, as opposed to “why?” questions. As Jackson and Mazzei (2017) explain, “We use theory...to open up previously *unthought* approaches to thinking about what is happening in our research sites and encounters” (p. 720, emphasis in original). I invite you to think with me about my re-constitution into a teacher leader committed to social justice unionism by plugging select critical social theories into assemblages with the above episodes to see what possibilities are illuminated.

#### *Critical Democratic Theory*

Contemporary political scholars theorize an inclusive, participatory democracy (Mirra & Morrell, 2011; Oakes & Rogers, 2006). Mirra and Morrell (2011) contrast “neoliberal democracy” which advances individualism, consumerism, and political passivity with the collectivism, production, and activism of “critical democracy.” They argue for a “shift from criticizing the presumed deficits of individual schools and specific racial groups to analyzing the problematic assumptions in curriculum, pedagogy, and policy that structure success and failure” (Mirra & Morrell, 2011, p. 411). A co-reading of critical democratic theory with the episodes asks: *How does employing elements of critical democracy foster my re-constitution?*

The elements of critical democracy act as interventions that alter my positionality. I shifted from being an embodiment of a lack of critical consciousness to being an active citizen. Each time I experienced how knowledge production, collectivism, and activism could contribute to shifts in power relations in favor of those who have been disenfranchised, I became more deeply embedded in a stance for critical democratic public education.

The UFC slate attended the school advisory board meeting as an activist group and accomplished more speaking time for the NTU president as well as a halt to a vote that would have allowed class sizes to reach 30 or more students. NEW Caucus's contract analysis produced knowledge through a critical analysis of the neoliberal-inspired contract put in front of us by the union leadership. Though the rank-and-file still voted for the contract, nearly winning the union election the following spring demonstrated the impact of our social justice unionism leadership. Organizing with other education workers contributed to my re-constitution.

However, portraying the "struggle" as collective in nature can sometimes leave localized concerns unaddressed, inadvertently perpetuating the myth of teachers' work as isolated acts. I never spoke about my classroom struggles at Central to the caucus because I made at least two assumptions: that none of the others are struggling with their teaching and that there is no space within NEW to address "individual" problems. Having such an intent focus on class and structural analyses, we didn't see the trees for the forest.

I wonder what oppressive systems might have been informing my thinking. Gude (2014) describes neoliberal working conditions for teachers as "the industrial classroom" (p. 21), one driven by lean production private sector practices of "increased workloads for decreased pay" (Johnson, 2014, p. 12). In the third episode, I faulted myself for not being able to keep up with the workload or produce academic gains for my students within these working conditions, and subsequently quit teaching at Central. Later, when I learned details about the working conditions of the childcare center workers, the idea that structural forces can have an impact at the classroom level is reinscribed. This uncovered a tension existing between my leadership in the caucus and my continued internalization of TFA ideology that mythologizes the teacher as the most important factor in public education. Taking a critical democratic disposition provides a lens to see how continuing to hold neoliberal values played a role in my abandonment of teaching as a social justice project.

Conducting one-to-one organizing conversations with childcare center workers served as an intervention to neoliberal democracy. The collectivist approach the Better Beginnings campaign took was to organize around the material working conditions of the childcare workers as well as the needs of working parents. Leading for social justice unionism now means to me taking the issues of the individual and raising them to the collective level.

### *Critical Race Theory*

Critical race theory (CRT) is built on several propositions, including: (1) racism is embedded in American society, (2) the use of storytelling adds necessary contextual contours, (3) the liberal approach to changing society must be challenged, and (4) civil rights legislation actually benefits Whites more than any other racial group (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Rosiek, 2016). For Ladson-Billings (1998), CRT "speak[s] to innovative theoretical ways for framing discussions about social justice and democracy and the role of education in reproducing or interrupting current practices" (p. 9). A co-reading of critical race theory with the episodes asks: *How does racism inform my re-constitution?*

Re-examining the resignations of certain caucus members illuminates the organizing power of racism (Rosiek, 2016). Jose's resignation letter prompted the caucus to call a meeting to discuss our internal functioning. I shared that the group had been functioning as though our vision for a critical democratic society was our reality, particularly when it came to the point about combating oppression; however, I had no solution to offer, just the observation. Another concern brought up

was that although we had agreed to use consensus to make decisions, most of the women of color in the group complained about not being listened to. I wonder how equity can be safeguarded, particularly for women and people of color, and how women of color, specifically, come into leadership positions if the idea of leadership is male- and White-oriented.

