

**Building the Service Employees International Union:
Janitors and Chicago Politics, 1911-1968**

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THESIS

Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Chicago, 2016

Chicago, Illinois

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To Grandpa Don, who believed that I could win any fight.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would not have completed this dissertation without the advice, support, and love of an entire community of people. During my time as a graduate student at University of Illinois at Chicago, I found a vigorous community of colleagues and friends who supported my intellectual and personal growth in numerous ways. In particular fellow graduate students Tom Alter, Dan Brunsvold, Cory Davis, Tom Dorrance, and Anne Parsons all provided me with feedback that significantly shaped my understandings of political economy and history. Thanks for traveling this road with me.

Although I owe a debt of gratitude to the entire UIC History Department, two of its members deserve special thanks. Between the classes I took with him, his work on my dissertation committee, and the years I spent working with him on the journal *Labor*, Leon Fink significantly influenced every word of this dissertation. His support and insightful comments helped me to become a better scholar in countless ways. Robert Johnston, my adviser, shaped my entire time in graduate school—and indeed much of my adult life. Willing to devote hours to discussion and minute evaluation of my work, Robert challenged, inspired, and motivated me on a daily basis. Without his legendary patience and faultless kindness, I truly doubt that I would have completed this work. I can say without exaggeration that it has been a singular honor to work with Robert over these past few years. Thanks so much to both of you, and to the entire fantastic department.

A wide variety of other scholars have provided significant help during the process of this dissertation and deserve thanks. Eileen Boris, Andrew Cohen, and Jeffery Sklansky all served on my defense committee and showed me a great deal of patience, and helped me to shape and sharpen my ideas. Joseph Slater, Jennifer Klein, and Rachel Sherman all gave influential feedback on conference papers that helped me to develop several of my ideas.

Several of my friends and colleagues deserve thanks for helping me through this process. Everyone at Willamette University—but particularly Seth Cotlar, Bill Smaldone, David Gutterman, Ellen Eisenberg, and Melissa Buis-Michaux—provided me with all the guidance and support that a junior faculty member could ask for. I owe them, and Willamette University, a tremendous debt of gratitude. During the long process of dissertation writing my friends also provided me with greater support, encouragement, and patience than I had any right to expect. In particular, thanks to Caity Roberts and Nic Bodiford who have stood by me in good times and bad.

My greatest thanks goes to my family. Betsy Strobel, my partner and companion, sat beside me hour after hour as I wrote and revised. Without her kind words—and sharp skills as an editor—I could not have pushed through the difficult days and eventually produced the dissertation you hold in your hands. I cannot express what an honor it is for me to have her in my life. Larry and Linda Peterson, my parents, played an integral role in every phase of this dissertation. I have professionally written few words that they did not read before anyone else. I cannot count, cannot even imagine or estimate how many hours they have spent working on my writing, nor can I express how much their help, support, and love has meant to me. Whatever I achieve, whatever good I am, is because of them.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFL	American Federation of Labor
ALP	American Labor Party
BSEIU	Building Service Employees International Union
CBE	Chicago Board of Education
CFL	Chicago Federation of Labor
CHA	Chicago Housing Authority
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CREB	Chicago Real Estate Board
DPW	Department of Public Works
EA	Employers Association
FDR	Franklin Delano Roosevelt
FHA	Federal Housing Administration
GOP	Grand Old Party
HERE	Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees
ILGWU	International Ladies' Garment Worker's Union
NAAC	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NLRB	National Labor Relations Board
RAB	Realty Advisory Board
SEIU	Service Employees International Union
TWU	Transit Workers Union
WLB	War Labor Board

SUMMARY

Although some describe the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) as the future of the American labor movement, historians have devoted a surprisingly small amount of attention to its origins as a union of flat janitors in Chicago. Investigating these roots reveals a fascinating story of a labor union that achieved superb conditions and protections for unskilled workers. Beginning in 1912 the SEIU of Chicago—then called the Building Service Employees International Union (BSEIU)—established a dense network of political, community, and business alliances. The union transformed these associations into leverage that they used to gain concessions from both public and private employers. The early BSEIU thus prefigured many of the tactics often associated with the modern SEIU, such as a high emphasis on political power and a willingness to collaborate with employers on mutual interests.

In 1927, the BSEIU of Chicago successfully expanded into the public sector. Through their alliance with Mayor William Hale Thompson, the union gained official support for unionization among the city's school janitors. The support of the mayor allowed the union to manipulate the Chicago Board of Education into paying school janitors higher wages, and ending the practice of child labor in Chicago's schools. Effectively a political payoff, the organization of school janitors set a precedent for a particular form of labor organization that focuses on the use of corrupt political actors as a means of improving the working conditions of both public and private sector workers.

By the 1930s, organization had radically transformed the world of Chicago's janitors, providing them with wages and conditions equivalent to those of skilled craft workers. In response to public criticisms of the increased position of these workers, union leaders sought to portray their members

as public servants. Such a justification became internalized by many of the union's members, who began to speak of themselves as professional “saniticians” instead of as janitors. Although the BSEIU of Chicago operated with little attention to democratic norms, and with little direct participation of its members, membership in the union reshaped the identities of generations of workers. The unique combination in Chicago of top-down administration, politicized bargaining, community alliances, and the rhetoric of public service cannot be described through the normal terminology of labor history, but might be described as civic unionism.

From its roots in Chicago, the BSEIU spread across the country—most prominently to New York and San Francisco. In New York an amazingly successful social movement amongst the city's elevator operators and janitors led to the creation of a labor organization that radically differed from their Chicago kin. Focused on democracy, militancy, and participation, leaders in New York established a unique hybrid of craft and industrial unionism that stood in direct contrast to the civic unionism of Chicago.

Ironically, the New York locals provided a vector through which the notorious mob fixer George Scalise could infiltrate the organization. Eventually becoming president of the union, Scalise established an empire of graft that encompassed most of the organization. In 1940, after the reporter Westbrook Pegler revealed Scalise's perfidy, an investigation by prosecutor and presidential candidate Thomas Dewey nearly destroyed the organization. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, however, a rising leader in the BSEIU, William McFetridge, succeeded in associating the BSEIU with the nascent war effort. Through his involvement in wartime salvage and propaganda operations, McFetridge not only restored the reputation of the union but also managed to integrate himself into the emerging Democratic machine in Chicago. Although this proved to be a significant success, McFetridge's efforts to clean and reform the union often focused more on consolidating his own power, resulting in little real reform and a further decrease of meaningful member participation

in the organization.

After the war, the BSEIU and McFetridge found themselves ideally positioned to become significant players in the complicated, and always corrupt, world of Chicago politics. Instrumental to the rise of Mayor Richard J. Daley, McFetridge viewed the union as effectively integrated into the organic structure of the city government. Merging his roles as a labor leader, political fixer, and real-estate developer, McFetridge combined the powers of labor and capital to advance the causes of his union—and his mayor. In the 1960s, this approach reached its fruition with the union's financing of the Marina City complex. A massive real-estate development, Marina City not only advanced Daley's grandiose plans for downtown Chicago, it also helped to promote employment for janitors.

Facing a changing labor market due to suburbanization, the union sought to use its extensive financial resources to effectively transform patterns of residency to better suit their needs. The ability to pursue such grandiose goals came at a grave cost to the organization. Through their political alliances, McFetridge and his union became staunch defenders of Chicago's status quo. During the 1960s this meant that many in the union stood in the way of positive reforms and changes. In particular, the BSEIU fought against reformers in the Chicago Housing Authority who sought to decrease housing segregation—a goal union leaders nominally supported—while ending graft, something that the union could not allow.

When leadership of the BSEIU passed to the New York based leader David Sullivan, the national organization began to more aggressively support the civil rights movement and municipal reform. As they prioritized these causes over the networks of power that maintained the BSEIU in Chicago, conflict between the local and national organizations became inevitable. Until McFetridge's death in 1969, the union remained fixated on a humiliating internal war that damaged the entire organization.

The history of the BSEIU in Chicago provides an interesting case study of an organization that achieved laudable goals through often questionable tactics. For a time this approach proved highly

successful. However, with time, the compromises of the union's ethics and its many deviations from the ideals of the labor movement resulted in a significant crisis. In addition the union's power affected the political and social history of Chicago in ambiguous ways, both stretching the power of craft unions through the 1960s and impeding efforts to reform the city. The ambiguity of these outcomes provides insights into the larger challenges, and potential strengths, of highly politicized approaches to labor organizing.

I

INTRODUCTION

“I’ve got this thing and it’s fucking golden.” If nothing else, historians will forever remember Rod Blagojevitch, the bouffant-ed former governor of Illinois, for these words. In 2008, the American public was shocked by the revelation that “this thing” was President-Elect Barack Obama’s vacant seat in the Senate—a seat that Governor Blagojevitch attempted to sell to the highest bidder. Sending out feelers to political fixers throughout Illinois and Washington, D.C., Blagojevitch spread the word that he would give the president’s empty seat to whoever offered him the most for it.

Though the press thoroughly dissected and explored the sordid tale of Blagojevitch’s corruption, most reporters overlooked one crucial element. Arguably, the most important potential bidder in Blagojevitch’s covert auction was newly elected president Barack Obama. After all, Obama stood to gain the most—or lose the most—from Blagojevitch’s decision. For Obama, a good appointment would gain him an ally in a tightly divided Senate, but a bad appointment could endanger his early presidency. Riding a wave of post-election popularity, Obama could potentially offer quite a bit to the governor. Blagojevitch could have communicated his intentions to Obama through a lobbyist, a lawyer, or an elected official, but instead, he allegedly chose the President of Chicago’s SEIU Local 1, Tom Balanoff. Although little came of the attempt, Blagojevitch’s decision to convey his offer through the head of a union of janitors deserves note. How could a man who devoted his life to organizing workers become the central conduit between the corrupt Governor of Illinois and the President of the United States?

When Blagojevitch turned to Balanoff, he walked in the footsteps of countless other Illinois politicians.¹ Since its establishment as the Flat Janitors Union in 1913, most presidents of Local 1

¹ See Elizabeth Bracket, *Pay to Play: How Rod Blagojevitch Turned Political Corruption Into a National Sideshow* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009) and, for a more up-to-date discussion, Jeff Coen & John Chase, *Golden: How Rod*

traditionally held significant political influence. The Flat Janitors Union, which later founded the Building Service Employees International Union (BSEIU), began as a craft union devoted to gaining respect for workers in the city's apartment buildings. Using a combination of traditional union tactics, innovative political action, and less than savory alliances, the flat janitors became among the most influential unions in Chicago. Transforming political influence into workplace power, they not only improved the wages of flat janitors but helped janitors to express their value to society.

From its inception, the BSEIU used political power as labor organization by other means. Representing workers without much economic leverage over employers, the union's leaders preferred the use of political power and cross-craft solidarity to strikes and pickets. Although modern unions are legally required to distinguish between organizational and political activities, such distinctions would have seemed nonsensical to the leaders of the early BSEIU—political activity served as a means of organization and vice versa. During the height of its power in the 1950s and 60s, the BSEIU in Chicago enforced its will through a dense and powerful network of agents and allies. Wielding their influence as a weapon, the leaders of the BSEIU used politicians and even the police to significantly improve the lives of thousands of workers.

Like any toolkit of labor tactics, the approach of the BSEIU in Chicago had both virtues and faults. Janitors effectively replaced economic leverage with politics and influence resulting in over fifty years of consistent and often remarkable improvements in their wages and conditions. In addition to material gains, the union provided janitors with a powerful say in city government, eventually becoming one of the most important political agents in the city. To a certain extent, the

Blagojevich Talked Himself out of the Governor's Office and Into Prison (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2012). That Balanoff is the SEIU official whom Blagojevich communicated with has never been conclusively confirmed, but Bracket, Cohen, and Chase all write with confidence that he was the conduit.

union even helped janitors in Chicago to find substantial existential meaning in their thankless labor. However, the BSEIU in Chicago also suffered from a dark side. Corruption, authoritarianism, and conservatism tainted much of the union's legacy. Though many craft unions suffered from bouts of corruption, few suffered so acutely as the BSEIU. Indeed, graft served as a tactic for the union. Through patronage, influence, and electioneering the union served as an active, seemingly even proud agent of political corruption. From the violent days of Mayor Thompson and Al Capone to the blatant corruption of Mayor Richard J. Daley, the union not only failed to promote good governance, it actively used corruption to gain strength.

The leaders of the BSEIU often preferred the smoky back rooms of City Hall to the public space of union halls. Leaders like William Quesse and William McFetridge genuinely fought to benefit their members, but they also showed little patience for internal democracy or grassroots activism. Factionalism, cults of personality, and personal grudges often divided and damaged the union's locals. At its worst moments, leaders even enlisted small armies of bodyguards to prevent inter-factional violence. Unfortunately, these faults rarely resulted in concerted challenges to the leadership. The iron fist of the union's hierarchy maintained virtually unquestioned power over the union and the livelihoods of its members. The strong sense of hierarchy, in turn, contributed to rigidity and conservatism in the union's activities, ensuring a struggle with the technical, demographic, and social changes of the 1970s. Despite all of these weaknesses, these leaders became sufficiently powerful that commentators regularly listed them as among the most influential political figures in Illinois.

A few decades ago, labor historians might have found a craft union possessing such political savvy in the twentieth century surprising. Fixating on the failures of the AFL to develop into an

independent political party, early labor historians such as John Commons and Philip Taft constructed a consensus narrative in which the failure of the Knights of Labor effectively drained the political ambitions of craft unions. In this narrative, Samuel Gompers not only demolished the political ambitions of the labor movement, he succeeded at severely narrowing the goals of unionists throughout the country. Without a broad political agenda or belief in an alternative to corporate capitalism, most labor unionists abandoned the field to business groups and sought to protect only their own economic interests. Consequently, broader understandings of the place, and potential power, of the labor movement in society moved to the periphery with only socialists and anarchists continuing to actively struggle to redefine the basic terms of capitalism.²

Though this consensus turned many labor historians away from the exploration of twentieth century craft workers, study of craft workers in the nineteenth century remained vibrant. Indeed, several innovative historians during the early 1980s documented the political ambitions of workers prior to the decline of the Knights of Labor. Sean Wilentz's 1984 *Chants Democratic* provided a superb account of the highly political world of craft workers in Jacksonian New York City. Developing a shared sense of class identity, these workers used political means to pursue a vision of a moral political economy inspired and defined by the dominant political ideology of republicanism.³ Leon Fink's 1983 *Workingmen's Democracy* similarly painted a vivid portrait of the political ambitions that such workers expressed, sometimes successfully, through the Knights of Labor.⁴

2 See Julie Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics: The American Federation of Labor and Political Activism, 1881-1917* (New York: Cambridge, 1999), 4-8, for a far more extensive discussion of the early historiography of craft worker politics.

3 Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

4 Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983).

Beginning in the late-1980s labor historians extended these insights into the early twentieth century, first complicating and then demolishing the Commons-Taft understanding of craft worker's politics. In 1989 Michael Kazin published the book that, arguably, initiated this trend. A study of craft workers in San Francisco, *Barons of Labor* reveals an entire world of political unionists who, while not always agreeing with each other, deftly used politics to further their goals and strengthen their organizations. As Kazin writes, "In politics, workers showed absolutely no deference to the governing elite... As one of the best organized factions in the state's premier city, union members were assiduously courted by politicians from all parties."⁵ Elizabeth McKillen's 1995 *Chicago Labor and the Quest for Democratic Diplomacy* further expanded this insight by revealing the ability of workers in Chicago to not only play local politics, but also to play influential roles in international relations.⁶

The assault on the anti-political reputation of craft unions reached its culmination in Julie Greene's 1998 *Pure and Simple Politics*. Taking direct aim at the Commons-Taft school of thought, Greene argues that throughout the early twentieth century the AFL persistently, directly, and intensely engaged with the political sphere. Drawing inspiration from Theda Skocpol's oft quoted charge to "bring... the state back in" to the historical conversation, Greene's work reveals a complex co-evolution between the emerging power of the AFL and the emerging power of the federal government. Far from being anti-political, Greene argues, the Gompers' faction used politics to pursue an anti-statist agenda that sought to limit the government's ability to degrade the power of the labor movement. Perhaps more importantly, Gompers' admittedly narrow vision of the

5 Michael Kazin, *Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 16.

6 Elizabeth McKillen, *Chicago Labor and the Quest for a Democratic Diplomacy, 1914-1924* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

possibilities of political action never became hegemonic throughout the federation, nor did even he consistently apply them. Instead the politics of the AFL were shaped by considerations of both the institutional evolution of the United States, and the contentious internal politics of the organization. Though the political vision of the AFL in Greene's work remains somewhat limited, her work definitively returned the politics of the AFL to the historical conversation.⁷

The publication of *Pure and Simple Politics* came about during a broader reconsideration of the place of craft unions in labor history—and in the labor's present as well. The continual failure of the labor movement to achieve meaningful legal reforms, prevent the expansion of free trade, or even to stop the erosion of its own membership led many scholars and activists to reconsider the orthodox view that craft unions became effectively obsolete in the wake of the CIO. Writing in her important 1991 book *Dishing It Out*, Dorothy Sue Cobble argues that labor scholars and activists need to return their attention to craft unions because they remain the only model of unionism in the United States that prospered under a hostile legal regime.⁸ In her 2006 *L.A. Story*, Ruth Milkman makes a similar point “Disdained by many as staid conservative bastions of 'business unionism'... these former AFL unions are the last organizations one would have expected to be leading labor movement renewal. So why have these unions... dominated recent efforts to rebuild organized labor?... Precisely because they emerged under [extremely hostile] conditions... and [utilize] a variety of organizing approaches with which the CIO unions have little or no experience but which are well suited to the contemporary era.”⁹ Once the pariahs of the labor movement—and the subject of plenty of premature, condemnatory obituaries—craft unions thundered back in to the mainstream

⁷ Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics*.

⁸ Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and the Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

⁹ Ruth Milkman, *L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement* (New York: Sage Foundation, 2006), 4-5.

narrative of labor in the United States.

Bringing such workers, and such questions back into the conversation allowed for the production of innovative works that redefined our understanding of what ambitious craft worker politics could look like. Robert Johnston's 2003 *The Radical Middle Class* uncovers a world of petit bourgeois proprietors and craft workers who used politics to define capitalism in their own terms. Sharing a vision of republican political economy, Johnston's craft workers and small employers constructed a broad alliance of the "middling class." Embracing politics as a means of social change, the middling class used political influence to fight for a strongly anti-corporate, anti-elite vision of capitalism. Far from simply ratifying the terms of capitalism, as earlier labor historians suggested, the craft workers of Portland, Oregon, in alliance with the petit bourgeois, actively fought for their own model of the marketplace.¹⁰

Johnston's work notably moved many of the insights of Wilentz fully into the modern era of American history. As Johnston argues, "We should recognize that the Question of Capitalism came into the twentieth century open enough that thousands of [lower-middle and working class] citizens were willing to vote in favor of a truly radical measure [the single-tax] that expressed substantial discomfort with capitalism, indeed overt hostility to it."¹¹ Far from accepting the elite endorsed ideology of corporate capitalism, craft workers continued to evoke an understanding of capitalism with its roots in pre-capitalist conceptions of the moral marketplace.

Georg Leidenberger's *Chicago's Progressive Alliance* similarly uncovers the scope of the political activity, and unique ideology, of craft workers. Published in 2006, Leidenberger's book

10 Robert Johnston, *The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

11 Johnston, *The Radical Middle Class*, 176.

examines the role craft workers played in the struggle around public ownership of street cars in early 1900s Chicago. Craft union leaders and workers themselves actively participated in this debate, making public ownership key to their political agendas. By forming an alliance with middle-class, progressive reformers, workers in Chicago claimed the right to directly govern the transit market of their city. As Leidenberger relates, "With such a strong organization behind them, trade union leaders claimed a voice in Chicago's public affairs. A teamster in 1903 expressed labor's new sense of power: 'Who is the public? In Chicago most of the people in the last three years have joined labor unions.... And the middle-classes? Didn't you notice that thirty-five hundred teachers have joined the American Federation of Labor? If most of the people is the public, then the public is the labor union.'"¹² By defining themselves as the "public" and then claiming the public's democratic right to govern itself, Leidenberger's workers expressed a political commitment completely irreconcilable with the anti-political stance originally attributed to the AFL.

