

**SUCCESS & FAILURE IN COVID-19  
ORGANIZING: LESSONS LEARNED FROM  
GRADUATE WORKERS ON STRIKE**

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National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining  
in Higher Education and the Professions

## Site & Participants

- In the midst of a spike in labor stoppages among graduate student unions, I decided to conduct a study of one such strike
  - Herbert and Apkarian (2019) identify seven graduate student union strikes between 2012-2018. By the end of 2021 there were ten more work stoppages by graduate student unions, eight of which occurred at least partially during the COVID-19 pandemic (US BLS, 2021a, 2021b; ILR, n.d.)
- I focused on a graduate student union (“**the union**”) at a university (“**the university**”) and distributed recruitment materials through union comms officers
- Participation was open to any union member who participated in the strike
  - One participant, Dom, was a dues-paying non-member actively involved in the strike, but all others were active members at the time of the stoppage
- UNH IRB approval #: Legacy-UNH-8463

## Methods and Questions

I recruited and interviewed 8 participants using an in-depth interview protocol modeled on Seidman's (2013, 2017) three-session phenomenological method:

- **First Session:** I asked participants to explain any previous knowledge or experience with labor organizing or labor organizations more generally.
- **Second Session:** I asked participants to reconstruct “a typical day’s experience” from the strike.
- **Third Session:** I asked participants to reflect on their sense of dignity and to consider how their strike experiences reinforced or challenged that sense.

## Inductive Questions Arise (A Caveat)

The study began as a kind of follow-up study to my dissertation, which centered the question of worker dignity among a small cohort of adjunct faculty at a Catholic Church-affiliated university, but it became clear to me very early on that a deductive approach was insufficient to capture issues of most importance to the participants.

One of the persistent themes across all interviews was the sense of frustration that strike demands were not met. Inquiring into why participants thought so, I came to understand the failure in terms of missed opportunities for internal and broader coalition-building.

**For that reason, this presentation focuses on the question of why the strike failed.**

# The Union's Strike Demands in Context

Survey of demands across COVID-19-era strikes by graduate student unions:

- cost of living adjustments to stipend payments
- affordable housing
- improved grievance procedures for sexual harassment & discrimination claims
- increased health care coverage & eligibility
- mandatory fee waivers
- flexibility for remote working
- increased COVID-19 testing
- campus policing reforms

## Success...

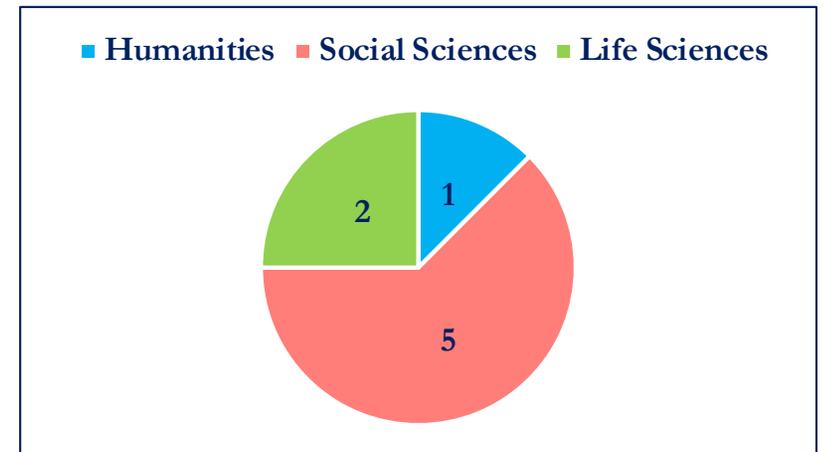
- Participation of 1,000+ in general membership meetings
- Support of other groups on campus, including solidarity strikes by undergraduate workers
- Initial support of unions in other industries signaled solidarity
- Camaraderie and joy on picket line