When individuals with different standpoints come together for a common interest, space for interest convergence is created, which tends to allow those who represent the dominant ideology to reap the most benefits (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Matthew showed this to be the case when he ran with the incumbent slate, using his NEW membership as evidence of his social justice orientation, and was elected to the NTU secretary-treasurer position. He did not submit an official resignation to the caucus, and it was not clear exactly when he became joined to the union leadership. I question how I could have trusted him (and at one point even defended him against Jose!).

A critical race analysis moves me out of the space of individual ego to the structures of White privilege and supremacy. One night at dinner, Jose told me stories from his political activist history of attempts at co-optation by White liberals. His stories became necessary contextual contours for me, offering insights our study groups did not provide. Where other social justice educator caucuses have been able to struggle with and through internal racism (Asselin, 2019), NEW Caucus failed to address racial inequalities in a way that might lead to systemic change. Our practices were not in alignment with our theory. What I thought I knew about racism was not enough to interrupt it, let alone dismantle it. Being a leader for social justice unionism means putting into action explicit anti-oppressive social practices.

### *Black Feminist Thought*

“Is that Leah?” I peer across the street and make out the woman sitting on a wall. “Ms. Graves?” I’m canvassing for my school board re-election campaign. We talk for a few minutes. I explain how I am not on the slate supported by the mayor this time but am part of a team that is running a grassroots campaign. She shares insights about Newark politics, sometimes shaking the campaign literature to emphasize a point. I listen intently, knowing her wisdom from lived experiences is part of the collective social thought I seek from other Black women (Collins, 2000). A co-reading of the episodes with Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000) asks: *How does centering Black women’s group standpoint have an impact on my re-constitution?*

It made a difference that Carole Graves, a Black woman, led the NTU during the strikes in the 70s; and it wasn’t just in face because as she told us at the study session, “My parents were socialists, so I understood who I was.” It made a difference because this told me I, too, could be a leader. In 2010, Karen Lewis, a Black woman, was elected president of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). She headed a slate of candidates that came from CORE, the social justice caucus within the CTU (Uetricht, 2014). Lewis, like Graves, is not an anomaly but part of a legacy of Black female educators who led unions and their communities (Johnson, 2004). Coupling gender with race, I come to understand who I am because I locate myself in an empowering tradition of leadership. The expressions of doubt I felt because I was not White, male, or a history teacher fade. Working with the childcare center workers had a similar impact. The fifth episode explained how the union organizing committees at both La Casa and UVSO are 100% women of color. Any question of our capability to lead as women of color was eliminated, and if others attempted to co-opt our leadership legacy, I was better poised to protect it.

## Research and Practice Implications for Social Justice Unionism and Social Justice Caucuses

This autoethnographic inquiry adds to the body of literature in teacher unionism that theorizes how teachers envision and then attempt to enact a just, antiracist, democratic reality of public education while also revitalizing their unions (Weiner, 2012). As both workers and scholars, rank and file teachers are studying and writing about their activist experiences (Jacobin & CORE Caucus, 2014; Charney et al., 2021) in addition to conducting systematic research about social justice unionism (Asselin, 2019; Maton, 2016; Stark, 2019). Continued research into the internal social dynamics of as well as individual members' experiences in these caucuses and unions will contribute to our understanding of how to eradicate racism, sexism, and other oppressive systems.

Social justice unionism, like democracy and anti-racism, is a project, an ideal that we strive toward. We will find people drawn to it who locate themselves in different places on the political spectrum, who have different personal and political goals, and who have varying kinds and amounts of political activism experience. Such a high level of variation is bound to produce conflict. In connecting research and practice, caucuses and unions should join with activist-scholars who can function as critical friends that provide a broader perspective of the work as well as effective practices utilized by other workers (Weiner, 2015).

Taking into account place and people is vital when building toward and enacting social justice unionism. In urban contexts, like Newark, the working class and student population is constituted predominantly by people of color, but the majority of K-12 teachers still are White. Caucuses and unions should take care to organize and center the leadership of people of color so the complexities of their lived realities can inform the work in practical ways. This refers to actual members but also their histories and epistemologies; political education and study groups will be more effective when diverse voices are brought in to (de)construct narratives of political economy and union history.

Last, political education and analysis and union democracy are important aspects of social justice unionism. However, it is imperative that caucuses and unions with social justice aims are actively base-building and organizing campaigns with concrete demands if they are to transform the material living conditions of oppressed people as well as the quality of learning for students.

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