Andrew Wender Cohen's 2004 opus *The Racketeer's Progress* undoubtedly set the agenda for what might be called the new history of craft workers. A study of such employees, and citizens, in Chicago between the turn of the twentieth century and World War I, Cohen's work not only lays out a compelling historical narrative, it builds a conceptual framework through which historians can better understand the interwoven politics, labor activity, and public lives of craft workers. Cohen proposes that the craft workers of Chicago "struggled for the right to determine the shape of the modern urban economy, [and favored]... [a] world [where] success depended less on capital than on connections, less on competitive advantage than on consensus."¹³ Through this struggle, workers

12 Georg Leidenberger, *Chicago's Progressive Alliance: Labor and the Bid for Public Streetcars* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006), 42.

13 Andrew Wender Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress: Chicago and the Struggle for the Modern American Economy, 1900-1940* (New York: Cambridge, 2004), 13.

built an interlocking set of agreements, understandings, and social norms that Cohen describes as craft governance.

In Cohen's terms, craft governance represented an economic and social vision in which agreements with employers set the terms of “legitimate” competition between businesses and workers. Regulations maintained wages and prices at rates that, while making few wealthy, allowed small producers economic stability. In this system unions regulated conditions in the workplace to ensure that worker's hours and conditions remained reasonable and respectful. By protecting the employment of skilled workers and encouraging the success of small businesses, craft workers maintained better labor conditions than they would receive from unregulated competition. These conditions rendered the lines between employers and employees porous and discouraged concentration of wealth. As Cohen relates, “A gap existed between workers and bosses [but] this gap was not wide, class relations were fairly fluid, and many workers established themselves as businessmen.”¹⁴ Without hard and fast social divisions between workers and bosses, the politics of Chicago craftspeople found tremendous appeal among employers. Given this fluidity many employers “expressed an ideology hospitable to the regulation of public and semipublic institutions including business associations [and] unions... They implemented rules that protected local workers and proprietors from the ravages of the market.”¹⁵ Here we find the final antithesis of the earlier consensus around craft workers in the AFL. Not only do Cohen's craft workers participate in politics, they do so with intensity, vigor, and a broad view of how capitalism might be regulated by the needs of the community.

Craft governance provides a useful, if incomplete framework for understanding the BSEIU in

¹⁴ Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 10.

¹⁵ Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 38.

Chicago. Like other craft workers in the city, the Chicago locals of the BSEIU used political power and collaboration with employers to enforce their own vision of a proper, moral economy. However, janitors lacked the high barriers to entry, such as control over training and accreditation, that empowered most craft workers. Indeed, employers generally considered janitors as unskilled laborers who proved their suitability for the job through their physical abilities, appearance, and willingness to work for low wages. Employers even forced married flat janitors to prove that their spouses could do manual labor alongside them. Given this, the BSEIU could not regulate the marketplace through the traditional tools of craft unionism. Despite this, the janitors of the BSEIU managed to achieve equivalent conditions, if not better, than their skilled kin through the canny use of politics and development of an ideological stance that transformed them into servants of the public good. I argue that the BSEIU accomplished this by combining craft governance with a heterodox set of ideologies and strategies including republican political economy, Americanism, local politics, and professionalism into a new tactical/ideological synthesis that I call civic unionism.

Practitioners of civic unionism sought to gain economic leverage for unskilled workers through a specific tactical toolkit. Recognizing that, due to the low barriers to entry into their occupation, traditional forms of economic leverage could not achieve positive outcomes for janitors, the BSEIU of Chicago focused on harnessing the power of their community. First these alliances took place within the framework of craft governance through sympathy strikes and other forms of pressure. However, union leaders rapidly found that political alliances, and even alliances of convenience with certain employers, could be even more lucrative. Political power could then be parlayed into economic leverage as the tools of state authority became useful in pressuring recalcitrant employers

into agreements and by directing patronage dollars towards union members. These tactics proved to be so successful that they required the union to develop rhetorical justifications—such as Americanism, professionalism, and public service—for the exalted position of janitors in Chicago. Though union leaders deployed these justifications with a degree of cynicism, the rhetoric the union used in discussing the work of building service workers powerfully shaped the way that some union members viewed their labor. Paradoxically a union bathed in corruption helped its members to find substantial meaning, along with significant remuneration, in their own supposedly lowly labor.

I do not intend civic unionism to be a rigid or comprehensive definition of the tactical toolkit used by the BSEIU in Chicago over the sixty years of history that this dissertation covers. Instead, we should conceive of civic unionism as a terminology that helps distinguish between various models of labor organization. The use of such terminology is valuable because while civic unionism bears a degree of resemblance to other models, no single other model describes all of its elements. Civic union of the BSEIU of Chicago cannot comfortably fit into any of the standard categories that historians use to describe labor unionism. Though civic unionism grew out of craft unions, civic unionism's lack of emphasis on traditional craft relationships and disinterest in traditional labor tactics makes craft unionism a faulty description. Though there are some shades of post-Wagnerian industrial unionism within civic unionism, particularly in its emphasis on large-scale negotiations covering entire sectors, the underlying organization and mindset of both union leaders and union members remained aligned along craft lines. Furthermore, civic unionism relied first and foremost on personal alliances between labor leaders, politicians, and business owners—a structure that represents the very antithesis of a systematic, legally defined labor relations. Civic unionism also differed from business unionism in its view of the proper role of labor organizations. Historians

generally portray business unionism as a very limited set of tactics and goals focusing purely on economic gains made through collective power in the marketplace. The civic unionists of Chicago, in contrast, framed unionism in extremely broad terms, essentially viewing unions as influential agents and powerbrokers with an organic role in governing society. Put another way, if labor historians characterize business unionism as a narrowing of the legitimate scope of the labor movement's interests, then civic unionism expanded that scope to include the totality of the public sphere. The closest fit between the approach of the BSEIU in Chicago and a traditional category of union tactics is post-industrial community or social movement unionism. Like community unions, the BSEIU of Chicago turned to external allies as one of their primary sources of leverage and sought to engage with larger, community-level issues. However, civic unionism always lacked the emphasis on member-centric activity characterized by Janice Fine, Steve Lopez, and others as the hallmark of community unionism as practiced by the modern SEIU.¹⁶

Through the concept of civic unionism, I seek to expand the insights of the new history of craft workers to cover the foundation and early development of BSEIU. By doing this, I will also shed light on the modern SEIU. One of the most important, and contentious, labor organizations in the world, the SEIU—which dropped the “B” in 1968 as part of a re-branding effort intended partially to conceal the union's roots—flourished during a dark period for the American labor movement. During a time when de-industrialization and de-unionization dramatically degraded other organizations, the SEIU prospered and grew. By the year 2000 the SEIU's total membership topped 1.5 million, making it the largest U.S. labor organization.¹⁷ Though directly leading only a small fraction of the labor movement as a whole, the SEIU's president after 1996, Andy Stern became the

16 Janice Fine, “Community Unions and the Revival of the American Labor Movement,” *Politics & Society* 33(1) March 2005; Steven Henry Lopez, *Reorganizing the Rust Belt: An inside Study of the American Labor Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

17 Lopez, *Reorganizing the Rust Belt*, 7.

de facto face of organized labor in the media. The SEIU became so prominent that Stern largely displaced AFL-CIO president John Sweeny, a former president of the SEIU, as the most prominent labor leader in the country.

Over the last two decades, labor scholars and commentators have argued that the SEIU could be a model for the revitalization of the American labor movement. Among the earliest such clarion calls, Rachel Voss and Kim Sherman's influential 2000 article "Breaking the Iron Law of Oligarchy: Tactical Innovation and the Revitalization of the American Labor Movement" used the example of several SEIU locals in San Francisco to argue that the union expressed a particular talent for using the tactics of social movements to encourage labor organization.¹⁸ Writing in 2004, Steve Lopez expanded on these themes in *Reorganizing the Rust Belt*, a sociological study of the tactics that the SEIU used in Pennsylvania to overcome the negative legacies of previous "do nothing" business unions. To accomplish this, the SEIU combined aggressive organization, political and civic alliances, and member-centric organizing—a combination of approaches he calls social movement unionism—to organize nursing homes.¹⁹ Ruth Milkman's 2006 *L.A. Story* provides a subtle and highly detailed account of how the SEIU used community and social movement tactics to re-unionize the janitors of Los Angeles—a group of workers which the union lost control of during the 70s.²⁰

None of these works, with the partial exception of Milkman, spends much time or effort connecting the modern SEIU with its roots in the BSEIU. Arguably many of the union's tactics do owe as much to the Civil Rights Movement as they do to the janitors of early or mid-century Chicago. However, I am struck by the similarity between the community unionism espoused by the

18 Kim Voss and Rachel Sherman, "Breaking the Iron Law of Oligarchy: Tactical Innovations and the Revitalization of the American Labor Movement" *American Journal of Sociology* 106 (September 2000): 303-349.

19 Lopez, *Reorganizing the Rust Belt*.

20 Milkman, *L.A. Story*.

modern SEIU and the civic unionism of the Chicago locals a century prior. These similarities are close enough that civic unionism, and consequently craft governance, can be described as precursors to community unionism.

Connecting community unionism and civic unionism creates many new analytical openings. One of the most troubling paradoxes in the study of community unionism is its roots in unions with authoritarian leaderships. Kim Moody, Kim Scipe, and Steve Lopez all explicitly define community and social unionism as the antithesis of conservative business unionism.²¹ Yet as Milkman perceptively notes, “Many of the most successful [community union] initiatives of the SEIU have actually been 'top-down' efforts, engineered not by the rank and file but by paid staff in the upper reaches of union bureaucracy, not its antithesis!”²² Indeed, critics often accuse the SEIU of hyper-centralization and authoritarianism. In his influential review essay/jeremiad “Reutherism Redux,” Steve Early writes with palpable horror that all of the aforementioned authors should be far more critical of the union due to these seizures of power—something that Early views as tantamount to the betrayal of the very basis of the labor movement. He notes that the SEIU does not “view their local restructuring or trusteeship-related roles as an opportunity to develop the full leadership capacity of indigenous militants,” preferring instead to centralize power in the hands of a few leaders, who he derisively notes “have never been a janitor, security guard, nursing home worker, home health care aide or public employee in their own local or anyone else's.”²³ How could the

21 Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (London: Verso, 1988); Lopez, *Reorganizing the Rust Belt*; Kim Scipes, *AFL-CIO's Secret War against Developing Country Workers: Solidarity or Sabotage?* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010).

22 Milkman, *L.A. Story*, 21.

23 Steve Early, “Reutherism Redux,” in *Against the Current* Issue 112 (September-October 2004). <https://www.solidarity-us.org/node/1122> Accessed September 1, 2016. In the interest of disclosure I should note that I was once a very low-level example of one of these outsiders who staff the union. The experience left me with a degree of sympathy for Early's position. Only months out of college when I began work for the SEIU, I often found myself culturally and socially out-of-place as an organizer. That said, Early's Manichean approach leads to an unbalanced portrayal and overly dismissive approach to the many talented, earnest people who work in the SEIU yet do not fit his standards of authenticity. However, while I disagree with Early's style, the ultimate conclusions of this

greatest practitioners of community unionism—a tactic that scholars describe as opposing business unionism—be implemented in a highly bureaucratic, authoritarian fashion that precisely matches many of the classic features of business unionism?

Perhaps we can find an answer in the early BSEIU of Chicago. Leaders in the union recognized that their members, while unskilled and thus lacking the economic leverage of most craft workers, still held surprising political power. Instead of attempting to imitate other craft unions, the union forged electoral alliances that ensured favorable outcomes from politicized labor arbitrators.²⁴ These political connections became the very core of the union's approach and often replaced more traditional labor tactics. As Fine argues, the community unionism of the modern SEIU came from the exact same realization that the low-income workers have more potency as a political interest group than they have as a trade union.²⁵ Such an understanding transforms labor unions from an avenue through which workers gain a voice in the workplace into a political and community interest group that must remain united on a local and, in the modern case, national level to retain its effectiveness. In Chicago, the anti-democratic logic of this system ultimately resulted in the union operating more as a quasi-governmental entity than as a labor union. Indeed, by the mid-1950s the union became so intertwined with their most important community ally, the Daley administration, that the union operated largely as an unaccountable organ of the city government. To be sure, it would be reductionist to suggest that we can fully understand the modern SEIU through an examination of its roots in Chicago. The early days of the BSEIU in New York and San Francisco played an equal role in defining the roots of the modern organization. However, this dissertation

dissertation are surprisingly congenial to his perspective.

²⁴ See Chapter Two for more details.

²⁵ Fine, “Community Unions and the Revival of the American Labor Movement,” 153.

seeks to give the union's foundation in Chicago a major—if not primary—place in the conversation about roots of the SEIU.

It would, however, be wrong—arguably disrespectful—to view the BSEIU locals, leaders, and members discussed in this dissertation as simply a means for unlocking insights into the modern organization. Between 1913 and 1968, the BSEIU changed the lives of tens of thousands of workers for the better. Through the combination of concrete improvements and inspirational rhetoric, the union encouraged its members to view themselves as defenders of public health, protectors of children and even critical components in the fight against fascism. At times, the union could have done better. Critics of the SEIU who wish to find an authoritarian, anti-radical core can certainly find that in these pages. However, despite its faults, failures, and imperfections, the union helped generations of building service workers rescue themselves from conditions that they self-described as slavery.²⁶ Whatever else can be said about the union, these accomplishments represent successes worthy of study, consideration, and—cautiously—even praise.

The Flat Janitors Union, and through it the BSEIU and SEIU, grew out of the distinctive political and labor environment of Chicago. Chapter Two examines how the social, political, and business conditions of the city provided unique opportunities for the fledgling Flat Janitors Union. During the 1910s and 1920s, the craft unions of Chicago remained an intimidating force in the city. These unions collaborated to enforce power over the marketplace through craft governance. William Quesse, founder of the Flat Janitors Union and ultimately the BSEIU, discovered ways of making janitors useful to other craft unions. In return, they provided crucial support to Quesse and his fledgling union. After successful organization, the union made itself useful to Mayor William “Big Bill” Thompson, becoming the notoriously corrupt mayor's grassroots political machine.

²⁶ See Chapter Two for more on the rhetoric of slavery in the BSEIU.

Chapter Two makes two points that are important to the larger scope of this dissertation. First, it explores how the union's initial conditions in Chicago shaped the specific nature of the organization. The flat janitors could not have developed an initial basis of power without the practical support of other craft unions. From these craft unions, the flat janitors also inherited a distinctive political, ideological, and rhetorical tradition that helped define their organization and its demands. Second, the initial conditions of the union's success led its leaders to favor centrally negotiated and politically defined agreements over grassroots activism. This preference defined one of the key elements of civic unionism, the valuing of hierarchical arrangements over militancy and member autonomy. For better or worse, the union's roots in Chicago shaped the rest of the history of the BSEIU and defined many of the distinctive characteristics of the modern SEIU.

With an ally in the mayor's office, the BSEIU organizers Elizabeth Grady and William McFetridge set their sights on school janitors. Prior to the intervention of the union, individual school building engineers hired janitors individually and paid them out of a lump sum provided by the Chicago Board of Education (CBE). The diffusion of authority and responsibility inherent in this system encouraged abusive practices—including the mass employment of children. However, McFetridge and Grady took advantage of Thompson's seizure of control over the CBE to reshape how the city employed janitors. Through their efforts, Grady and McFetridge ended child labor in Chicago's schools while gaining improved wages, conditions, and workplace protections for public janitors throughout the city. The union achieved all of these gains by subverting the civil service system and the administration of the Chicago school system—effectively the Grady and McFetridge transformed political corruption into a means of labor organization.

Chapter Three argues that the school janitors are a prototypical example of civic unionism. Grady and McFetridge gained sufficient leverage over the CBE that union members enjoyed

representation on both sides of the bargaining table. School janitors demanded, and received, higher wages and improved conditions even during a massive crisis in the Chicago school budget. Grady and McFetridge re-defined the labor market of their members with the active participation of union members as a political pressure group, not through strikes or overt labor activity. Indeed, through their influence over the civil service system, union leaders and ward bosses effectively chose who would get school janitor jobs—ensuring the loyalty of the members to their union and its network of political connections. Chapter Three thus explores how easily morality and ethics could become ambiguous for practitioners of civic unionism. Grady and McFetridge empowered school janitors by giving them an ally in negotiations and a voice in their workplace, but they also integrated them into systematic graft and machine politics.

Over the course of a decade, the wages and conditions of janitors in Chicago improved dramatically. While union members, and the Chicago labor movement, naturally applauded this elevation in status, the sudden change in the economic position of janitors subjected them to public criticism. Chapter Four deals with the union's attempts to justify and maintain the gains that it achieved through graft and influence. Initially the union justified itself through the services that it provided to other reputable craft unions. After gaining wide spread membership throughout the city the BSEIU became the unofficial intelligence service of the craft unions—notifying business agents of rules violations and helping to ensure compliance. However, a series of corruption accusations and convictions in the late 1920s reduced the value of this justification and forced the union to seek a new rhetoric. Through pamphlets, magazines, public speeches, and talking points passed along to members, McFetridge and Grady sought to re-frame their members as professionals who served the public interest. In the imaginations of the union's organizers, and, to a certain extent, in the minds of the union's members, janitors became re-defined as public servants whose labor helped to defend

Chicago from chaos and disease. Through this rhetoric of the public good the union sought to justify the increasingly murky lines between its own hierarchy and the machinery of the city's government.

Chapter Four therefore provides a study of union power and its justification. It argues that to legitimate their political clout, the union portrayed itself as a quasi-public institution and its members as defenders of the public good. Though similarities exist between this and the rhetoric of craft unionism, the rhetoric of civic unionism rapidly took on far broader implications. The rhetoric of professionalism and public health filtered through the union and impacted its members. The combination of improving conditions and increasing public criticism led many janitors to defensively justify their labor in terms of public service. Arguing that they deserved their increasing position due to the benefit they provided the public, janitors asserted their own value both in public and private. In Chapter Four I propose that such an assertion of value is more important than simple public relations, it illustrates how unions can help workers to transform the meaning of their own labor. For all of its faults, the BSEIU of Chicago discovered a way of challenging conventional ideas about skilled labor, union membership, and even the place of janitors in civil society.

The Great Depression brought tremendous growth to the BSEIU when a brilliant group of New York labor activists led by James Bambrick combined the union's political savvy with the grassroots legitimacy of a social movement. Riding the wave of the New Deal and the victories of the CIO, Bambrick's Local 32B achieved an amazing success, effectively gaining the ability to regulate the building service worker market in New York over the course of just a few years. With little support from the International Union, the janitors and elevator operators of New York built a social justice oriented union with mass popularity throughout the city.

Chapter Five does not address the issues of corruption that defines most of historical treatments of Local 32B. These issues are important—and are the subject of Chapter Six—but I believe that

fixating on them has blinded historians to the very meaningful successes achieved by the union. Instead, this chapter explores the ways in which the differences in the historical, political, and ideological context between the BSEIU in Chicago and New York led to the evolution of radically different approaches to unionism. The building service workers of Chicago achieved organization during a time when the craft unions of the city struggled to survive. Bathed in the corruption of the city's politics, organizers made free use of questionable alliances and favor trading in their efforts to gain regulation of their labor market. In particular, the BSEIU of Chicago came to rely on shared interests with employer's associations translating into collaborative relationships. In New York, on the other hand, unions rapidly used public support to overcome the resistance of actively hostile and obstructionist employers. Such a radically different context, combined with inspiration from industrial unionism, ensured that the BSEIU of New York evolved into something closely akin to a modern community or social movement union. The distinction between the two approaches provides a contrast that is useful in understanding the ways in which civic unionism remained rooted in the world of craft unionism.