## ...and Failure

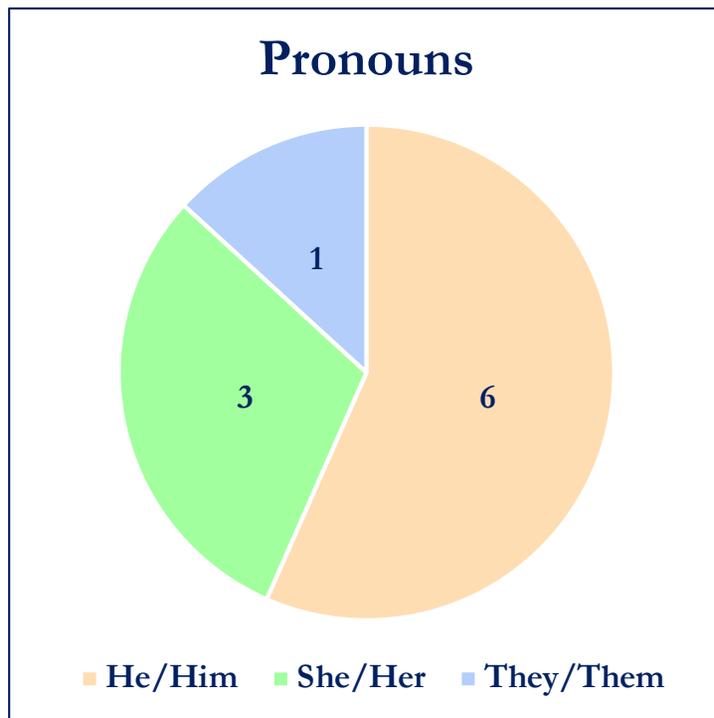
- Demands were unmet at conclusion
- Legal threat under no-strike law
- National issues failed to mobilize lasting support outside the union
- Some tactics led to negative press and diminished community support

# Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Character
ASH	<i>Seasoned Labor Organizer</i>
CAL	<i>Pragmatic Radical</i>
DOM	<i>Friend in the Struggle</i>
GUS	<i>Bomb Thrower</i>
KAY	<i>Sustainability Activist</i>
LON	<i>Proponent of the Attainable Good</i>
MEL	<i>Friendly Neighborhood Antifa</i>
SEB	<i>Cautious Stalwart</i>



## Interview Participants (cont'd)



- One participant identified as a person of color
- One participant identified as an international student
- One participant identified as gay
- One participant identified as trans
- Two participants were married (not to each other)
- Four participants had some official role in the union
- Five participants had community organizing experience

## In Their Own Words: SEB

I see [the strike] in terms of that type of “good trouble” that John Lewis had referred to, in that it’s resistance but it has meaning behind it. [...] I only truly felt [tension] when I was getting nervous about the legality and the consequences of the strike. But overall I just felt like, per the strike, it was an important thing to do and I didn’t really care about what the upper administration’s perspective was about it. I just felt like it was ethical because the COVID precautions that they had taken were insufficient and the police demilitarization was and is an important topic that they were just ignoring.

## In Their Own Words: CAL

The thing that frustrates me the most about the union [...] is that oftentimes ideology is thrust forward by itself. Like, when it comes to making a decision, ideology is the vanguard, it is the wedge, rather than strategy.

[I used to think] that you won followers and support because you could articulate a clear point of view, a coherent point of view, and you did not waver from it, like: “I know what’s right and I know why it’s right, and I’m just gonna tell you.”  
And that just doesn’t work in community organizing.

## In Their Own Words: KAY

Getting people engaged [...] was hard, and then also getting the community you are trying to serve to be engaged and show up was also difficult.

And the relations with everyone were incredibly important, just building that base and fueling the work itself, and having the little rallies afterward, after the day was done with all the picketing. I mean, that was the first time after being in lockdown for so long that I'd been around a group of people. [...] This was really critical, both for what we were fighting for but also I think just for everyone's spirit and mental health going into another year of unknowns.

## In Their Own Words: ASH

There was a lot of internal conflict between COVID caucus, union staff, and some members. [...] I was like, “Oh shit, there’s some ideological and political battles being fought.”

We weren’t organizing in a vacuum – we were organizing in this town and in this region. [...] Once it became clear that the policing demands were part of the strike, that’s when support started to disappear more, but at first people in town were supporting us which I think galvanized us. Because the sense was, “Oh my gosh, if we do this while the community has our back...”

## In Their Own Words: DOM

There were several actions that we did, in terms of the strike, that sort of tested our relationships because maybe they weren't the most strategic or most smart. There was one time where we went to a dean's house and had an action there and a lot of faculty were upset by that. So, obviously, I feel like the perception was that we weren't treating other people with dignity because of the tactics that we were using. And so that put a lot of strain on us internally, and caused maybe some infighting that resulted in a lost of respect of some members. By the time the strike ended it was pretty evident that people were upset with each other.

## In Their Own Words: GUS

Because the union is really decentralized, right, there were just different priorities among people who were organizing. It's not like organizers versus members, right, or like this committee versus that committee, but even within each committee there's just like diversity of priorities.

I always refused to take an official title, partly because I wanted to – look, the people with titles are also the people who get the most internal strife, they're the people who are called upon to fall on their swords, or the people who are blamed for things they didn't do. And I was just like, I knew enough to know that I didn't want a title.

## In Their Own Words: MEL

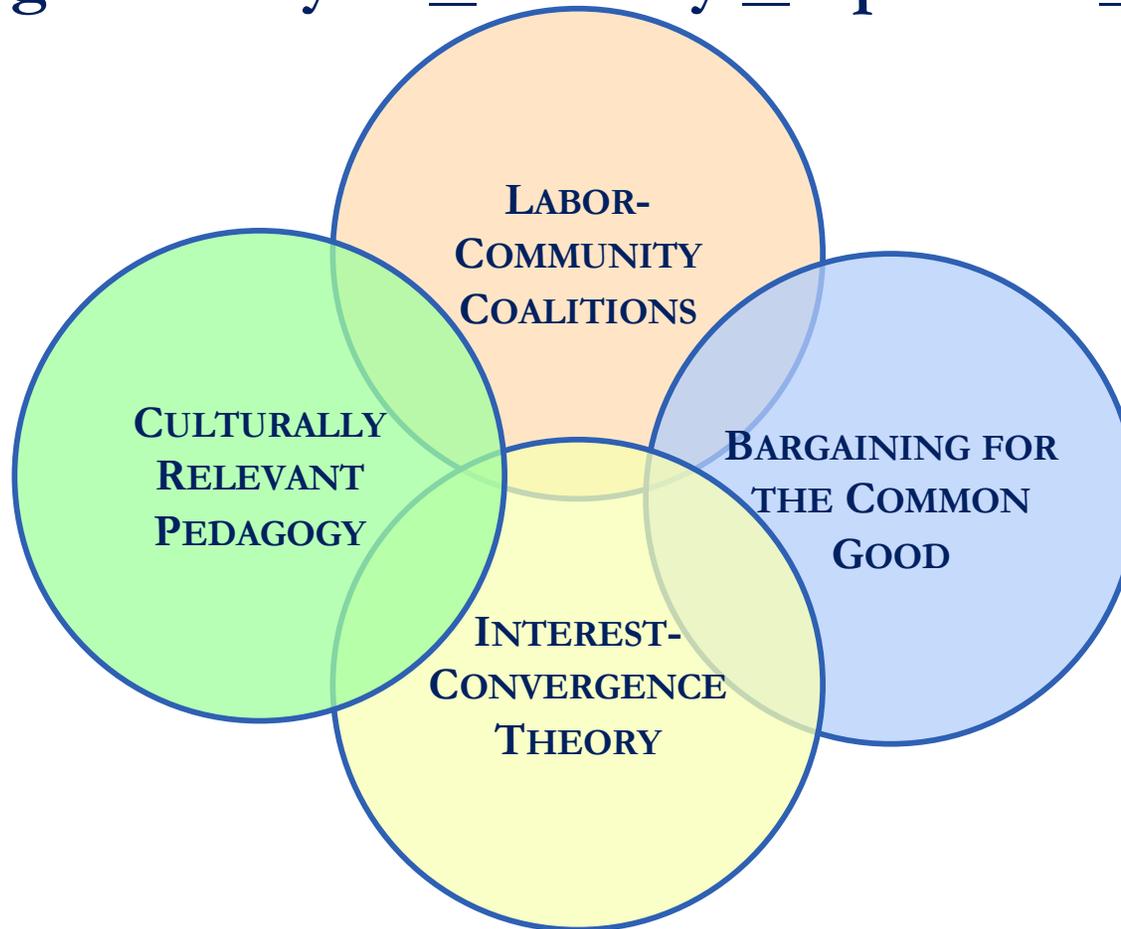
There are a lot of really smart people with great political ideas about organizing and building community and breaking down boundaries, and I think they get a little bit stuck in this bubble, thinking that everyone in their union is like them or believes what they believe, and they just move forward with that without checking. [...] [Our union] is a different kind of union than these unions that're doing bargaining for the common good.