The euphoria of the union's success in New York rapidly turns into tragedy as a Mafioso named George Scalise used his charm and capacity for violence to gain power over Bambrick and the BSEIU of the East. When factionalism nearly ripped the Chicago BSEIU asunder, Scalise expanded his power westward and seized control of the BSEIU as a whole. Operating like a parasite, Scalise turned the entire organization into a source of illicit profit and violent power. Dethroning Scalise required the combined efforts of the comparatively clean faction in the union led by McFetridge and perennial presidential candidate, Thomas E. Dewey. Though the unlikely duo of McFetridge and Dewey would excise Scalise and many of his supporters from the BSEIU, their reforms often resulted in cruel ironies and did little to solve the larger problems of the union. Though these efforts

proved somewhat successful, the union still struggled to put Scalise behind them. However, World War II provided unexpected salvation to the ailing BSEIU. Through an alliance with Chicago's Mayor Kelly, the union became critical to the city's civil defense and industrial salvage operations. The public relations boon of these connections allowed McFetridge to become one of the most influential political power brokers in Chicago. Ironically the combination of a flawed anti-corruption campaign and a nearly apocalyptic war built the career of one of the most influential labor leaders in Illinois, and perhaps American history.

Chapter Six examines the most widely commented upon period of the union's history. Generations of journalists and labor scholars have made use of George Scalise as an example of the corrosive influence of organized crime in organized labor. Though the chapter centers on Scalise, it broadens the discussion of the BSEIU in the 1940s by giving due consideration to the successes of the union in Chicago and New York. The chapter argues that, while the New York locals produced a promising hybrid of craft and industrial approaches, much of their potential disappeared through the corruption of Scalise. Unfortunately, the exploitation of Scalise and McFetridge's subsequent internal purges did little to restore the idealistic possibilities of this moment. In Chapter Six I propose that the tale of Scalise, McFetridge and Dewey fundamentally disrupts any remaining comfortable assumptions about virtue, corruption and reform that labor historians may have—suggesting that heroes and villains are rarely clear and that reform can generate cruel ironies that undermine the best elements of an organization.

After World War II, McFetridge and the BSEIU of Chicago began a furious ascent to the peaks of civic power. More integrated into than allied with the Democratic Party of Chicago, the union's political influence reached new heights. At this point, I argue that civic unionism fulfilled its greatest promise by uniting the powers of labor and the state into a single framework that supported

the advancement of Chicago's building service workers. Such influence allowed the union to gain leverage over employers and increased wages and conditions without overt labor struggle. During this long period of labor peace, many in the union rose to significant civic positions, and McFetridge built an intimidating personal political network.

But what did the power of the union's leaders mean to the average janitor? Through a series of oral histories, Chapter Seven suggests that the impact of the dominance of the BSEIU on the day-to-day lives of its members was ambiguous. McFetridge's stature and connections helped to maintain and expand the wages and salaries of the city's janitors but also empowered an abusive, petty empire of business agents. As memories of traditional labor activism faded from living memory for many janitors in Chicago, solidarity and shared purpose disappeared. Even the flat janitors who sat at the top of this system increasingly viewed their union as a pseudo-state bureaucracy. The latter section of Chapter Seven argues that in this moment the costs of the BSEIU's approach in Chicago become apparent. As the leadership of the union became increasingly powerful, the union became increasingly disconnected from its members—and its original purpose. These same oral histories, however, also reveal the real value of civic unionism. The conditions that the flat janitors achieved throughout the machinations of the BSEIU changed the way that they viewed their labor. Clearly influenced by the rhetoric of their union, flat janitors began to express understandings of their labor that vividly asserted their public value, and their right to demand the respect from their tenants and employers. I argue that despite the faults of the BSEIU in Chicago under McFetridge, its common description through the pejorative of business union is faulty. Certainly the authoritarian leadership, and general acceptance of capitalism, in the union suggested similarities to business unionism, the term cannot encompass the union's tactics or accomplishments. Far from a narrow economic organization, the union used political power and community allies to regulate their labor market and

crafted an ideology that became deeply internalized by its membership. Indeed, it is not unfair to find an antecedent to the modern SEIU tactic of organizing the “whole worker” in the civic unionism of the BSEIU.²⁷

By the mid 1950s, McFetridge became a king maker who was widely considered among the most important figures in Richard J. Daley's efforts to replace Martin Kennelly as mayor of Chicago. Described by journalist Len O'Connor as Daley's “Machiavelli,” tendrils of McFetridge's influence extended to every corner of the city.²⁸ McFetridge now stood at the height of his influence, his efforts often focused more on maintaining and servicing his vast network of patronage than on serving his members. His commitment to the Daley machine blunted the potential of his organization and caused the BSEIU to side against many progressive causes such as practical housing integration. Power resulted in a complacent attitude towards labor organization with the union's flagship local, Local 1, failing to adapt to changing conditions. However, the union continued to maintain and improve upon the conditions for building service workers.

Despite these limitations, Chapter Eight argues that McFetridge and his followers expressed a truly innovative understanding of labor activism. In this way, McFetridge's BSEIU secured a prominent and meaningful place for janitors in Chicago. At the heights of their power, union leaders sought to revitalize the city and create employment for its members through the construction of the sprawling Marina City complex. Through his development agenda, McFetridge intended to replace employers with union ownership and to directly reshape the economy of the city through the wealth of his organization. Though this vision ultimately failed due to an internal coup, and perhaps because of its own internal contradictions and corruption, Marina City represents something more

27 See Jane McAlevey, “It Takes a Community,” *New Labor Forum* 13(1) Spring 2003, 32 for a discussion of the SEIU and whole worker unionism.

28 Len O'Connor, *Clout—Mayor Daley and His City* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1975), 133.

than an architectural triumph and icon of mid-century modernism—it stands as a monument to an insightful and significant approach to creating a uniquely American social market economy.

The dissertation ends with Chicago losing its grip on the destiny of the SEIU. In the wake of an internal power struggle between McFetridge and New York leader David Sullivan, the SEIU of Chicago lost its preeminent place in the organization. After the death of McFetridge in 1969, the centers of power in the union fully diffused to the coasts and some of the distinct elements of civic unionism fell to the margins of the organization. Subsequent power struggles in the organization would play out as a struggle between more conservative community unionists, exemplified by Sullivan and inspired by the union's successes in the 1930s, and social movement unionists, exemplified by George Hardy and inspired by the Civil Rights Movement. Though these conflicts continued to be shaped by the legacy of Quesse, McFetridge, and civic unionism, Chicago itself became far less important to the national story of the union than New York and San Francisco.

Although the heyday of its power and influence passed after 1970, the SEIU remains strong in Chicago and continues to negotiate improved wages and conditions for members. Union leaders who began their political lives with McFetridge went on to serve in a wide variety of capacities including the presidency of the NAACP. The political machine that McFetridge helped to build would endure in Chicago throughout the long, controversial career of Richard J. Daley and beyond. As the example of Tom Balanoff and Rod Blagojevich illustrates, leaders in the Chicago union remain important leaders and political figures.

In the longer stream of history, perhaps, we should not be surprised that the SEIU played kingmaker to a fellow Chicagoan, Barack Obama. From the very foundation of the Flat Janitors Union, a host of politicians found a useful ally in the SEIU. Unfortunately the scandal of Rod

Blagojevitch also fit neatly as part of the history of an organization that commonly struggled with corruption and authoritarianism. Whatever the faults of the union in Chicago, its enduring significance and success make it a fascinating example of a group of workers who truly succeeded in redefining the terms of their labor market and place in society—through the determined application of political power.

II

HIS MAJESTY, A JANITOR

Introduction

William Quesse's tombstone paid tribute to his life as the founder and first president of the Building Service Employees International Union (BSEIU). Donated by Local 1, the Flat Janitors Union, the tombstone read, "Whereas our President William F. Quesse organized, developed, and served as the leader of our Chicago Flat Janitors Union and by such service brought from a condition of slavery to a status of freedom with decent working and living conditions, our membership and thousands of families depended on him."¹ While he passed away in 1927, Quesse's legacy remained widely discussed by the union's leaders and members throughout the 30s and 40s. Speaking at the BSEIU's 1942 convention, for example, long-time union organizer Gus Van Heck called Quesse the union's "inspiration [who] talked... about our Building Service workers [like] no other labor union leader ever did." Van Heck reminded the delegates that initially "our men or women [were] not wanted in the labor movement... it took a man with clear vision like Bill Quesse to build this great labor organization of ours."² In speeches and union literature, Quesse's legacy commonly became the foundation myth of the BSEIU.

It is important not to over-emphasize Quesse's significance. Quesse certainly served the union well as a tactician and inspirational figure, but it was the activism and work of his fellow janitors that built the BSEIU. However, the laudatory treatment of Quesse by union leaders is understandable given the successes achieved during his presidency. Prior to unionization, flat janitors received substandard wages, lived in dingy basement apartments in buildings that they

1 "William Quesse Years," Box 1, Folder 3, SEIU Historical Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Hereafter SEIU Historical Records, "William Quesse Years."

2 *Proceedings of the Ninth General Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union* (Chicago: BSEIU, 1942), 32/.

served, and could be fired arbitrarily. The Flat Janitors Union changed all of this. Indeed, by 1920 the flat janitors achieved so much influence that the *Chicago Tribune* complained that they had become more powerful than the city's wealthiest building owners.³ Importantly, the contract entitled flat janitors to a share of their building's revenue, effectively granting them a minor stake in the city's housing market. The improvements proved so significant that some members of the union came to view janitorial labor as a respectable career and viable means of social advancement. These successes endured. Indeed, the flat janitors established a political and industrial dynasty that would control the building services in Chicago for the next 40 years. While the national BSEIU, and its successor the SEIU, grew out of many regional movements, the success of these flat janitors in Chicago provided the foundation upon which organizers build the rest of the organization.

Without diminishing the very real tactical prowess of the flat janitors, their successful unionization was only possible due to a unique intersection of social, economic, and political factors in Chicago. Chicago in the 1910s was known for its aggressive and strong community of craft unions. From the very beginning, Quesse heavily relied upon these craft unions to rally community support and provide resources and services. In addition, the support of the city's craft unions legitimated the janitors' claims of authority. When the janitors of Chicago had little leverage over employers, the solidarity of these craft unions on the picket line gave them critical bargaining leverage.

Beyond obvious material and tactical assistance, the traditional power of Chicago's craft unions laid the groundwork for flat janitors in subtle ways. As many of the city's building owners accepted the legitimacy of other craft unions, they were more willing to settle with Quesse, especially if it served their larger interests. The willingness to negotiate allowed the union to

³ "His Majesty, A Janitor And His Union Sued," *Chicago Tribune*, October 3, 1920, 10; Genevieve Forbes Herrick, "Up the Labor Ladder with William F. Quesse," *Chicago Tribune*, March 20, 1927, 86.

develop surprisingly amicable relationships with employers. Avoiding large-scale strikes when possible, the union found ways to make mutually beneficial agreements with employers in which, in return for supporting a building owner's political or business agenda, the union received significant concessions.

Yet the Flat Janitors Union can not be described as simply another player in the vast network of Chicago's community of craft unions. Over the next sixty years, the flat janitors of Chicago clawed their way into the highest reaches of political power, eventually becoming the kingmakers of mayors. Union leaders used their position to reward their allies and punish their enemies, resulting in decades of steady improvements for a group of workers commonly described by employers as unskilled. The political ascension of the union began in 1927 when they became critical members of a winning mayoral coalition, and secured largely unquestioned authority over the janitorial trades in both the public and private sectors. When the BSEIU was re-founded in 1921, the organization largely grew out of the support base and funding of the Flat Janitors Union. In Chicago, the BSEIU became an independent and powerful political agent. However, working within the structure of Chicago's political economy required compromises. The transformation of the janitor in Chicago was thus not achieved through pure means; corruption, dirty politics, and even organized crime all played roles in the Flat Janitors Union. The foundation that the BSEIU was built on may have been stable, but it was far from idealistic.

The successes and importance of the Flat Janitors Union in Chicago adds more credence to the growing consensus among historians that craft workers deserve a place at the center of the city's labor history. Opposing historians like Lizbeth Cohen, whose work focuses almost exclusively on industrial unionism, historians such as Andrew Wender Cohen and Georg Leidenberger argue that

craft unions in Chicago achieved significant successes, acted as critical political players, and deserve a prominent place in the history of the city's labor movement. Restoring craft workers to the story of Chicago's labor history complicates the narrative of modern Chicago, suggesting that at every phase of the city's development, labor has played a significant role in shaping its political, economic, and physical landscape. Restoring craft workers to their rightful place in the labor history of Chicago also highlights the voices and struggles of thousands of service and artisanal workers.

The Flat Janitors Union came out of craft unionism, but evolved into something different. Often eschewing the tactics of trade unionism—such as strikes and solidarity—in favor of political influence, control over government patronage, and alliances of mutual convenience with building owners, the flat janitors developed a toolkit that I call civic unionism. In many ways, civic unionism proved successful. By emphasizing political and community alliances, the Flat Janitors Union achieved impressive successes for a group of workers who described their pre-union conditions as nearly slavery. However, imperfections and moral ambiguities plagued civic unionism. Without a strong emphasis on internal democracy or grass-roots activity, the union tended towards authoritarianism and cults of personality. Over time, these flaws undermined the gains and legacy of the union.

The recognition of this evolution differentiates my understanding of the Flat Janitors Union from its previous historical treatments. Given its success, power, and eventual role in building the SEIU, historians have devoted a surprisingly small amount of attention to the flat janitors. The main historiography of the flat janitors consists of three articles by John Jentz. Beyond Jentz, the only major work on the flat janitors is *A Need for Valor*, a short, official history of the SEIU written by Pat Cooper, Tom Beadling, Grace Palladino, and Peter Pieragostine. These works, while showing

their age, remain excellent sources, but do little to link the flat janitors to the larger development of the distinctive tactics and ideology of the BSEIU.⁴

Connecting the civic unionism of Quesse to the larger development of the union reveals the importance, and distinctiveness, of the flat janitors approach to labor organizing. Indeed, the strategies that Quesse and his followers developed bear a fascinating resemblance to modern tactics of the BSEIU's successor, the SEIU. Effectively developing their own model of interwar community unionism, the Flat Janitors Union, and the BSEIU, prefigured many of the trends of the modern labor movement. Though the Flat Janitors Union did not necessarily inspire these trends, its early articulations of them complicate their origins and suggests that the significance of the flat janitors stretches far beyond the shores of Lake Michigan.

The City By The Lake

“In the name of that homeless wanderer in this desert of stone and steel, whose hopeless heart lies leaden in his bosom, whose brain grows faint for want of food — in the name of that unnecessary product of American freedom and prosperity, the American tramp, I bid you welcome to the Imperial City of the boundless West.”

— William C. Pomroy in William Thomas Stead's *If Christ Came to Chicago* (1894)

Chicago inhabited a place of ambiguity in the imagination of late nineteenth century America. Some viewed the city as the essential melding point of the old east and the new west, a polyglot that seemed to define the virtuous average of the growing nation.⁵ To others, Chicago seemed a far

4 John B. Jentz, "Citizenship, Self-Respect, and Political Power: Chicago's Flat Janitors Trailblaze the Service Employees International Union, 1912-1921," *e-Publications@Marquette*, http://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1032&context=lib_fac Accessed November 1, 2016'; John Jentz, "Labor, the Law and Economics: The Organization of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union, 1902-1917" in *Labor History* 38 (1998); John B. Jentz, "Unions, Cartels, and the Political Economy of American Cities: the Chicago Flat Janitors Union in the Progressive Era and 1920s" in *American Political Development* 14 (Spring 2000); Tom Beadling, Pat Cooper and Grace Palladino, *A Need for Valor* (1983 *Unpublished Manuscript*), Box 4, Folder 3, SEIU Historical Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Hereafter, SEIU Historical Records, *A Need for Valor*. Note that this is not the published version of *A Need for Valor* but the longer original draft which was cut to create the official, published version.

5 Georg Leidenberger, *Chicago's Progressive Alliance: Labor and the Bid for Public Streetcars* (DeKalb: Northern

darker place. In his 1894 jeremiad, *If Christ Came To Chicago*, for example, William Stead vividly evoked a city of dark corners and darker vices. A labor activist and journalist from England, Stead was horrified to discover that even the city's most legitimate politicians used whiskey and gambling as “an engine of party finance.”⁶ These corrupt titans of Chicago politics ruled the city not from the city's gleaming city hall but from its dingy saloons. In such a world, justice was a farce. Prostitutes, gamblers, grifters, and other criminals were “raided from time to time 'for revenue only,' of which they yield a goodly sum to the pockets of the administrators of 'justice.’”⁷ Most of the city's wealthy businessmen “constitute[d] what may be called the diabolism of Chicago,” callously preying on the poor and the weak for their own profit.⁸

The moral ambiguity of Stead's Chicago mirrors the way that historians treat craft workers in the city. Despite their prominence in the city's political economy, labor historians have often treated the city's craft unions as little more than a missed opportunity. The accepted narrative of Chicago labor, as known to even casual students of labor history, focuses on the failures of the city's craft unions to bridge the city's ethnic and racial divides. Lizbeth Cohen's formulation of this view is perhaps the most influential, “Fragmentation of workers along geographic, skill, ethnic, and racial lines – along with repression by employers and government and weak national union structures within the craft-oriented American Federation of Labor (AFL) – led to the defeat of workers' once promising challenge.”⁹ Craft unions are blamed for the collapse of many of the city's best known labor struggles including the Pullman Strike of 1896 and the legendary Steel Strike of 1919.

Illinois University Press, 2006), 10.

6 William Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago: A Plea for the Union of All Who Love in the Service of All Who Suffer* (Chicago: Laird & Lee, 1894), 38.

7 Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago*, 3.

8 Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago*, 90.

9 Lizbeth Cohen, *Making A New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 3.

Then the heroes of our story arrive! Prompted by increasing cross-ethnic engagement with popular culture and the challenge of the Great Depression to capitalism, workers began to articulate a new class identity. Seizing on this opportunity, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) provided an institutional structure through which workers could demand recognition and respect. Learning from the racial parochialism of the AFL, the CIO encouraged an inclusive culture which finally resulted in labor solidarity in the Second City. Continually pushed by a corp of virtuous Communists and radicals, CIO unions spread throughout the city, creating a new and durable stronghold for the labor movement. Whatever its imperfections or later mistakes, in this narrative the CIO is the true face of Chicago's workers.¹⁰

Craft unions do not receive a positive word in this narrative. Bumbling obstacles at best, craft unions of teamsters, janitors, carpenters, and others become mere distractions from the ultimate successes of industrial unionism. The dominance of this view blinds labor historians to the important struggles, and triumphs, of craft unions. After all, why would a labor historian dwell on embarrassing, regressive, irrelevant, and fundamentally failed unions? Until the 1990s, the little historical work devoted to craft workers focused on the exploitation of craft unions by Al Capone and others. Such an approach further reinforced the irrelevancy of craft unions, rendering craft workers increasingly synonymous not with justice but with indiscriminate violence and graft.¹¹

10 Lizbeth Cohen, *Making A New Deal*, 12-13. Melvyn Dubofsky and Foster Rhea Dulles, *Labor in America: A History*, 6th ed. (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, 2000), 217-224, 292-293.

11 See for example John Hutchinson, *The Imperfect Union: A History of Corruption in American Trade Unions*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), Robert J. Kelly, *The Upperworld and the Underworld: Case Studies of Racketeering and Business Infiltrations in the United States*, (New York: Plenum, 1999). James B. Jacobs, *Mobsters, Unions, and Feds: The Mafia and the American Labor Movement* (New York: NYU Press, 2006) Less academic examples of this tradition include William Z. Foster, *Misleaders of Labor* (New York: Trade Union Educational League, 1927), Gordon L. Hostetter & Thomas Quinn Beesley, *It's A Racket* (New York: Les Quin Books, 1929), Ronald Goldstock, and *Corruption and Racketeering in the New York City Construction Industry: The Final Report of the New York State Organized Crime Task Force* (New York: New York University, 1990).