[A member of the COVID caucus] had never done anything for [the union] before, and a lot of people were asking me [...] what is the deal with this guy? Like why is he being so aggressive and treating staff so poorly and treating other union leadership so poorly? And I was like, "I honestly have no idea, I always really liked him." [...] I was frustrated because every time I got near this it felt like the kind of hypertoxic organizing spaces that I had distanced myself from in the past. It's just like full burnout recipe.

## In Their Own Words: LON

One strain running through this entire episode is that this union did an exceptional job for a union that is composed of maybe a-little-bit-too-educated people with maybe not quite that much labor experience. And it did a good job for what it is, but there were also a certain number of unforced errors that the union – kind of all arise from the original sin of any graduate student union, which is just kind of factionalism and infighting because everyone is explicitly connecting the struggle that they're engaged in to these like grand ideological visions and priors that they hold. So in some people's minds they're fighting for the Marxist utopia and in other people's minds they're fighting to get a 25¢-and-hour raise. Those two people are never really going to be able to agree on tactics because they're motivated by such different visions of what the battle is.

# Constructing a Theory of Culturally Responsive Organizing



## Key Elements of CRO

Borrowed from literature on *Labor-Community Coalitions*:

Common-cause coalitions “[are] characterized by an attempt to identify separate but associated interests behind which a coalition can form. The union enters the coalition to advance its distinctive interests, while its nonlabor partners do the same”

- Frege, Heery, & Lowell, 2003, p. 125

“Common-cause coalitions exist when two or more organizations with separate but associated interests coalesce around goals that will help achieve both sets of associated interests.”

- Nissen, 2004, p. 72

## Key Elements of CRO [cont'd]

Borrowed from literature on *Bargaining for the Common Good*:

“Rather than *coalitions* in which unions recruit community allies to support their pre-formulated demands in a transactional relationship that usually dissolves at the end of a campaign, these allies seek something different. They try to build enduring *alignments* that accumulate lasting power over time through campaign victories, a shared and increasingly fleshed out infrastructure, and a common vision and narrative.”

- McCartin, 2016, p. 133

“While the collective bargaining that emerged in twentieth-century America was generally binary and involved only employers and unions, BCG advocates attempted to broaden participation to give the community or other stakeholders a place at the bargaining table.”

-McCartin, Sneiderman, BP-Weeks, 2020, p. 103

## Key Elements of CRO [cont'd]

Borrowed from literature on *Interest-Convergence Theory*:

“The interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites.”

- Bell, 1980, p. 523

## Key Elements of CRO [cont'd]

Borrowed from literature on *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*:

“[E]ducators traditionally have attempted to insert culture into the education, instead of inserting education into the culture.”

- Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 159

“Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions:

- (a) Students must experience academic success;
- (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and
- (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order.”

- Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160

## Culturally Responsive Organizing, Normatively Speaking

Unions should:

- Build lasting relationships with community stakeholders through issues alignment
- Seek improvements in broader community through the collective bargaining process
- Comprehend such alignment in terms of converging interests of the union and other community stakeholders
- Draw out community stakeholder needs rather than super-imposing union priorities

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