The decline of the “heroes” of the traditional narrative of labor, CIO-style industrial unions, forced labor historians to rethink their opinions on craft unions. Suddenly craft unions no longer looked like atavistic relics, they appeared to be survivors who weathered and prospered during the lean days of pre-New Deal unionism. Much of the scholarly re-evaluation, which I call the new history of craft unions, focuses squarely on Chicago. A barrage of superb scholarship unlocks the labor history of the city in numerous ways, opening up the study of groups like janitors. The new scholarship explores the innovative ways in which these workers gained political and economic leverage, often under extremely hostile legal circumstances. Though not dismissing, or even necessarily challenging, the earlier critiques of the racism, sexism, and parochialism of craft unions, these scholars have recovered many laudable aspects of craft unions.¹²

Andrew Wender Cohen's examination of Chicago's craft unions in the 1900s represents the most iconic re-framing of the craft workers in Chicago. Though never ignoring the faults of Chicago's craft unions, Cohen proposes that craft workers articulated a remarkably sophisticated alternate vision of modernity. Rejecting the legal and social norms of the city's corporate elites, craft workers used strikes, boycotts, fines, bribes, and violence to demand the right to control their lives and their labor market.¹³ Cohen reminds us, craft workers at the dawn of the Twentieth century faced an unnerving dilemma; industrial production and, more importantly, the immense power of corporations threatened their wages and conditions. Caught between mechanization and the political

12 For examples of this new perspective which do not necessarily fit into the chronological / topical emphasis of this chapter see: Michael Kazin, *Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era*, Julie Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics: The American Federation of Labor and Political Activism, 1881-1917* (New York: Cambridge, 1999), David Witwer, *Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2003), Joseph E. Slater, *Public Workers: Government Employee Unions, the Law, and the State, 1900-1962* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2004), Grace Palladino, *Skilled Hands, Strong Spirits: A Century of Building Trades History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), John Jentz & Richard Schneirov, *Chicago in the Age of Capital: Class, Politics, and Democracy during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

13 Andrew Wender Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress: Chicago and the Struggle for the Modern American Economy, 1900-1940*, (New York: Cambridge, 2004), 1-9.

influence of the new corporate elite, the world of work that generations of craftspeople had fought to create was disappearing. While some see the protests of these workers as reflexive anti-modernism, Cohen argues that craft workers did not resist modernity but instead re-defined it in ways that favored workers and small producers.¹⁴

Cohen does not spend much time fitting these insights into an ideological or philosophical framework, but it is not difficult to see the roots of such an approach. Indeed, craft governance often seems to be a re-articulation of the rich tradition of (small r) republican critiques of the unrestrained market. From the very inception of the United States, major figures have argued that the stability of the republic required that the vagaries of the free market be restrained by the public good. As historian Drew McCoy argues, "Above all, the Revolutionaries were acutely aware of the moral dimension of economic life, for they seemed obsessed with the idea that a republican polity required popular virtue for its stability and success. Simply stated, they assumed that a healthy republican government demanded an economic and social order that would encourage the shaping of a virtuous citizenry."¹⁵ To the Framers, politics, economics, and virtue wove into a single concern and topic.

After the American Revolution, many of the Framers spoke eloquently about the necessity of maintaining a broad class of prosperous citizens to ensure the stability of the fragile republic. Thomas Jefferson amplified this in a 1785 letter to Madison that "the consequences of... enormous inequality producing so much misery to the bulk of mankind [are severe], legislators cannot invent too many devices for subdividing property..."¹⁶ Madison would later argue in Federalist No. 10,

¹⁴ Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 37-41.

¹⁵ Drew McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Williamsburg: Chapel Hill, 1980), 7.

¹⁶ James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, *Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, October 28, 1785*. 1785 Manuscript/Mixed Material. "Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mjm012587>. (Accessed March 31, 2016),

“But the most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society.”¹⁷ Jefferson, Madison, and many of their peers lauded the use of political power to ensure a broad prosperity and even wealth distribution as a way to decrease the division between citizens, and to ensure stability for the republic.

Scholars have commonly described this ideology as “republican political economy,” the belief in the necessity of a broad coalition of small proprietors and workers who seek to restrain those who threaten the common good.¹⁸ Such ideas became common after the Revolutionary War as many influential figures critiqued the failure of wealthy aristocrats to use their prosperity to enhance the republic.¹⁹ While the “Market Revolution” of the Jacksonian Era resulted in the glorification of economic success, such success remained justified only if it promoted the common good.²⁰

Beginning in 1848, the United States entered into what Eric Hobsbawm famously called the “Age of Capital” during which the American economy became increasingly dominated by large-scale economic interests.²¹ As Richard Schneirov reminds us in *Labor and Urban Politics*, this was a “crisis of legitimacy” for capitalism in America in which critics of unfettered markets flourished.²² The discomfort with capitalism was felt across the lines of class in the United States. While many critics came from labor organizations such as the Knights of Labor, they were shared by a broad

17 James Madison, *Federalist* No. 10., http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed10.asp. (Accessed March 31, 2016).

18 For a concise discussion of the republican political economy historiography see Robert Johnston, *The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 318, fn #1. See also Drew McCoy, “Benjamin Franklin's Vision of A Republican Political Economy for America,” *William And Mary Quarterly* 35(4), October 1978.

19 Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1992), 276, 284.

20 Richard Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago 1864-97* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 9.

21 John Jentz & Richard Schneirov, *Chicago In the Age of Capital: Class, Politics, and Democracy during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 1. See also Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Capital: 1848-1875* (New York: Scribner, 1975) for the origin of the concept.

22 Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics*, 8.

class of small business and landowners who viewed themselves as “producers.”²³ Even among the country's elites, there remained significant signs of discomfort. As T. J. Jackson Lears' work reveals, the well-heeled Arts and Crafts movement of the early 1900s was based on the recognition “that the market economy had undermined the home's economic role” and sought a “regeneration of the agrarian country-side.”²⁴ In this context, the craft workers of Chicago are part of a story that goes back to the foundation of the United States. Like their forebearers, these workers sought to create political institutions that would turn capitalism to the benefit of the common good. Echoing Jefferson, Madison, and many others, workers justified their efforts not only through self-interest but through their own models of justice and rights.

Cohen's work provides a useful framework for encapsulating how Chicago's craft workers took these traditions and used them to conceptualize their own models of economic justice and legitimate competition. Cohen proposes that workers established a political economic hegemony that used democracy, strikes, and violence to replace the raw logic of capitalism with a set of relational agreements between organizations of workers and employers. Workers and employers based these agreements on a shared sense of common interests in wage and price control, and limitations on external competition. Eventually, these agreements became so pervasive and interwoven that Cohen argues they represented an informal, parallel legal structure that he describes as craft governance.

Obviously such efforts did not receive universal praise from their employers. However, obedience to the dictates of craft unions and small business associations was not purely voluntary. Those who refused to accede to this system would be brought before tribunals and punished through

23 See Leon Fink, *Working-men's Democracy: Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State 1877-1917*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); for discussions of the producerist mindset.

24 T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 75.

picket-lines, boycotts, harassment from allied politicians, and, if necessary, violence. Though this system never gained complete hegemony, to workers in Chicago the laws of the crafts held much the same legitimacy as the laws of the city.²⁵ As Harold Lasswell famously defined it, “Politics [is] who gets what, when, [and] how.”²⁶ Through craft governance, the unions of Chicago often successfully regulated each of these quantities at every level of the city, from the shop floor to city hall.

Cohen carefully notes that craft governance never produced a placid or stable utopia. Though it allowed workers to maintain high wages while resisting the totalizing influence of the city's growing corporate elite, it also discouraged technological innovation and was marred by violence and graft. Though some unions used craft governance to challenge racism and sexism, many used it to defend white, male privilege. Since few of the agreements and structures that constituted craft governance received legal recognition, they proved ripe for exploitation by gangsters and opportunists.²⁷

Despite these flaws, for many of Chicago's workers the structures of craft governance provided them with a practical method of shaping the marketplace to better suit their own ideals, and to better serve their community. The influence of wealthy industrialists over the city's municipal government and ideological dominance of the Illinois court system ensured that workers had few legal forms of redress. Contemporary legal theory held that any political disruption of the marketplace was an unconstitutional violation of the rights of property. Injunctions against non-violent protests, collective punishment for the actions of individual workers, violations of basic norms of free speech, bans on basic union tactics such as boycotts, and arrests based on flimsy legal basis remained the dominant interaction between unionists and the court system. Cohen reminds us that

²⁵ Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 10, 47-57.

²⁶ Harold Laswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1936).

²⁷ Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 224.

even after “the Clayton Antitrust Act of 1914... established the legality of labor unions... criminal antitrust prosecutions actually became more common after its enactment.”²⁸ Denied fair access to the courts, labor unionists had little choice but to forge alliances with criminals and corrupt politicians, and to rely on the force of their own arms.

Craft governance emerged in Chicago partially because of the political power of its workers. Richard Schneirov's work on nineteenth century Chicago persuasively argues that workers and labor unionists of Chicago shaped the politics of the Midwest. In Chicago, labor emerged as an independent political force in the city, alternatively running its own campaigns and forming opportunistic coalitions with major parties. While the “ability of labor to win benefits from one or both of the two major parties was a major reason for the failure of an independent labor party... [it] would be a mistake, however, to reduce this simple phenomenon to a case of 'bourgeois ideological hegemony.’”²⁹ Though limited by the elite preserve of the court system, workers in Chicago achieved political power through the manipulation of partisan politics that allowed them to enact, albeit in only pseudo-official ways, their vision of how the city's economy should operate.

The structure of politics in Chicago made it particularly susceptible to the political power of the working class. As John D. Buenker argues, the ethnic and cultural diversity of Chicago, along with a tradition of strong aldermen, devolved political power into a complicated and inscrutable web of local political bosses and semi-independent political fixers.³⁰ Cohen argues that Chicago's workers took advantage of this diffusion of power by spreading their connections through multiple nodes of influence, noting that the “same families produced prominent politicians, union officers, and

28 Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 244.

29 Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politic*, 366. See also John Jentz and Richard Schneirov's more recent and equally excellent work, *Chicago in the Age of Capital*.

30 John D. Buenker, “Edward F. Dunne: The Limits of Municipal Reform” in Paul Green & Melvin Holi eds, *The Mayors: The Chicago Political Tradition*, 4th Ed, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 2013), 49.

businessmen.”³¹ Such infiltration of the state allowed unions to add city ordinances and building inspectors to strikes as part of their tactical toolkit.³² Indeed, the laws of craft unions and the laws of the city did not always oppose each other as their creators and enforcers were the same people.

The politics of Chicago's unions provided fertile ground for the formation of the Flat Janitors Union, and for their articulation of civic unionism. Though most unions in Chicago used politics as an adjunct to more direct forms of economic leverage—such as strikes, walkouts, and boycotts—the flat janitors focused their efforts on gaining the support of powerful allies amongst labor, capital, and the state. By providing their allies with concrete goods, such as electoral support, the union gained prominent supporters. These supporters provided flat janitors with the leverage they needed to achieve the wages, conditions, and respect accorded to skilled workers. However, such a triumph bore significant costs and required forging alliances with less than respectable figures.

Furnace Room Slaves

“The old time Janitor had no social status... the Janitor was looked upon as some dumb animal, a sort of a nondescript tramp who had inveigled some equally nondescript female animal to become his wife.”

- *Public Safety*, July 1931

Labor organizations in Chicago during the early twentieth century unquestionably found more success among skilled workers than unskilled. Prudent employers—those who wished to avoid boycotts or worse—viewed having a union pin as a prerequisite for employment in the building trades and among the skilled service occupations such as barbers. However, most unskilled jobs remained outside of the structure of union protections. The lack of unionization among unskilled laborers did not come from a lack of interest or effort from the city's labor movement. As Georg

31 Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 55.

32 Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 148.

Leidenberger notes, in 1905, the Chicago Federation of Labor “sought to forge a broadly based inclusive movement with a trade-based form of organization. The house of labor would be open to 'all toilers of whatever craft, class or caste.’” Union leaders often talked about the necessity of achieving sector-wide organization to ensuring the stability of the labor movement.³³ Despite this, many groups of workers remained outside of the union's reach.

The CFL engaged in significant efforts to bring janitors into the fold. Some of these organizing campaigns resulted in limited gains for particular groups, but failed to achieve wide-spread or long-lasting success. The largest effort occurred in 1903 when the CFL backed a campaign to organize the city's office janitors. The campaign, which coincided with the foundation of the first organization to bear the name BSEIU, ultimately failed due to a lack of resources and leadership.³⁴ While working alongside craftspeople in venues widely ranging from hotels to offices to apartments, janitors seemed fated to remain outside of the city's craft regime.

The CFL considered the flat janitors—janitors who worked in small to medium apartment buildings—of Chicago particularly difficult to organize because most worked for several employers. As Chicago Alderman Oscar Nelson reminded union leaders in 1935, “It was not an easy task by any means to organize the flat janitors in Chicago. When you stop to think that in some instances a janitor has five or six buildings to care for, each building having a separate owner or agent, and that means fighting five or six employers to secure working conditions for one man, then you know it was not an easy task.”³⁵ Dispersed around the city and directly employed by hundreds of different

³³ Leidenberger, *Chicago's Progressive Alliance*, 33.

³⁴ SEIU Historical Records, *A Need for Valor*.

³⁵ *Proceedings of the Seventh Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union* (Chicago: BSEIU, 1935), 4.

building owners, flat janitors lacked a central workplace to organize. For union organizers, working in such a piecemeal fashion represented a tremendous investment of time and energy.

Furthermore, flat janitors often felt little sense of shared identity around which they could be united. Ethnically and racially diverse, janitors felt connection by little beyond their shared job and the experience of immigration. While the majority (53%) of janitors in the 1920 census were foreign born and of European descent, they lacked a common origin and culture. Despite being predominantly (82%) white, black janitors outnumbered any single white ethnic group, and likely consisted of recent immigrants to Chicago from the South. The only real point of demographic similarity among janitors was gender. The vast majority of janitors were men (89%), and all flat janitors were male.³⁶ However, it is important to note that this census data conceals the work of wives and daughters, who commonly worked alongside husbands and fathers. The wide range of ethnic and racial backgrounds among janitors likely resulted from their diffusion across the city. The demographics of janitors clearly shows a group with little inherent ground for unity and minimal access to the levers of political power.

Without a meaningful degree of solidarity, employers controlled every element of a flat janitor's life. Continuing his picturesque description of the union's origins, Oscar Nelson declared that the conditions of flat janitors prior to unionization were “almost next to slavery... He had to be able to do painting, carpenter work, electrical work... There was no set wage scale.... They had to live on tips or the returns from odd jobs they did for the tenants. A janitor had nothing to say about a notice of dismissal.”³⁷ Flat janitors

36 All census data is from Steven Ruggles, J. Trent Alexander, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Matthew B. Schroeder, and Matthew Sobek, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 5.0* [Machine-readable database]. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010). The calculations are my own.

37 *Proceedings of the Seventh Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 4. Something that is interesting here is that slavery in this context means not only being in a subservient labor position but also being forced to do the work of other crafts. This shows the strength of craft-based reasoning in Nelson's mind, that only slavery could truly force someone to break the lines of craft jurisdiction.

who worked in apartment buildings typically lived in the basements of the buildings that they worked in, and remained always at the beck and call of their residents. Even during their supposed free time, janitors needed to be constantly available to serve the whims of their residents.³⁸ The union's 1940 *Information and Instructions to the Members of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union* described the dilemma this put workers in, "A janitor could be, and often was fired without notice and his scanty belongings placed on the street while he or his wife searched for a roof over their heads."³⁹ For flat janitors, displeasing a boss meant more than unemployment—it could mean sudden eviction from their homes.

Employers often mercilessly took advantage of the weakness of the janitor's bargaining position, resulting in notoriously poor conditions. Janitors often lived in cramped and dirty "coal holes" in which they shared their living space with the furnace that they maintained.⁴⁰ As employers viewed their labor as unskilled, and themselves as quickly replaceable, the wages for flat janitors remained extremely low and subject to sudden, arbitrary change.⁴¹ Though employers only hired men as flat janitors, most employers assumed that a janitor's wife would work along side him as a de facto "scrub woman." As the 1940 janitors' manual recalled, "Included in the janitor's service was the service of his wife who had to be viewed by the agent or owner to see that she was strong enough to do her share of the scrubbing, cleaning.... She must also be of presentable appearance as she was expected to be on call for maid service if a tenant received unexpected company."⁴² Flat janitors did not consider themselves to be solitary workers, but instead part of a familial labor unit. As employers considered the flat janitor's wife part of the labor agreement, employers considered her physical abilities and appearance to be

38 Jentz, "Labor, the Law and Economics: The Organization of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union, 1902-1917" in *Labor History* 38 (1998), 418-429; Box 4, Folder 3, SEIU Historical Collection, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

39 Building Service Employees International Union, *Information and Instructions to the members of Chicago Flat Janitors Union, Local No. 1*. (Chicago: Press of John F. Higgins, 1940), Hereafter *Instructions to the members of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union*.

40 *Instructions to the members of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union*, 14.

41 *Federation News*, February 22, 1927.

42 *Instructions to the members of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union*, 14. See also *Federation News*, February 22, 1927.

open for scrutiny. Quesse recalled that when he worked as a janitor his “wife was supposed to do the scrubbing, help with the garbage, and be at the beck and call of any tenant who wished her service.”⁴³ It is not difficult to understand how such a process left flat janitors feeling acute anxiety over their bruised masculinities.

Even at home, flat janitors could not escape their sense of degradation. Living in one of the buildings they worked in, flat janitors complained that they literally never left their jobs. It is important to always remember that the tenants of flat janitors were their neighbors. Taking advantage of this, many tenants delighted in treating their neighbor-janitors as inferiors. Raising a family under such conditions often proved to be difficult at best, and degrading at worst. Some employers discouraged janitors from having children. Those janitors who were “so afflicted must understand that his children must not associate with the tenants' children for fear of the tenants children becoming contaminated.”⁴⁴ Subservience among flat janitors thus became multi-generational. Given this, it is not surprising that after unionization, flat janitors put a high priority in scholarship programs for their children.

Alderman Nelson exaggerated in his comparison of flat janitors to slaves, but it is easy to see why subservience became such a recurrent theme in the accounts of flat janitors. In their lives, most flat janitors could not find a place of rest, of privacy, or even of basic respect. The damage that these conditions did to the egos of flat janitors cannot be overstated. Despite having steady work, their jobs consigned their wives to manual labor and their children to subservience. Throughout much of the post-unionization rhetoric of the union through the 1920s and 30s, the union held up the abolition of family work as its greatest achievement, often seeming even more significant than wage gains.⁴⁵

43 Herrick, “Up the Labor Ladder with William F. Quesse,” 86.

44 *Instructions to the members of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union*, 14.

45 “William F. Quesse With His Stub Pencil and a Pad of Paper,” *Public Safety*, July 1931, 11.

Indeed, flat janitors universally described their pre-union conditions in terms of servitude. Their lack of power in the workplace allowed employers and tenants alike to treat them in abhorrent ways. Many flat janitors related that they felt like servants, slaves, or even animals. As a union official later recalled, “About the lowest down in the scale of American life was the Janitor.... the old time Janitor had no social status... the Janitor was looked upon as some dumb animal, a sort of a nondescript tramp who had inveigled some equally nondescript female animal to become his wife.”⁴⁶ The pre-union janitor lived “among the rats and vermin in the coal hole; beneficiary of the cast-off clothing of the tenants” and were “furnace room slaves.” Janitors lived in “the dark, dark recesses of the basements and cellars of the city [and were] the human debris... of the coal and cinder piles.”⁴⁷ They were the “American 'untouchable[s].’”⁴⁸

Yet flat janitors proved their worth to their employers and tenants every day. Charged with far more than cleaning, janitors filled a bewildering assortment of roles. Union officials later described janitors as “the agent of the premises and [the collector of] rent.” But despite this critical role, “Real estate agents were constantly undermining one another to get buildings in their charge by promising to run them cheaper than the agent in charge... to accomplish their end they demanded that the janitor do all forms of extra work to show a better profit sheet at the end of the month. It came out of the hides of the janitor and his wife.”⁴⁹ Flat janitors continually found themselves caught between the needs of their employers and their tenants. As the easiest target of tenant aggression, abuse for things outside of their control became the norm.

Though commonly described as unskilled workers, flat janitors did somewhat technical and very delicate work. In most buildings, janitors maintained the furnaces and boilers that operated the building's heating system. If poorly maintained and operated, these systems belched putrid smoke into the air or, in extreme cases,

46 “William F. Quesse With His Stub Pencil and a Pad of Paper,” *Public Safety*, July 1931, 12.

47 “William F. Quesse With His Stub Pencil and a Pad of Paper,” *Public Safety*, July 1931, 25.

48 “William F. Quesse With His Stub Pencil and a Pad of Paper,” *Public Safety*, July 1931, 25.

49 *Instructions to the members of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union*, 14.

could become dangerous to residents. Employers constantly pressured janitors to take on bigger and more complex repair work in their buildings, forcing janitors to become everything from carpenters to plumbers as “seldom did a tradesman of any description find his way into the apartment buildings of Chicago [prior to janitorial unionization].”⁵⁰ Employers forced janitors to flagrantly violate the barriers between crafts, weakening the power of all craft unions in the city.

While union leaders in Chicago realized that the disorganization of janitors hurt all craft unions, they fit awkwardly in to the organizational and disciplinary structure of craft governance. Nearly impossible to monitor due to their dispersal throughout the city, janitors could not be regulated through the traditional strategies of craft governance. How could the already overburdened organizers of the city's craft unions also monitor every apartment building in the city for violations of craft rules? How could craftspeople convince janitors to risk their livelihood, and their homes, by refusing their employers' demands?

Brought into the Light

“Our Chicago Flat Janitors Union has taken these men from [servitude] to a place in the sun.”

- Alderman Oscar Nelson

Organizing flat janitors represented a unique set of difficulties to the CFL. The traditional tactical toolkit of craft unions did not fit the conditions of flat janitors. Despite this, the CFL displayed great commitment to the cause of janitorial unionization. The first roots of organization among janitors came during the great craft union organizing drives of the early 1900s. The CFL established a few fledgling locals of janitors in 1902, and by 1904 a significant organization existed among the buildings of Chicago's Loop. Viewing the Loop organization as a potential nucleus of an international union, the AFL chartered the first Building Service Employees International Union in March of 1904. Notably, these early unions recognized that the high degree of ethnic and gender diversity among janitors required them to be somewhat more progressive than their peers among the

⁵⁰ *Instructions to the members of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union*, 15.

craft unions, commonly promoting African-Americans and immigrants to leadership positions.⁵¹ However, the first great unionization drive among janitors failed. The failure of a 1905 Teamster strike signaled a general weakening of allied craft unions in Chicago.⁵² Internal divisions and corruption in the leadership of the first BSEIU further weakened the organization. AFL president Samuel Gompers later described the first president of the BSEIU as a “cheap grafter” and in the fall of 1905, the AFL pulled the BSEIU's charter, leaving behind a handful of isolated unionized janitors across the city.⁵³

Though a failure, the experience of organization and union activity spread the idea of activism among janitors. The failed effort also brought a young man named William Quesse into the labor movement. Quesse was born in 1878 in Illinois to German immigrants, and began work as a janitor in 1902. Frustrated with the conditions that he and his wife labored under, Quesse became a significant figure in the 1902 organizational effort. The defeat of the organizational drive in 1905 emotionally devastated Quesse. Seeking a less stressful life, he left the city to try his hand at farming in Oklahoma.⁵⁴

During his self-imposed exile, Quesse never stopped thinking about the failed janitorial union. When he returned to Chicago in 1913, Quesse had a new approach to organizing janitors. Instead of attempting to organize all of the city's janitors, he proposed that the organization focus initially on the most vulnerable employers, small apartment building owners. Since individual, small real estate owners lacked the resources to survive a prolonged strike, Quesse believed they could be intimidated by the prospect of lost income.

Essentially bluffing unsophisticated employers into accepting the demands of his virtually non-existent union,

Quesse made scattered gains for flat janitors in individual buildings.⁵⁵ Chicago journalist Genevieve Herrick

51 *Federation News*, September 3, 1962, Jentz, "Labor, the Law and Economics: The Organization of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union, 1902-1917," 415, John Jentz, "Seeds of the SEIU," Box 4, Folder 12, SEIU Historical Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University. SEIU Historical Records, "Seeds of the SEIU."

52 Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 118-119.

53 Quoted in Jentz, "Labor, the Law and Economics: The Organization of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union, 1902-1917," 417 .

54 SEIU Historical Records, "Seeds of the SEIU."

55 Herrick, "Up the Labor Ladder with William F. Quesse," 86; SEIU Historical Records, *A Need for Valor*, Jentz,

would later describe this process as a “stone, splashed down into the puddle, sen[ding] out ever widening arcs of movement.”⁵⁶ Soon Quesse's organization attracted the attention of a group of Belgian janitors who affiliated with his group and became the early core of the union's organizers.⁵⁷ However, this small scale, building-by-building approach proved slow and labor intensive as it required separate negotiations with the employers of literally every new member.

To move beyond a few buildings, Quesse realized he needed to gain leverage over the large associations that dominated Chicago's rental market. Only through centralized bargaining with these organizations could the city's janitors gain union protections. Traditionally, leverage among craft unions came from their ability to control entry into the marketplace by influencing training and employment. Flat janitors, on the other hand, were expected to learn their skills on the job. Controlling entrance into the field proved impossible for the fledgling Flat Janitors Union.⁵⁸ With this avenue closed to janitors, the organizers of the Flat Janitors Union turned to a combination of politics and solidarity with craft unions. To gain the support of the craft unions of Chicago, Quesse argued that unionized janitors would police craft boundaries and work rules. A 1931 retrospect on Quesse's life recalled that he “haunted the offices of Organized Labor. Again with his pencil and paper he showed where the 'dumb' Janitor was scabbing on union labor to such an extent that he was causing a loss of working days among all the building trades. Not only was the Janitor a menace to himself and his children and a menace to unionized labor, but he was the costliest member of society.”⁵⁹ Quesse effectively offered the craft unions of Chicago a deal. If they provided the flat janitors with funds and solidarity, Quesse promised that janitors could become the enforcers of craft rules.⁶⁰

"Labor, the Law and Economics: The Organization of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union, 1902-1917"419.

56 Herrick, “Up the Labor Ladder with William F. Quesse,” 86.

57 Herrick, “Up the Labor Ladder with William F. Quesse,” 86

58 Herrick, “Up the Labor Ladder with William F. Quesse,” 86, John B. Jentz, "Citizenship, Self-Respect, and Political Power: Chicago's Flat Janitors Trailblaze the Service Employees International Union, 1912-1921" in *Labor's Heritage* 9(1), Summer 1997, 6.

59 “William F. Quesse With His Stub Pencil and a Pad of Paper,” *Public Safety*, July 1931, 13.

60 Jentz, "Labor, the Law and Economics: The Organization of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union, 1902-1917"417. SEIU

Quesse's offer resonated with the craft unions of Chicago. Under increasing pressure from the press for their association with crime and high construction costs, craft unions became desperate for help in policing their agreements. Given the widely dispersed nature of janitors, the deal Quesse offered seemed like a godsend. In 1935 the head of the Chicago Painter's Union described the help that the flat janitors provided under this agreement as critical, "[The union] has [its members] trained so that whenever a non-union painter, plumber, steamfitter or electrician comes to an apartment building, we are notified, and if the matter cannot be adjusted, [the janitors are] always ready and willing to take the union janitor off the job. [Usually] the matter is quickly adjusted and the 'scab' painter... is replaced by a union mechanic."⁶¹ Over the next few years, flat janitors became the de facto intelligence network of Chicago's community of craft unions—reporting on any violation in return for the support of their fellow workers.

Solidarity among craft unions provided Quesse with the initial leverage he needed to become a credible threat to larger property owners. Beyond providing a degree of financial support, craft unions agreed to not cross janitorial picket lines. Respecting janitorial picket lines allowed striking janitors to threaten their employers with severe economic consequences. If Teamsters refused to bring such essentials as coal and ice to a building during a strike, they could provide the janitors with significant leverage. Similarly, by refusing to work on buildings labeled as non-union, the Carpenters ensured that maintenance problems would eventually begin to emerge in anti-union buildings. While commercial tenants might be convinced to endure such inconveniences in the name of anti-unionism, apartment tenants proved less sympathetic. Relying on the complaints of tenants to put pressure on employers, Quesse believed that landlords would eventually bargain in good faith.⁶²

Historical Records, "Seeds of the SEIU".

61 *Proceedings of the Seventh Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 12.

62 Carroll Lawrence Christenson, *Collective Bargaining in Chicago: 1929-30, A Study of Economic Significance of the Industrial Location of Trade-Unionism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1933), 30.

While the early power of the flat janitors came from solidarity with external unions, Quesse took care to cultivate internal solidarity among his members. Unlike many other craft unions in Chicago, the flat janitors organized as a single, non-segregated local. In Quesse's words, "[The Flat Janitors Union] is composed of all creeds, colors and nationalities, and [we] do not allow anyone to use any prejudice in the organization against each other."⁶³ Quesse's commitment to this principle went beyond rhetoric. Many of the union's organizers were black, as well as three of the members of its executive board.⁶⁴ Later in its history, the union established a racial quota, guaranteeing a minimum number of leadership spots for African-Americans.⁶⁵ The respect with which the leadership treated their black members impacted race relations throughout the union. Indeed, the 1920 Chicago Commission on Race Relations noted that flat janitors possessed little of the racial animosity that was common among many of the city's white workers.

While some of Quesse's commitment to this effort may have come from his legitimate belief in the justice of racial equality, it also served a practical purpose. Janitors proved uniquely vulnerable to the importation of labor. Quesse realized that if employers could easily replace striking janitors with black strikebreakers, the union would not be able to survive a major strike. By placing racial comity at the center of the union, Quesse encouraged Chicago's African-American community to support the union. Unlike many other unions, whose racist policies made few friends in the black community, Quesse could count on cross-racial support for his picket-lines. Such support would be

63 Quoted in Jentz, "Citizenship, Self-Respect, and Political Power: Chicago's Flat Janitors Trailblaze the Service Employees International Union, 1912-1921."

64 BSEIU, *1919 Yearbook*, Box 1, Folder 6, SEIU Research Department Historical File, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Hereafter, SEIU Research Department Historical File, *1919 Yearbook* SEIU Historical Records, *A Need for Valor*.

65 SEIU Historical Records, *A Need for Valor*.

useful not only in defending the union against strikebreakers but also in providing the flat janitors with allies among the prominent black political fixers of the city's Republican Party.⁶⁶

Despite the support of these unions, the Flat Janitors Union lacked resources. With few members paying dues, the union relied on the free services from the labor friendly printers and lawyers.⁶⁷ What the organizers could not get for free, they often paid for out of their own pockets.⁶⁸ The union could not even afford its own office space, and instead used local saloons.⁶⁹ Without a large membership, organizers served as the union's primary pickets, exposing them to arrest or even mob violence.⁷⁰ Quesse's son recalled in 1936 that he “never knew whether [Quesse] would come back altogether or in pieces.”⁷¹

Though little commented upon, the labor of Mary Quesse, wife of William, played a large role in building the union. While never given a formal position, janitors remembered Mary as the most important organizer in the union. Her son, a business agent for the Flat Janitors recalled, “Neither [the Flat Janitors] nor the International would have started without her... She worked as hard as Dad.”⁷² *Building Service*, the journal of the union's main New York local, amplified this point in 1952 relating that “[while] Mrs. Quesse had no official title... she did the work of today's organizers... Often she defended them in disputes with their employers... she can rightly be called 'the mother' [of the BSEIU]!”⁷³ Though Mary Quesse was an exceptional example, she helps to illustrate the nature of gender relations among the flat janitors. Janitors' wives served as direct

66 Jentz, "Citizenship, Self-Respect, and Political Power: Chicago's Flat Janitors Trailblaze the Service Employees International Union, 1912-1921," 10.

67 SEIU Historical Records, “Seeds of the SEIU”.

68 SEIU Historical Records, “Seeds of the SEIU”.

69 *Federation News*, December 22, 1962.

70 Jentz, "Labor, the Law and Economics: The Organization of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union, 1902-1917," 420.

71 *Building Service*, July 1936.

72 *Building Service*, April 1952.

73 *Building Service*, April 1952.

participants in their husband's labor, to the extent that janitors described themselves as janitor-couples, and they naturally became key participants and partners in the union's organization.⁷⁴ While many of these efforts were specifically intended to reduce their role in the workplace, it was the wives of the Flat Janitors Union who comprised much of the labor that built the organization.⁷⁵

By 1914, the support of other craft unions and the pugnacious efforts of the union's organizers resulted in a small membership and a degree of legitimacy for the union. Growth brought the fledgling organization into conflict with the Apartment Buildings Association (ABA), which began to provide legal and financial support to building owners in conflicts with the union. Core to the ABA's objection to the union was flat janitors' requirement of closed shop conditions, which offended the small building owners of the association.⁷⁶ However, the closed shop represented the union's only way to achieve lasting power. Without the control afforded through control of training, the flat janitors sought to control admission to their trade through union control of hiring. Through such control, Quesse believed that the union could not only gain leverage but also increase the legitimacy of the janitorial occupation among craft unions. By winning such respect, Quesse hoped that the union could attract better workers to the union, whose job performance would help to justify higher wages and better conditions.⁷⁷

The ABA decided to challenge the union drive during their efforts to organize buildings owned by the Marshall family.⁷⁸ The flat janitors responded by striking the Marshall's buildings and setting up picket lines. Despite police harassment, the union effectively controlled access to the buildings

⁷⁴ *Building Service*, April 1952.

⁷⁵ SEIU Historical Records, "Seeds of the SEIU." In many ways this rendering is tokenist and that is something that I regret. Mary Quesse is the only flat janitor's wife from this period that I have reliable information about so the coverage here is frustratingly limited. This makes my comments on the contours of gender among janitors similarly tenuous.

⁷⁶ Jentz, "Labor, the Law and Economics: The Organization of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union, 1902-1917"420.

⁷⁷ *Instructions to the members of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union*, 15.

⁷⁸ Jentz, "Labor, the Law and Economics: The Organization of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union, 1902-1917,"420.

and obtained promises of support from the labor community of Chicago. As one ice dealer noted, “If we [delivered] ice to [a struck building] by next Monday we would not have a wagon on the street.”⁷⁹ As the strike continued without an end in sight, the situation became increasingly acrimonious with stink bombs being regularly thrown at struck buildings. Eventually, the courts intervened and on January 27, 1915, Judge Dennis Sullivan issued a broad injunction that effectively banned the union from continuing strike activity. Tellingly, Sullivan based his decision not on the accusations of property damage but instead on the union's desire to regulate employment. The Flat Janitors Union's very right to exist was the true target of the Sullivan Injunction.

The Sullivan Injunction may have been a major legal set-back, but it failed to break the union. Though the union struggled to organize building owners who belonged to the ABA or the Chicago Real Estate Board (CREB), membership growth continued slowly among independent building owners. In 1916, Quesse believed that the union could once again challenge the associations. When their requests for negotiations with the associations fell on deaf ears, the members of the union authorized a strike. Quesse recognized that the flat janitors could not survive an extended strike. The union lacked the money to support long-term picketing, and had only a tenuous grasp on the janitors in buildings owned by barons of real estate that made up the CREB. Taking the only option available to them, the union bluffed. One of the officers of the union, Gus Anderson, proceeded to loudly and stridently proclaim that the union could “tie up this town tighter than a drum” through a general strike. Always on the lookout for sensational labor news, the *Tribune* obliged Anderson with consistent and breathless coverage of the union's strike preparations. Emboldened by the coverage, Quesse set a January 17th, 1917 deadline for negotiations.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Jentz, "Labor, the Law and Economics: The Organization of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union, 1902-1917," 421.

The bluff worked. As the deadline approached, the CREB reluctantly came to the bargaining table with a fascinating offer. Recognizing that they could not resist the entire Chicago labor movement, the leadership of the CREB reconciled themselves with the idea of the flat janitors governing their trade. However, they objected to the idea that all janitors should be paid the same amount for the same work. Rents among the flats of Chicago varied radically, resulting in very different incomes for building owners. Therefore it would be easy for owners of highly profitable buildings to pay their janitors more, but a significant hardship for the owners of less profitable buildings. To mollify the owners of low-income buildings, the CREB proposed a contract that tied janitorial pay to the rents collected for the building owner.⁸⁰ Seizing on this as an opportunity to avoid a strike that they could not win, the union agreed to the contract.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of this peculiar agreement. For the first time the prosperity of the janitor became intimately tied to the prosperity of their employer. As rents rose or fell with the desirability of the building, so too would the wages of the building's janitor. Union leaders described this agreement as “the only wage agreement in which the worker receives a definite percentage of the income of the boss.”⁸¹ While one could view this as a betrayal of the classic principle of equal pay for equal work, its implication and functioning proved more complicated.⁸² By aligning the interests of workers and their employers, it partially replicated the classic relationship of craft workers and their employers. However, the new payment structure did more than this. As the pay for flat janitors varied wildly depending on what building they worked in, janitors gained an incentive to move up to more profitable buildings—the flat janitor's job suddenly

80 Herrick, “Up the Labor Ladder with William F. Quesse,” *Chicago Tribune*, p. 86, Jentz, “Labor, the Law and Economics: The Organization of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union, 1902-1917” 422-428.

81 *Proceedings of the Seventh Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 4.

82 John B. Jentz, “Unions, Cartels, and the Political Economy of American Cities: the Chicago Flat Janitors Union in the Progressive Era and 1920s” in *American Political Development* 14 (Spring 2000), 55.

became a career with an opportunity for advancement. Now flat janitors sought not only to please their own employers, but to develop reputations that could help to propel them into better buildings. Since union leaders could significantly help or hinder this process of career advancement, janitors had a significant incentive to prove their loyalty to their union. Similarly, career considerations encouraged janitors to hone their craft and seek to impress the owners and managers of higher-end buildings.

The new structure caused many janitors to develop an independent or even professional mindset. No longer obsequious employees tied to an employer, flat janitors began to view themselves as service providers independent of a single building or employer. Flat janitors arguably now fit Burton Bledstein's classic formulation of a professional as one who does not produce "a material product, they provide the public a service."⁸³ The union's later 1919 contract made this change explicit, noting, "It shall be the duty of the Janitor to protect the interests of his employer in every possible manner, which does not conflict with good citizenship or violate the rules of the Union... he shall give his employer the benefit of his experience in such a manner as will show his employer that he is working in harmony with this agreement."⁸⁴ Importantly the 1919 contract revision framed janitors as semi-autonomous craftsmen whose duties to employers remained subsidiary to their duty to their union and the public good. Throughout his career as a union leader, Quesee framed his efforts not simply as improving the material conditions of his members but as teaching them the "art of self-respect."⁸⁵ Through the ways that the 1917 and 1919 contracts reshaped the labor market for

83 Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: Norton, 1976), 38.

84 SEIU Research Department Historical File, *1919 Yearbook*.

85 "William F. Quesee With His Stub Pencil and a Pad of Paper," *Public Safety*, July 1931, 11.

flat janitors, he succeeded at not only helping janitors to gain respect, he also established a kind of professionalism amongst them.

The new relationship between employers and employees focused the union on larger issues than simply contract negotiations and workplace control. Under the new regime, wages depended upon the larger success or failure of the Chicago real estate market and, in many ways, of the city itself. The increasingly public orientation of janitors explains why their contract explicitly charged janitors with refusing any request that “conflict[ed] with good citizenship.”⁸⁶ As Jerry Horan, president of the Flat Janitors Union, noted in the 1929 inaugural issue of the BSEIU's journal, *Public Safety*, “The building service employee comes directly into contact with the general public. He is indeed one of the greatest guardians of public safety. On him depends a great deal...”⁸⁷ To promote this image of public service, Quesse became active in the city's public health system by showing officials that “his co-operation was necessary if the city sanitary measures they had fought to place on the statute books were to be enforced.”⁸⁸ The new contract and Quesse's efforts began a long transformation in the way that janitors viewed themselves—a transformation which would result in a unique ethos of service and unionism.

In more conventional terms, the contract provided the janitors with meaningful gains. The average increase in wages was 7% ,while janitors working in desirable buildings gained tremendously more. The contract specifically precluded wives from doing work alongside their husbands. To please the union's allies, the contract banned janitors from doing the work of other tradespeople. Arbitration mechanisms were established along with protections against arbitrary dismissal. In a move that thrilled the union's allies in Chicago's black community, wage differences

86 SEIU Research Department Historical File, *1919 Yearbook* .

87 Jerry Horan, “President's Letter,” *Public Safety*, October 1929, 1.

88 “William F. Quesse With His Stub Pencil and a Pad of Paper,” *Public Safety*, July 1931, 13.

based on race were abolished. Tenants were no longer allowed to give orders to janitors or to use them as domestic workers. Closed shop conditions were guaranteed, providing the union with the contractual ability to regulate entrance into their trade.⁸⁹

The CREB negotiated in good faith partially because they could use the union to serve their interests. An association of large real estate interests, the CREB wanted to encourage stability in Chicago's real estate market more than anything else. Long-leases on buildings provide landlords with fairly fixed and predictable incomes. Since they could not pass along increased labor costs to their tenants mid-lease, building owners had a clear incentive for ensuring cost stability. The growing militancy of the flat janitors threatened this stability with the possibility of spiraling, mid-lease expenses and collapsing profits. By offering stability, the contract with the flat janitors became a prudent way of preventing disaster.⁹⁰ Furthermore, the unwillingness of independent and ABA-affiliated building owners to negotiate with the Flat Janitors Union ensured that some of the CREB's competitors would face lost income from strikes and boycotts. These interests laid the groundwork for a collaborative and even symbiotic relationship between the CREB and the flat janitors.

The 1917 agreement established the Flat Janitors Union as the legitimate voice of janitors working in apartments. Though it only covered the buildings of CREB members, it quickly became the model for much of the city, and by 1920 at least three-quarters of janitors working in apartment buildings were covered by a union contract.⁹¹ Quesse had accomplished something amazing; janitors were no longer working in conditions “almost next to slavery” but had, in the words of Oscar Nelson, “brought [themselves] into the light.”⁹²

However, the janitor's new influence was tenuous at best. Quesse remained constantly aware that they had

89 Herrick, “Up the Labor Ladder with William F. Quesse,” *Chicago Tribune*.

90 Martin A. Brown & Eugene F. Wilson, untitled paper, SEIU Historical Records, Box 6, Folder 2, SEIU Historical Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University; Christenson, *Collective Bargaining in Chicago*. Hereafter Brown & Wilson.

91 Jentz, “Unions, Cartels, and the Political Economy of American Cities: the Chicago Flat Janitors Union in the Progressive Era and 1920s,” 58.

92 *Proceedings of the Seventh Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 4.

won their contract on little more than a bluff. The union simply could not have followed through on their threats, as they lacked the manpower, resources, and perhaps even the cross-craft support to truly shut the city down. Beyond this, post-war inflation led to rapidly increasing rents in Chicago, which the press often blamed on the increased wages of janitors. Employers complained bitterly in the press about what they saw as the unreasonable demands of the janitors.⁹³ The *Chicago Tribune* did little to help the public image of the union, ridiculing the janitors as “His Majesty” because of their escalating demands.⁹⁴

While relations with the CREB remained cordial, individual building owners continued to steadfastly resist union rules. At times, the resistance to the flat janitors was overtly violent. Negotiations in 1919 became particularly violent. After receiving a phone call, Quesse was lured to a secluded area and beaten for over an hour.⁹⁵ During the same negotiations, a Flat Janitors Union organizer's house was bombed.⁹⁶ In a broader sense, the improved wages and conditions of the janitors seemed absurd to many Chicagoans, who found their former quasi-servants suddenly asserting rights as craftspeople.⁹⁷

The delicate set of circumstances that permitted the flat janitors to organize seemed to be unraveling. The Flat Janitors Union achieved their initial victory through a combination of a bluff, the support of fellow craft unions, and a shared interest with the CREB. The ebbing power of the craft unions that the flat janitors depended on suggested that they could no longer fully rely on their ability to enforce the unions' dictates. Some members of the CREB now regretted the concessions that the association made to the union, suggesting that the next set of negotiations might prove even more acrimonious. To finish organizing the flat janitors of Chicago, and to secure their gains, the union needed a new ally.

93 “White and Black,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 23, 1919, 8.

94 “His Majesty A Janitor And His Union Sued,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 19, 1929.

95 “From the Tribune's Columns,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 15, 1929; “His Majesty A Janitor And His Union Sued,” *Chicago Tribune*; Herrick, “Up the Labor Ladder with William F. Quesse,” *Chicago Tribune*, 86.

96 “Bomb Damages Janitors Agent's Home, 2 Others,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 20, 1919, 1.

97 “His Majesty A Janitor And His Union Sued,” *Chicago Tribune*.

The Making of a Civic Union

“How many voters' pledge cards for a pardon? How many for ten pardons?”

— *Chicago Tribune*, December 21, 1923

Faced with a challenging situation, the Flat Janitors Union turned to corrupt politicians. Echoing the thoughts of modern community and social movement union theorists, Quesse recognized that what the flat janitors lacked in economic leverage, they could make up for in political leverage. Flat janitors possessed unique political power for the same reasons that made them valuable to craft unions: they made their homes in every nook and cranny of the city. Unlike industrial or craft workers who lived in a limited set of neighborhoods, flat janitors lived and worked everywhere. In the flat janitors, generations of Chicago politicians discovered an electoral machine capable of projecting its political influence across the entire city. Quesse argued that only politics could ultimately save the union, noting that election work was “very important because you know our agreement and wage scale runs out [soon] and we are laying the foundation.”⁹⁸ What Quesse founded is the tactical approach that I describe as civic unionism.

The turn towards politics exemplifies the similarities between the Flat Janitors Union and what labor activists today call community unionism. As Janice Fine explains, community unions—many of which are associated with or funded by the SEIU—are distinguished by the fact that they are “based in geographic communities more than individual worksites... They define themselves in relationship to other community-based institutions [and] use politics and public policy as a central means of improving wages and working conditions for their members.”⁹⁹ These tactics derive from the realization that “low-wage workers in American society today have greater political than economic power. Regarded as 'low-skill,' they have little individual power in labor markets to begin with [but they can] have an impact on public policy.”¹⁰⁰ Though the civic

98 SEIU Historical Records, *A Need for Valor*.

99 Fine, “Community Unions and the Revival of the American Labor Movement,” 160.

100 Community Unions and the Revival of the American Labor Movement, 156.

unionism of Quesse differed from other elements of Fine's definition—in that it focuses on a single occupational group and used traditional electoral strategies among other things—the same dynamics of political and economic power drove the flat janitors whole heartedly into the political realm.

The flat janitors found their first great patron in Chicago's mayor, William Hale Thompson. While Thompson would later become notorious for his close connections to Al Capone, in 1918 his appeal was still rooted in the world of reformist Chicago, the African-American communities of the city's Second Ward, and the city's large Irish and Scandinavian populations. Flexible in his values and ethics, Thompson was a coalition builder who willingly sought allies everywhere. Not wishing to undermine his credibility and support from business sectors, Thompson engaged ambiguously with labor in Chicago by rhetorically declaring his solidarity with workers, while simultaneously supporting anti-union measures against the Chicago Federation of Teachers.¹⁰¹

In the flat janitors, however, Thompson saw more opportunity than risk. Already closely aligned with Thompson's allies among the political leaders of the African-American community, the janitors were a natural partner for the mayor. As John B. Jentz has observed, the ubiquity of the flat janitors throughout the city provided Thompson with “a ready-made, city-wide precinct organization with a staff of over 6,000.”¹⁰² Using their relationship with Thompson as leverage, the union expanded their political influence throughout Chicago's city government. The BSEIU quickly became a key player in Thompson's coalition. By 1920, the union had so infiltrated Chicago politics that critics claimed, “Quesse has more power and influence with the mayor and

101 Douglas Bukowski “Big Bill Thompson: The 'Model Politician'” in *The Mayors*, 61-63. For a fuller and superb discussion of Big Bill Thompson see Douglas Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson, Chicago and the Politics of Image* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

102 Jentz, “Unions, Cartels, and the Political Economy of American Cities: the Chicago Flat Janitors Union in the Progressive Era and 1920s,” 59.

state's attorney than anyone here no matter how much property he owns.”¹⁰³ The flat janitors began a political legacy that would endure for the next forty years.

Quesse buttressed this alliance by aggressively pushing for his members to become citizens and, by extension, voters. Using the pro-American fervor of World War I as a rhetorical framework, the Flat Janitors Union required that all of its members begin the process of becoming a citizen. John Jentz proposes that this was more than simple Americanization, it was an attempt to build a culture of shared values, saying, “The union easily linked [American] ideas [of freedom and liberty] to 'make the world safe for democracy'—with its own endeavor to 'gain a little democracy in the field wherein we earned our livelihood.’”¹⁰⁴ Citizenship, however, was more than a purely political gambit, as the union would commonly justify their demands for wages and improved conditions by appealing to “American” standards.¹⁰⁵

The new political power of the union faced its first real test in 1920 when the union renegotiated its contract with the CREB. While the CREB did not cover all of the unionized buildings in the city, most building owners treated the negotiated settlement between the CREB and the flat janitors as the de facto master agreement for all flat janitors in Chicago. Despite the union's successes, however, many flat janitors still lived in substandard rooms in buildings that they worked in. In 1920, the union's negotiators set out to change that, demanding that every janitor either be given sufficient wages to allow them to move out of the buildings in which they worked, or that their in-building accommodations be brought up to the standards of other tenants.

However, the CREB now opposed the Flat Janitors Union vociferously. Though the 1917 agreement received initial support from the organization's members, by 1920, rapid inflation in Chicago's housing market caused their leadership to regret basing janitorial wages on rent. Intent on intimidating the union, the CREB

¹⁰³ “Flat Owners Join to Fight Rent Curb,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 27, 1920, 1.

¹⁰⁴ Jentz, “Citizenship, Self-Respect, and Political Power: Chicago's Flat Janitors Trailblaze the Service Employees International Union, 1912-1921,” 4.

¹⁰⁵ Jentz, “Citizenship, Self-Respect, and Political Power: Chicago's Flat Janitors Trailblaze the Service Employees International Union, 1912-1921,” 4.

amassed a significant fund to support a fight against the union.¹⁰⁶ Ultimately, however, the CREB agreed to submit the dispute to an impartial third-party.¹⁰⁷ Possibly due to the influence of Mayor Thompson, the 'impartial' third-party chosen was William Fitzmorris, the city's Chief of Police.¹⁰⁸ Mayor Thompson appointed Fitzmorris, making the police chief a direct beneficiary of the union's political mobilization. Not surprisingly, Fitzmorris' decision was favorable towards the union. While it did not grant all of their demands, it provided some improvements and, importantly, did not give in to the increasing public criticism of the janitors' high wages, or disconnect wages and rents.¹⁰⁹

The Fitzmorris arbitration was corrupt. While the details are unclear, Fitzmorris' decision appears to have been a political payoff from Thompson to Quesse. Perhaps Thompson even pushed the CREB into accepting the arbitration. Though corrupt, the Fitzmorris arbitration proved to be a revolutionary moment for the union that presaged the organization's later political ascension. In 1914, the Flat Janitors Union struggled to gain fair treatment from the courts. Union pickets faced constant police harassment and sometimes violence. Six years later, the flat janitors stood among the major beneficiaries of the Mayor's patronage and exercised political leverage over the Chief of Police. Even if their methods did not fit into the most idealized image of social justice, they represented a tremendous step forward in the ability of barely enfranchised janitors to influence their city. Perhaps in 1920's Chicago, this is what democracy looked like for janitors.

Despite the successes of the flat janitors, the power of craft unions in Chicago continued to slowly decline. Long tired of the high price of labor, and fueled by the growing power of larger corporations, a backlash against

106 "Flat Owners Join to Fight Rent Curb," *Chicago Tribune*, Jentz "Unions, Cartels, and the Political Economy of American Cities: the Chicago Flat Janitors Union in the Progressive Era and 1920s," 58-60, SEIU Historical Records, *A Need for Valor*.

107 "Janitors Will Arbitrate: If Refused, Strike," *Chicago Tribune*, November 28, 1920, 5.

108 "Fitzmorris Picked to Fix Janitors' Pay," *Chicago Tribune*, December 19, 1920, 1. Jentz "Unions, Cartels, and the Political Economy of American Cities: the Chicago Flat Janitors Union in the Progressive Era and 1920s," 59-60. Forgive the ironic scare quotes.

109 Herrick, "Up the Labor Ladder with William F. Quesse," p. 86; Jentz "Unions, Cartels, and the Political Economy of American Cities: the Chicago Flat Janitors Union in the Progressive Era and 1920s," 59.

craft governance had been brewing since the 1905 Teamster Strike. The union-led Building Trades Council (BTC) had long been under fire for policies which, in the name of keeping wages high, increased the cost of building in the city. Though these policies faced consistent legal assault by judges who defined most union activity as an illegal restraint of trade, in 1920, the BTC continued to exercise significant influence over their labor conditions. However, in 1921, the BTC was pressured into accepting the arbitration of Judge Kershaw Landis. Landis issued a broad reaching award which banned most of the BTC's effective tactics, and instituted the open shop in many of the city's trades. When the courts seemed slow to enforce the so-called Landis Award, Chicago businessmen funded the Citizens Committee to Enforce the Landis Award (CCLA). An extremely well funded pressure group, the CCLA used its deep pockets to fund an extensive media and legal campaign against labor unions.¹¹⁰

While the Landis Award did not apply to the flat janitors, their leaders became caught in the same anti-union fever that seemed to spread through Chicago's elite in 1921. Inspired by the success of the Landis Award, the Chicago Crime Commission (CCC), another private group funded by the city's wealthiest residents, provided money and resources to prosecutors in return for prosecutions of labor activists. What resulted was a dragnet of the city's labor movement, arresting labor leaders for both their violent crimes, such as bombing buildings, and their public policies, such as boycotting non-union materials and solidarity strikes.¹¹¹ Unsurprisingly, the CCC targeted the leadership of the flat janitors. On May 13, 1921, ten of the union's leaders, including Bill Quesse, were indicted for a variety of crimes, including extortion and bombing non-union buildings. However, prosecutors had significant trouble convincing a Chicago jury to convict the leaders of the flat janitors, resulting in a hung jury in the first trial. Frustrated by their failure, representatives of the CCC worked to gather evidence against Quesse and his compatriots. During a second trial in May of 1922, Quesse faced a significantly better

¹¹⁰ Cohen, *Racketeers Progress*, 244-246.

¹¹¹ Cohen, *Racketeers Progress*, 251.

prepared prosecution and a skeptical jury. This new jury convicted the Flat Janitor Union's leadership of "conspiracy to boycott" but failed to convict them on any of the more serious, more violent counts.¹¹²

The conviction of Quesse and his fellows was part of a larger pattern in Chicago. Looking beyond the more clearly criminal violence and intimidation which were part of the enforcement of craft governance, courts sought to dismantle the very basis of union power. Central to this attack was an attempt to ban efforts by craft unions to regulate the larger economy. In the case of the flat janitors, prosecutors construed Quesse's efforts to force an employer to honor their contract and provide back wages as a form of extortion.¹¹³ Boycotts, which allowed unions to redirect money away from their opponents, were particularly heinous in the business dominated world of Chicago law. These prosecutions were centrally about ensuring that the large corporate interests' understanding of capitalism, as free of worker intervention, became dominant in Chicago.

After efforts to appeal the convictions failed, the union sought to use political influence to free its leadership.¹¹⁴ Unable to rely on Mayor Thompson, who did not run for re-election in 1923, the union turned to Governor Len Small. Small was an ally of the former Mayor Thompson, and a beneficiary of the union's political support. After his election in 1924, for example, Small wrote Quesse a note thanking him for "guarding my interests."¹¹⁵ The union deluged Small's office with cards signed by their membership, and the tenants of many unionized buildings, noting that they would be supporting Small in his re-election campaign. The union delivered packets of these pledge cards to the governor along with a note from Quesse that read "Gov. Small has been and is the friend of organized labor, and he is entitled to the support of all good union men."¹¹⁶

Through this unsubtle show of political muscle, the union transparently sought to remind Small of his debts to

112 "Quesse and Nine Freed on Bond Pending Appeal," *Chicago Tribune*, October 1, 1922, 18. Jentz "Unions, Cartels, and the Political Economy of American Cities: the Chicago Flat Janitors Union in the Progressive Era and 1920s.", 62-65. Quesse and his fellows were, of course, entirely guilty of the crime of boycotting.

113 SEIU Historical Records, *A Need for Valor*.

114 "What Private Justice Comes To," *Chicago Tribune*, September 22, 1923, 6.

115 Quoted in SEIU Historical Records, *A Need for Valor*.

116 Oscar Hewitt, "Call to Small S Standard Heard By Labor Czars," *Chicago Tribune*, March 8, 1924, 3.

them.¹¹⁷ Writers in the *Tribune* lambasted the campaign as an obvious attempt to intimidate the governor into action, commenting “How many voters' pledge cards for a pardon? How many for ten pardons?”¹¹⁸ When, in April of 1924, Small pardoned the chiefs of the janitor's union, no one was surprised.¹¹⁹ Small's visible show of support for Quesse may have even enhanced his public profile.¹²⁰

Small's pardon proved to be one of a series of new victories for the flat janitors. In 1922, while Quesse was still under indictment, a new contract was arbitrated by Judge Bernard Barasa. Another Thompson appointee, Judge Barasa awarded the flat janitors a favorable contract. Among the provisions of the new contract was the establishment of a Permanent Arbitration Board (PAB) to manage future bargaining between the Flat Janitors Union and the CREB. The PAB consisted of a representative from the union, a representative from the CREB, and a representative from the city, initially Barasa. Considering the political power of the union, the PAB structure guaranteed that the union either controlled or could influence two out of the three members of the board. Essentially, the PAB structure helped the union to guarantee a sympathetic hearing of all major contractual issues. The CREB's negotiators must have known this, but were willing to accept the PAB in return for the union promising to use the arbitration system instead of striking or wielding their increasingly intimidating political power against the board.¹²¹

From the perspective of the rabid anti-unionism of the twenty-first century, the CREB agreeing to this structure may seem odd. Yet the PAB served the interests of the union, the CREB, and Mayor Thompson's allies. Recognizing that the power of the city's craft unions remained under constant challenge, the PAB provided the flat janitors with a way to decrease their dependence on other unions. By endorsing an arbitration

117 Hewitt, “Call to Small S Standard Heard By Labor Czars,” *Chicago Tribune*, p. 3. Jentz “Unions, Cartels, and the Political Economy of American Cities: the Chicago Flat Janitors Union in the Progressive Era and 1920s,” 52.

118 “Quesse Seeks Pardon; Works for Len Small, Parke Brown,” *Chicago Tribune* December 21, 1923, 7.

119 “Small Pardons Quesse and His 9 Labor Aids,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 13, 1924, 6.

120 Thomas Wren, “Quesse Becomes 'Big Boss' of Labor in Illinois,” *Chicago Tribune*, September, 14, 1924, 7.

121 Jentz “Unions, Cartels, and the Political Economy of American Cities: the Chicago Flat Janitors Union in the Progressive Era and 1920s,” 64.

structure, the union enshrined a system that they could shape as much through their political allies, who often served on the board, as they did through labor activity. Through the PAB, the CREB gained a stable, procedurally predictable form of bargaining through a period of rapidly increasing rents. In addition, the PAB reflected the high level of trust that developed between labor and management. Indeed, during the hearings on Quesse's appeals the CREB put up, at best, a token effort to keep the flat janitors' leaders in jail. In many ways, the CREB and the Flat Janitors Union became partners in maximizing the profits of Chicago's apartment buildings.¹²² Obviously, this partnership limited tactical options, but it established a stable bargaining structure that endured until 1972.¹²³ While the union would not dominate every contract negotiation during this fifty year period, the average wages of unionized flat janitors in Chicago remained notably higher than those of unionized flat janitors elsewhere through at least 1977.¹²⁴

The anti-union drive of the early 1920s was less successful than its sponsors expected. Chicago juries proved unwilling to convict many union officials for conducting strikes or boycotts, and many prosecutors found themselves reluctant to anger voters by aggressively pursuing cases. These failures resulted in a change of strategy among anti-labor activists. Instead of focusing on the ways in which unions prevented the free flow of the marketplace, the new corporate crusade against unions focused on their association with organized crime and bootlegging.¹²⁵ By portraying unions as controlled by organized crime, opponents of labor transformed union members and employers into unwitting victims of hoodlums.¹²⁶ Under this new approach, strikes became

122 Jentz "Unions, Cartels, and the Political Economy of American Cities: the Chicago Flat Janitors Union in the Progressive Era and 1920s," 68.

123 Alvin Nagelberg, "CREB Drops Role in Janitor Pay Talks," *Chicago Tribune*, May 4, 1972, sec. 3, 11.

124 "General Executive Board Meeting: Report of Activities, October 1962," Box 1, Folders 82, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University. "General Executive Board Meeting: Meeting minutes of the General Executive Board. April 1963" Box 1, Folders 86, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

125 Cohen, *Racketeers Progress*, 258.

126 David Witwer's work on the concept of the racketeer is perhaps the most comprehensive. See David Witwer, *Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003) & David Witwer *Shadow of the Racketeer: Scandal in Organized Labor* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

rhetorically transformed into mere efforts of crime bosses to extort money from employers and to fatten union accounts for embezzlement.¹²⁷ Critics proposed that these corrupt leaders should not be described as union men, but as racketeers.

By all accounts, significant ties between labor leaders, politicians, and criminals of Chicago existed. As sociologist Robert M. Lombardo reminds us, “Beginning with gambling king Mike McDonald, Chicago's criminal underworld constituted the most powerful political force in the city. The vice lords [and] saloon keepers... achieved an alliance with politicians and police ultimately [assuming] a quasi-legitimate function.”¹²⁸ Fractured into many neighborhoods, Chicago's political coalitions were composed of local, ethnic leaders. These leaders were commonly either under the protection of vice lords or were crime kingpins themselves. In return, aldermen and mayors protected the interests of crime lords so long as they internally regulated their gambling houses and brothels. Some crime lords even supported reform candidates and provided ad hoc financial welfare support for their communities. Such a complicated mixture of legitimate and illegal power produced figures who readily combined politics and vice.¹²⁹

Considering this interweaving of legitimate and illegitimate, legal and illegal, it is not surprising that the craft unions of Chicago significantly engaged with organized crime.¹³⁰ These associations rapidly became problematic for the labor movement in Chicago. Beginning in the 1910s, the rapid expansion of the city's economy led to hordes of new workers, consumers, and employers. As Cohen notes, “As consumer demand expanded, drawing hundreds of new actors into the marketplace, bribery became cheaper than compliance.... gangsters, lured by profit, empowered by their willingness to kill, and uninterested in the rank and file, began

127 Jentz “Unions, Cartels, and the Political Economy of American Cities: the Chicago Flat Janitors Union in the Progressive Era and 1920s,” 60.

128 Robert M. Lombardo, *Organized Crime in Chicago: Beyond the Mafia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 44.

129 Lombardo, 5, 44, 60-69.

130 Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 259-262.

turning unions and associations to their own ends.”¹³¹ Newly empowered gangsters saw craft governance as simply a means of extorting money from employers, and using unions as sources of funds became increasingly common in the labor movement.

As the flood of illicit money into the underworld after Prohibition led to large-scale violence, the association of unions with organized crime became a major public relations problem for the labor movement. While Johnny Torrio briefly maintained peace through strict territorial agreements between gangs, the election of Mayor William Dever in 1923, who attempted to weaken organized crime in the city, put pressure on the gangs that resulted in open warfare.¹³² With Chicago's public becoming increasingly hostile to organized crime, the tarring of unions with the rhetoric of racketeering became an incredibly effective anti-union tool.¹³³

The Flat Janitors Union proved vulnerable to corruption. After his success, William Quesse was well known to spend lavishly. After his death, a viciously critical article in the *Tribune* described him as a man who “liked to be the center of a group. He was willing to pay for this admiration by buying drinks.” Defending him from the charges of the CCC were similarly said to have cost “between \$275,000 and \$300,000.”¹³⁴ Despite these expenses, at death his estate was valued at over \$125,000. Given his generally low salary, it is clear that the leader skimmed money from the union or engaged in some type of extortion.¹³⁵ There is also significant evidence that in some areas of the city, janitors received higher paying positions based on the size of the kickback they provided to the union's agents.¹³⁶ Indeed, the union's connection to former Mayor Thompson intimately linked the union with the underworld.

131 Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 224.

132 Lombardo 80-90.

133 Cohen, *Racketeers Progress*, 259-262.

134 Herrick, “Up the Labor Ladder with William F. Quesse, ” 86.

135 Christenson, 16. Jentz “Unions, Cartels, and the Political Economy of American Cities: the Chicago Flat Janitors Union in the Progressive Era and 1920s,” 60.

136 SEIU Historical, *A Need for Valor*.

Thompson decided not to run for re-election in 1923, and instead pursued an ultimately futile dream of running for the U.S. Senate. He believed that by positioning himself as a progressive, he could gain national attention and power. By the next election in 1927, it was apparent that these efforts would not succeed and Thompson announced his intention to reclaim his old seat. During Thompson's absence, Mayor William Dever, who had been elected with broad support from the labor movement, alienated his former working-class allies by not taking a strong stand against the Landis Award. Facing dissension inside the Democratic Party, Dever was a weak candidate in comparison to Thompson.

Capitalizing on the alienation of labor unions from Dever, Thompson re-framed himself as a friend to the working class.¹³⁷ The former mayor's embrace of organized labor was partially legitimated by his continued relationship with the Flat Janitors Union. With nearly every janitor working in an apartment under their authority, William Quesse's union was an intimidating political presence. To ensure the return of their ally, the union placed their sophisticated electoral machine at his disposal. Never a terribly good grassroots organizer or player of precinct politics, Thompson relied on the janitors to direct much of his political mobilization. As the foremost scholar on Quesse, John Jentz notes, "The union had members in every ward who could put up signs, talk to voters, help people to the polls – the grassroots activities needed in American elections."¹³⁸ With union help, Thompson handily defeated Dever.

The re-election of Thompson in 1927 signaled a new era of political power for the union. A reliable partner in Thompson's new coalition, the Flat Janitors Union gained official sanction and protection. As powerful political players in Chicago politics, they faced little overt challenge from building owners. Working under the PAB structure, the union relied on political influence to win improvements and neglected more traditional forms of workplace activism. Though this turning away from the shop floor to the board room may be

¹³⁷ Bukowski, "Big Bill Thompson," 66-74.

¹³⁸ Jentz "Unions, Cartels, and the Political Economy of American Cities: the Chicago Flat Janitors Union in the Progressive Era and 1920s," 59.

anathema to modern labor activists, the PAB structure would generally provide improved wages and conditions for flat janitors for the next thirty years, all without the need for major strikes.¹³⁹

The Flat Janitors Union achieved something amazing. Yet it is important to also reflect on the costs of the union's association with Thompson. By helping to bring Thompson into power the union, also bought Al Capone's political protection. In the next few years, Capone's war with rival gangsters would turn Chicago into a blood bath, culminating in the Valentine's Day Massacre of 1929. The forces released by this conflict would come back to haunt the union in the 1930s when it struggled with a significant infiltration of Mafiosos.

The alliance with Thompson introduces a sizable element of moral ambiguity into the history of the Flat Janitor's Union, neatly illustrated through the career of Oscar F. Nelson. Born to Swedish immigrants in 1884, Nelson got his start organizing postal workers and worked as a State Factory Inspector while going to law school at night.¹⁴⁰ Already an active supporter of Quesse before becoming an attorney, Nelson served as the union's primary legal advisor charged with "taking care of all court matters connected with the Union's affairs."¹⁴¹ The architect of the union's efforts to receive an International charter, Nelson was also critical to the all of the union's early contract negotiations.¹⁴² Increasingly influential in the city's labor circles, the union used its political muscle to make Nelson the vice-president of the CFL and the alderman of the 46th Ward in 1923.¹⁴³ While technically elected as a Democrat, Nelson led the faction opposed to Mayor Dever and sought to break the power of Democratic party boss George Brennan.¹⁴⁴ By the time Thompson was re-elected, Nelson leveraged the political labor of the flat janitors to build an extensive personal political machine that crossed party lines. Through his allegiance to flat janitors, Nelson became Thompson's "floor manager" in the city

139 This would become problematic for the union in the 1960s. See Chapter Eight.

140 *Federation News*, November 23rd, 1935.

141 "Judge Nelson Sworn In," *Public Safety*, January 1936, 5.

142 "Judge Nelson Sworn In," *Public Safety*, January 1936, 5.

143 Willaim McFetridge, "Organizing Municipal Employees," *Public Safety*, 9. October 1929, "Judge Nelson Sworn In," *Public Safety*, January 1936, 5.

144 James Doherty, "To Win Office Scorn Politics But Get Votes," *Chicago Tribune*, March 17, 1946, sec 3, 1.

council, and was publicly lauded as “labor’s alderman.”¹⁴⁵ Always active in the union, Nelson became a living symbol of the union’s continuing clout and influence. During his time on the city council, however, Nelson developed connections with Al Capone. At the same time that he was publicly Thompson’s ally on the council, many believed that he also represented Capone and provided him with political cover.¹⁴⁶ Like the Flat Janitors Union as a whole, Nelson’s legacy encourages ambivalence: it would be unfair to describe Nelson as neither a powerful advocate for labor nor as a proxy for the Chicago Outfit—in the 1920s he was both.

William Quesse died on February 19, 1927. According to union lore, he simply worked himself to death. Mourned by unionists, politicians, and some building owners alike, the response to Quesse’s demise reveals how far the union had come during his lifetime. Where the death of an organizer of janitors might once have gone unremarked and unnoticed by most, Quesse’s funeral was attended by a veritable “who’s who” of Illinois politics. Governor Small and several state senators served as his pall-bearers while a host of judges, aldermen, and other figures watched.¹⁴⁷

In later years, the reputation of Bill Quesse grew to out-sized proportions inside the union. One member related in 1951 that Quesse was “the Washington of Building Services [and] a Chicago apartment janitor.... Almost everyone can understand why a man would die for his country. But only someone who has been gripped by the crusade for better living standards, which unionism is, could understand why the first BSEIU president worked himself into an early grave.”¹⁴⁸ *Building Service*, the key journal of the New York BSEIU, would unabashedly remember Quesse as a working-class hero in an April 1940 retrospective, “Everybody knew him as just plain Bill, a son of the working classes, a flat janitor who rebelled.”¹⁴⁹ Even at the time of his

145 “Judge Nelson Sworn In,” *Public Safety*, January 1936, 5.

146 “Ald. O. F. Nelson Speeds Home To Give Racket Bail” *Chicago Tribune*, August 6, 1933, sec. 1, 2.

147 SEIU Historical Files, “William Quesse Years.”

148 SEIU Historical Files, “William Quesse Years.”; Doherty, “To Win Office Scorn Politics But Get Votes,” *Chicago Tribune*, sec 3, 1.

149 *Building Service*, April 1940.

death, memories of Quesse began to take on a mythic quality. His priest, Father Malloy noted, “His great leadership helped to make Chicago... he was a martyr to the cause.”¹⁵⁰ In the CFL's journal, *The Federation News*, Oscar Nelson repeated Quesse's last words, “Good bye, I'm going now” with near reverence.¹⁵¹ In internal union documents, Nelson claimed that Quesse's last words were actually, “stick and protect my baby [Local 1].”¹⁵² Even in death, the words of Quesse carried sufficient weight to buttress Nelson's position in the union.

Quesse's legacy was complex. After his death, a large sum of money was found in a safety deposit box registered to him. To many this was, not unreasonably, proof that he had been engaged in one or more forms of corruption. Yet it would be unfair to dismiss the tremendous successes that the flat janitors achieved under his leadership. Between 1917 and 1921, the wages of some janitors increased by four times.¹⁵³ The labor-management relationship that Quesse cultivated helped to end the violence and acrimonious labor actions of the union's early days. As the *Chicago Sun* related in 1946, “Meet the union which hasn't had a [city-wide] strike in 43 years. That's the proud boast of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union... The janitors' formula for settling disputes without strikes provides for working during negotiations of any type and for voluntary submission of disputed points for settlement to the Permanent Board of Arbitration [sic] established by the union and the Chicago Real Estate Board 29 years ago.”¹⁵⁴ Perhaps most importantly, Quesse's union redefined the place of janitors in the city. While the work of flat janitors remained difficult, their political power and influence made them a force worthy of respect, and fear.

150 SEIU Historical Files, “William Quesse Years.”

151 *The Federation News*, February 26th, 1927.

152 “General Executive Board., Meeting; meeting minutes of the General Executive Board re: election of International President, March 1927” Box 1, Folder 2, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

153 Brown & Wilson, 6.

154 Quoted in BSEIU, *25th Anniversary of the Presidency* (circa 1960), Box 1, Folder 11, SEIU Historical Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University. The 43 years figure is a bit misleading as there were several strikes, as discussed earlier, in the late 1910s that were quite acrimonious even if they were not *technically* city-wide.

Conclusion

The union that Quesse left behind was far from perfect; the interconnection between the flat janitors, craft unions, employers, and city hall brought the union power but also embedded it in a system rife with corruption. Through their innovative approach to organizing, the BSEIU had become embedded in networks of power and influence that would define, and constrain, the union for decades to come. Often the collaborative relationship that emerged between employers and the union limited the scope of the union's ambition. Political power could also be a double edged sword. While connections with political elites gave the union leverage, the union was also required to be loyal to their patrons and provide a degree of stability. The practical realities of alliances with figures like Thompson ensured that the union would become associated with Chicago's underworld. As organized crime increasingly infiltrated the labor movement in the 1930s, these connections would come back to haunt the union.

At the same time, however, these failures should not completely overshadow the union's success. The Flat Janitors Union dramatically impacted the lives of many building service workers. Improved contracts and better working conditions returned dignity to thousands of janitors. Contractual prohibitions against forcing wives and children to work ended family labor, a system that had been deeply objectionable to most flat janitors. Moving out of dark basements into far better appointed apartments had metaphorically brought janitors back into “the sun”—a metaphor that appears constantly in remembrances of Quesse. In a decade, flat janitors gained the admiration of fellow unionists and the grudging respect of their employers. Where janitors were once “slaves”—to use another metaphor that recurs constantly in BSEIU literature—unionization had made them “free.” All of this was accomplished despite significant tactical disadvantages, such as low barriers to employment and dependence on employers for housing. Unionization helped flat janitors to change from being

among the least respected workers in Chicago to having a fearsome reputation for political influence.

I describe the Flat Janitors Union's use of political, labor, and business alliances as civic unionism partially because it captures the community orientation of leaders like Quesse. Quesse did not simply want to improve conditions for flat janitors, he wanted to change their place in their community. In this he succeeded. Forty years after his death, flat janitors remained a force to be reckoned with. After Quesse's death, flat janitors could not be described as “furnace room slaves.” Instead, flat janitors held stakes in their community, and a role in the administration of their city. Unionism among flat janitors thus meant more than wages and a modicum of respect, it represented a means through which a group of unskilled workers became active parts of the machinery of politics, and craft, in Chicago.

Modern social movement or community unions share exactly these ambitions. However, they differ in key ways—perhaps the starkest being their emphasis on democracy and high-participation tactics such as protests and marches.¹⁵⁵ Inside the Flat Janitors Union, Quesse became something akin to a saint. Union publications discussed the successes of the union as if he brought them into being through the sheer force of his will. There is no evidence that the common flat janitor ever played a major role in the operation of the union. Where modern community unions seek to engage their membership directly in the political process, the Flat Janitors Union instead became intercessor between janitors and the state—representing their interests in return for their political labor during every election cycle. Civic unionism did not so much challenge existing political and economic structures as much as it demanded a place for flat janitors in them.

These tendencies came from the Flat Janitors Union's roots in the craft unions of Chicago. Seeking to imitate the interwoven agreements of craft unions and employers, flat janitors established their own degree of marketplace regulation based on political pull and power. In this they took

¹⁵⁵ Janice Fine, “Community Unions and the Revival of the American Labor Movement,” in *Politics & Society* 33(1) March 2005.

advantage of the critical support of groups such as the Carpenters Union and the Teamsters to gain a foothold before building their own political power base. The political fluidity of 1920's Chicago also created opportunities that the union exploited to advance their position through Thompson's Republican coalition. Civic unionism, then, must be considered a phenomena with a distinctly Chicaguan heritage. More than philosophy or ideology, the initial conditions that the union developed under, shaped their approach to organization. With apologies to George Washington Plunkitt: the flat janitors saw their opportunities, and they took them.

Yet in the approach the union developed, a labor activist today might find a degree of hope. Flat janitors lacked all of the qualities that supposedly make workers valuable and potential material for unionism. Their employers believed they could easily be replaced. Their jobs lacked educational requirements. Their diffuse employment discouraged solidarity. Their employers could also evict them from their homes. Their community did not believe that they deserved better conditions. All of these problems should have drained their collective power into nothing, but they did not. Instead, the flat janitors achieved a series of victories over the next forty years. Despite all of their flaws, such a victory deserves recognition and should provide hope, even in the eclipse of much of the American labor movement.

With the return of Thompson to city hall, the union gained a powerful ally in the political economy of Chicago. With the BSEIU freshly re-chartered and given an extensive jurisdiction by the AFL, the union's leaders looked beyond the city's flats to the public sector. At a time where public sector unionism was uncommon, the BSEIU found ways to use patronage and corruption to gain control of the building services throughout Chicago's schools, courts, and city offices. As their power in the public sector grew, the BSEIU

would further blur the lines between labor and political activity, while ending the practice of child labor in Chicago's schools.

III

LOBBY DAY

Introduction

In 1928, the Chicago Board of Education (CBE) signed an astonishingly generous agreement with the janitors who worked throughout the city's expansive school system. Despite a pending budget crisis and calls in the press to cut school expenses, the new agreement provided janitors with better wages, vacation time, and protection from arbitrary dismissal. Organized into two locals of the BSEIU, 7 and 46, the school janitors were extended many of the same protections enjoyed by the powerful flat janitors of Local 1. While organizers from the BSEIU worked among the school janitors for years, their success came more through political capital than shop-floor militancy. Using leverage and alliances among the city's political elites, the BSEIU capitalized on this success and organized the remainder of the city's municipal janitorial corp—even expanding into state institutions such as hospitals.

While some labor historians have dismiss the political ambitions of craft unions like the BSEIU as overly limited or inconsequential, recent scholarship has rehabilitated them as political actors with legitimate goals. As Michael Kazin, Julie Greene, Elizabeth Sanders, Georg Leidenberger and other historians have suggested, craft unionists often possessed tremendous political power on the local level.¹ In some cities, including Chicago and San Francisco, the political influence of craft unions became so great that, as Andrew Wender Cohen puts it, “[Their power] calls into question the very distinction between economy and polity.”² Though craft unions may have lacked the revolutionary ambitions of the Industrial Workers of the World, they used political leverage to reshape local labor markets to suit their view of a moral economy.

¹ See Introduction.

² Cohen, *The Racketeers' Progress*, 53.

Though a growing consensus of labor historians argue that electoral politics activity have been ever present throughout the American labor movement, many commentators believe that the modern labor movement fixates on politics to an unreasonable extent. Often focusing on the SEIU, these journalists and scholars believe that the supposed political power of unions, forces moderation, disrupts militancy, discourages member participation, and encourages the leadership of remote, politically-sensitive, elite leaders. Steve Early illustrates this through the example of the mainstream labor movement's failures to capitalize on the energy of the Occupy Wall Street Movement. Noting that Occupy Wall Street “gave our timorous, unimaginative... unions an ideological dope-slap... [However,] most unions, pre- and post-Occupy, utilize the same high-priced Democratic Party consultants, focus groups, and opinion polls that fuel the Obama administration.”³ Sharing the same ideological and policy making structure with the Democratic Party, unions pursued a limited form of unionism intended to not offend their allies. Entranced with legitimacy and the trappings of political power, Early contends, the labor movement lost the ability to operate without political allies. Even AFL-CIO president John Sweeney's claims of “mov[ing] beyond 'politics as usual'... is [only] deal making and check writing involving the GOP.”⁴

Though Early's viewpoint is characteristically Manichean, in his eloquent jeremiad *The Death and Life of American Labor*, Stanley Aronowitz argues that a focus on influencing politicians and other elites has continually undermined the post-New Deal labor movement. Aronowitz proposes that the system of labor relations built by the Wagner Act “integrated [labor] into the prevailing political and economic system; so much so that [the modern labor movement] not only complies with the law but also lacks an ideology opposed to the prevailing capitalist system.”⁵ The drive to maintain a close alliance with the Democratic Party has resulted “in

3 Steve Early, *Save Our Unions: Dispatches from a Movement in Distress* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013), 12.

4 Steve Early, *Embedded d with Organized Labor: Journalist Reflection on the Class War at Home* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009), 237.

5 Stanley Aronowitz, *The Death and Life of American Labor: Towards a New Workers' Movement* (New York: Verso Books, 2014), 19.

a time when liberal reform is dead [and labor is] driven into a corner where they huddle impotent.”⁶ Labor leaders have been seduced by the promise of political legitimacy and “enjoy hobnobbing with mayors, governors, and other elected officials and national leaders. [They] are never more joyous than when they are invited to have a dinner at the White House.”⁷ Far from empowering unions, Aronowitz argues the promise of political power seduced the labor movement into a false sense of complacency. While few historians express this view with such flourish, the idea that the post-Wagner system and the promise of political legitimacy have undermined the militancy of the labor movement are common themes across the field.

Arguments against the political fixations of the modern labor movement deserve serious consideration as they hold a great deal of truth. Anyone who closely observes the labor movement's many failures to effect policy changes—such as the disappearance of the Employee Free Choice Act from President Obama's agenda—must admit that unions receive much in return for political support. Yet the example of the school janitors in Chicago reminds us that electoral politics once proved to be a superb investment for the labor movement. In return for the support of their members, Mayor Thompson helped the union to effectively seize control over both sides of the bargaining table. Such a success provided the union's members with improved conditions, wages, and respect on the job—not to mention ending the use of children as school janitors.

I argue that the process through which the school janitors of Chicago became unionized illustrates many of the core tactical moves that distinguishes civic unionism from other forms of labor activity. Grady and McFetridge never attempted to use economic leverage, solidarity, or the threats of labor actions to compel the CBE to obey them. The market value of the labor of school janitors, and the ease with which they could be replaced, did not play a major role in determining the outcome of negotiations. Instead, the non-economic,

6 Aronowitz, 65.

7 Aronowitz, 82.

political power of the union served as the main lever that forced the CBE to come to terms with the union. Through these efforts, Grady and McFetridge effectively transformed the labor market for school janitors by combining the value of each janitor's labor with some fraction of their ability to force the hand of city agencies. Certainly many craft unions described by Cohen used politics to promote their causes, but the school janitors of Chicago achieved victory almost purely through their union's influence.

The success of the school janitors in Chicago is particularly meaningful—and particularly indicative of the potential value of political alliances—because of its distinctiveness. Despite their political influence in many cities, the expansion of unions into the public sector was limited prior to the 1950s. While many cities contracted union workers for construction or carpentry, unionization among distinctively public workers, such as bureaucrats or teachers, remained limited. As historian Joseph Slater observes in his superb *Public Workers*, fledgling efforts to organize the expanding public sector in the 1900s and 1910s were largely eradicated by the wave of repression and negative public opinion after the 1919 Boston Police Strike which “doubly cursed [the labor movement]... First the Boston debacle provided alarming evidence that strikes by government workers were dangerous... Second, the example of police heightened the difficulty of seeing all public employees as 'workers': the type of people who should have the right to form unions... it contributed far more than any other single event to the peculiarly American view that public sector labor relations were something entirely distinct from private sector labor relations.”⁸ Under these conditions, the prospects for public sector unionism remained limited.

That the 1920s represented the low-tide point of public sector unionism makes the successes of the BSEIU in Chicago all the more impressive and distinct. However, to accomplish such a feat, the

8 Joseph E. Slater, *Public Workers: Government Employee Unions, the Law and the State, 1900-1962*, (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2004), 14. Joseph Slater is extremely influential on this chapter. Not only does his book *Public Workers* provide a solid framework for discussing the political development of public sector employment, but his comments on a conference paper I presented at the North American Labor History Conference on the Locals 7 and 46 are extremely influential on the structure of this chapter.

union leaders worked through the corrupt regime of Chicago's Mayor William "Big Bill" Thompson. Through their alliance with Thompson, union leaders found a place for school janitors in the mayor's structure of patronage and graft. However, for their alliance with Thompson to bear fruit, the union would first have to contend with the theoretically independent Chicago Board of Education (CBE). Luckily for the BSEIU, a dispute over how history was taught in Chicago would give Thompson the excuse he needed to take control over the CBE.

The Proving Ground of Democracy

"The story of the schools of Chicago through the torrential Twenties and the troubled Thirties has been a story of siege.... The tendency of the times made the Chicago public schools nothing better than a battlefield."

- Margaret Haley, *Battleground*

Writing in the mid-1930s, the fabled founder of the Chicago Federation of Teachers and notoriously hard-edged Illinois lobbyist Margaret Haley reflected that "Chicago, like London, mirrors the eye of the beholder. To Jane Addams it was forty times forty playgrounds, a huge social experimental station for the children of the city streets. To Clarence Darrow it has been [the] arena for forensic debate of legal conditions...To me Chicago is the proving ground of American democracy."⁹ Given her experiences with the CBE it is difficult to know how such a "proving ground" should be judged.

Always controversial, the CBE of 1928 was the heir of a peculiar and contradictory tradition. Remembered today as the target and sometimes ally of renowned educational reformers such as John Dewey and Ella Flagg Young, the CBE was well known in the 1910s and 1920s for corruption and waste. The school boards appointed by Mayor Thompson were particularly notorious for emphasizing illicit profit over quality of instruction. As Haley noted in her autobiography, the CBE's corruption made lobbying difficult because "the

9 Margaret A. Haley, Robert L. Reid ed, *Battleground: The Autobiography of Margaret A. Haley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 271. For more detail on Haley's life see also Mary J. Herrick, *The Chicago Schools: A Social and Political History* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1971), Marjorie Murphy, *Blackboard Unions: The AFT and the NEA* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) and Kate Rousmaniere *Citizen Teacher: the Life and Leadership of Margaret Haley* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

tendency... was so well known that the Legislature [was reluctant] to give any tax rate increase lest the Thompson Board... gobble it up for some other purpose and not make any increase in the teachers' salaries.”¹⁰ While a few of Thompson's appointees were devoted to improving Chicago's schools, Haley described the “majority of the Board [as having] little interest in things academic.”¹¹ Instead the CBE, and the Thompsonian Republicans they represented, used the schools for political and monetary advantage “[by] render[ing] unto Caesar [Thompson] everything that was his and a little bit more. New schools went up like mushrooms on the prairies, not because they were needed but because their building was part of the political system, benefiting builders, contractors, and other friends of the machine.”¹² The CBE under Thompson can thus be understood as an integral part of the peculiarly incestuous coalition of contractors, unions, and politicians that made up the Thompson political machine.

Haley and Chicago's teachers greeted William Dever as a savior when he defeated Thompson's chosen successor in the election of 1923. However, Dever quickly squandered this goodwill through the appointment of Willam McAndrew as school superintendent.¹³ On paper, McAndrew seemed like a good choice. The former Associate Superintendent of Schools in New York City, McAndrew received respect from teachers and reformers alike. In practice he proved to be politically and socially tone deaf. Visibly and loudly supported by the city's elite Union League Club, which Haley viewed as “one of the high alters of privilege,” McAndrew rapidly alienated the many working people in Chicago.¹⁴

McAndrew proved adept only at stepping on the toes of teachers. Believing that soliciting input from teachers wasted time, he banned the use of Teacher's Councils, an institution cherished by Haley and her supporters. Animositities grew further when the CBE, with McAndrew's support, placed onerous restrictions on

¹⁰ Haley, 187.

¹¹ Haley, 189.

¹² Haley, 189.

¹³ Haley, 203.

¹⁴ Haley, 207. Haley's chapter on McAndrew is aptly titled “Carpetbagger.”

the speech of teachers outside of the classroom. Similarly, McAndrew offended teachers, and working-class Chicagoans, by proposing a two-track system of instruction in which children who were not expecting to finish high school would be directed after grade school to a vocational system. Other cost-cutting proposals included replacing traditional patterns of instruction with the factory-like platoon system, fostering the impression that McAndrew represented manufacturers and the University of Chicago.¹⁵

Within a year of his ascension, controversies around McAndrew helped to throw Dever's coalition into disarray and cemented the Mayor's reputation as out-of-touch with common Chicagoans. Haley described McAndrew's reforms to Chicago schools as "a system for the advantage of the factory owner and operator, not for the child in the schools. It was an exemplification of the idea... that the less children knew about cultural values, the better automaton they became in factory service."¹⁶ Historian Mary Herrick delivered a superb postmortem of McAndrew's tenure, noting that the push against the superintendent did not come from "the Chicago of the thick rugs of the Union League Club, or the Chicago of the Association of Commerce... This was the Chicago of Yerkes and Lorimer, of Al Capone... [the Chicago] of bought votes... [the Chicago that] McAndrew had ignored all indications of... in his years as superintendent."¹⁷ When Dever failed to sufficiently distance himself from McAndrew, he drove yet another nail into his increasingly air-tight political coffin.¹⁸ By

15 Haley, 209. The platoon system was a proposal by McAndrew that sought to cut expenses by moving grade school students from teacher to teacher instead of having a single teacher per class. Haley and many others objected to the system because it seemed to replicate the rhythms of the factory as children as young as 6 were expected to move from classroom to classroom with mechanical precision. In addition, to accommodate more students, platoon schools had 10 to 70 percent more students than they could seat in classrooms. This resulted in a longer school day in which students were commonly at loose ends waiting for their next class to begin.

16 Haley, 211.

17 Herrick, 167.

18 For a damning discussion of Dever's political failures see Douglas Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson, Chicago and the Politics of Image* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1998) 149-168. While Dever's failure to get re-elected is sometimes blamed on Al Capone's alliance with Thompson, Dever likely could have survived the close election (he did get 49% of the vote) were it not for his alienation of a wide variety of groups including teachers and several factions in the city's labor movement. This is not to completely dismiss Dever, however, who certainly does deserve praise as one of the most successful reformers in the city during the early 20th century. For a sympathetic assessment of Dever's time as mayor see John R. Schmidt, *The Mayor Who Cleaned up Chicago: A Political Biography of William E. Dever* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989).

the next election, Haley and her followers came to view the corrupt governance of Mayor Thompson as superior to the political incoherence of Dever and active anti-unionism of McAndrew.

Hell-bent on regaining the mayor's office after several lackluster years out of office, Thompson saw an opportunity in the controversy surrounding McAndrew. In 1926, McAndrew dismissively rejected the efforts of one of Thompson's remaining appointees on the CBE to remove history texts deemed “pro-British” from the city's schools.¹⁹ Skillfully weaving McAndrew's contempt into a narrative of treason, Thompson made the elimination of the city's “pro-British” school superintendent a major campaign platform.²⁰ With rhetorical fire that surprised commentators, Thompson declared that McAndrew and his elite cronies were attempting to “destroy the love of America in the hearts of children by encouraging teachers to attend special classes at 'Chicago University' [University of Chicago] at which a text was used which pictured George Washington as a rebel and a great dis-loyalist.”²¹ Thompson went on to call McAndrew nothing more than a “tool of the king” and spoke at length of his desire to punch King George.²² Connecting McAndrew to Dever, Thompson indicted his opponents as anti-patriotic and declared that, “Bill Thompson stands for America first, Dever stands for America seventh.”²³

It would be far too easy to dismiss Thompson's rhetoric as ridiculous and meaningless rabble rousing, but his words were rooted in a subtle understanding of his constituents.²⁴ As Douglas Bukowski argues in his delightful biography of Thompson, “[H]is demagogy was far more relevant than detractors imagined... Thompson offered his audiences a double dose of emotional release. His 'king' could just as well be their 'boss,' 'millionaire' or 'newspaper publisher,' along with 'czar,' 'emperor,' or 'kaiser.' Dissatisfied workers also may once

19 Herrick, 167.

20 Bukowski, *The Politics of Image*, 183.

21 Quoted in Herrick, 166.

22 Herrick, 166. As Herrick notes, it is difficult to know which King George Thompson meant and it is somewhat unclear if he realized there was more than one.

23 Quoted in Bukowski, *The Politics of Image*, 183.

24 For a classic dismissal of Thompson see Herrick, 166.

have been unhappy subjects.... He did not merely entertain with his threats against King George—he encouraged the fantasies of listeners who felt they had tyrants enough in their lives.”²⁵ McAndrew provided Thompson with a perfect caricature of an out-of-touch, and somewhat suspect, Anglo elite. While he may have chosen farcical means for tarring McAndrew as such, Thompson's listeners may have understood this as simply a metaphor or stand-in for the seeming disdain that the Superintendent held for the workers and the teachers of the city.

After Thompson won re-election in April of 1927, the new mayor rapidly moved to take vengeance against McAndrew. Focusing on gaining control of the theoretically independent CBE, Thompson secured the support of the majority of CBE members who objected to McAndrew's political independence. These Thompsonians cemented their hold on the board by electing J. Lewis Coath, a well known supporter of the mayor, to the presidency of the board. Upon taking his position, Coath promptly summoned McAndrew before the CBE and held a series of sensational hearings in which a parade of witnesses berated the Superintendent as un-American.²⁶

During the hearings it became clear that Thompson had fully consolidated his power over the CBE. The *Chicago Tribune*, known as pro-McAndrew, described the CBE as having been “obeying its master's [Thompson's] voice” throughout the proceedings.²⁷ In many ways Thompson's control of the CBE and persecution of McAndrew had little to do with Chicago's schools, and everything to do with the Mayor's love of political theater. Accusing McAndrew of encouraging history teachers to promote an Anglo-centric version of the Revolutionary War and to exclude the experiences of Germans and the Irish, Coath drove home

25 Bukowski, *The Politics of Image*, 183-187. It is important to not think of Dever as any kind of saint – much of his appeal in the 1927 campaign was based on race-baiting Thompson by claiming that he represented the African-American community. One common slogan used by the Democrats was “Thompson – Me Africa First.” From this perspective it is difficult to have much sympathy for Devers. See Bukowski, 182.

26 Herrick, 169-170.

27 “Now Its Dr. McAndrew's Turn,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 10, 1928, 10.

Thompson's portrayal of Dever's appointees as anti-immigrant and anti-Chicagoan.²⁸ One of the CBE's attorneys further amplified this point, declaring that in his treatment of McAndrew, "Mayor Thompson [is] the leader of the battle on un-American histories."²⁹ When the board ultimately ousted McAndrew from his post, few were surprised.³⁰

With McAndrew's power broken and Thompson's control of the CBE unchallenged, the Mayor's allies saw an opportunity to claim the spoils of victory in the form of jobs and contracts. In the coming years, graft and profiteering would expand to unprecedented heights, critically straining the CBE's budget. But the Thompson coalition's new dominance of the CBE not only resulted in corruption, it also provided the BSEIU with the means to get school janitors a modicum of respect and support. In Chicago, justice and corruption were not always opposed.

Vote for the Crook, It's Important

"[Democrats tried] to beat Bill [Thompson] with the better element vote. The trouble with Chicago is that there ain't much better element."

- Will Rogers³¹

While much of the public sector remained unorganized, the working conditions of school janitors were particularly bad. Even the CBE readily admitted that the conditions that school janitors labored under were far worse than existed in the private sector.³² Pay was exceptionally low for janitors and many were employed for

28 Bukowski, *The Politics of Image*, 184.

29 "McAndrew Trial Finale Is Spent Praising Mayor," *Chicago Tribune*, March 15, 1928, 16.

30 Herrick, 170. For more on the politics surrounding McAndrew and his connection to Dever see Paul Michael Green & Melvin G. Holi eds, *The Mayors*.

31 Quoted in Bukowski, *The Politics of Image*, 185. The subtitle is a reference to the famous anonymously produced bumper sticker and very unofficial slogan of Edwin Edwards' 1991 Louisiana gubernatorial campaign. Edwards was well known for being a corrupt politician but was running against the infamous David Duke in the Democratic primary. Liberal Democrats urged each other to vote for Edwards despite his corruption through slogans like "Vote for the Crook. It's Important" and "Vote for the Lizard, not the Wizard." See "The No Win Election" *TIME Magazine*, November 25, 1991. There is, of course, another layer of irony to this title because Thompson, like Edwards, was supported by the African-American community in response to an openly racist campaign. While, of course, it would be an error to compare Dever to David Duke, some of the same underlying racial dynamics were present in both cases. See Bukowski, *The Politics of Image*, 182 for more on Dever and race.

32 "Chicago Board of Education: Custodial Litigation, 1927" Box 6. Folder 7, Otto Schmidt Papers, Chicago History Museum. Hereafter Otto Schmidt Papers.

only a handful of hours a day. Perhaps most shocking to modern sensibilities, child workers, often poor school children, were commonly used by schools as janitors.³³ The CBE claimed that they were not responsible for these conditions because janitors were not directly employed by the city. Instead, school janitors labored under an indirect system of contracting run by a corp of semi-independent Engineer-Custodians. The CBE paid each Engineer-Custodian a lump sum based on the square footage of the buildings that they serviced. Since most of the buildings were far too large to be serviced by a single person, in practice each Engineer-Custodian employed a significant workforce of janitors and other auxiliary personnel.³⁴

The CBE provided only weak protections for its indirectly employed workers. The board mandated that school janitors be paid a minimum wage of \$.50 per hour but claimed little control over labor conditions. Workers under this system had neither a guarantee of working hours, nor any overtime protection, sick days, or paid vacation time. Without union or civil service protection, they were commonly subject to arbitrary firings and discipline.³⁵

The indirect labor regime set up by the CBE allowed Engineer-Custodians to exploit school janitors. Since the lump-sum payment structure provided Engineer-Custodians with an incentive to cut labor costs to an absolute minimum, wages were low and the working hours were erratic. According to William McFetridge, a leader in the BSEIU who would later become its president, the real pay for school janitors ranged widely from \$40 to \$75 a month.³⁶ Always a fan of rhetorical flourish, McFetridge declared that the “starvation wages [of school janitors] are un-American and all of our tax paying bodies would not knowingly foster such conditions and wages... if they were appraised of the facts.”³⁷ Even the Director of Labor for the CBE felt horrified by the

33 Interestingly child labor was banned in theory but appears to have been widely practiced. See “School Board to Adjust Pay of Engineers,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 29th, 1920, 10.

34 Chicago Board of Education, *Chicago Board of Education Proceedings*, August 3, 1927.

35 William McFetridge, “Organizing Municipal Employees,” *Public Safety*, October 1929, 9; Otto Schmidt Papers.

36 William McFetridge, “Organizing Municipal Employees,” *Public Safety*, October 1929, 9.

37 McFetridge, “Organizing Municipal Employees,” 9.

conditions of school janitors, noting, “Most [janitors were] employed but two or three hours a day... Many children were employed.”³⁸ Under such conditions, unionization seemed difficult, if not impossible. Without a central employer to negotiate with, the union would be forced to negotiate with literally hundreds of Engineer-Custodians. The Engineer-Custodians could easily frustrate such an organizing drive by utilizing the school's natural pool of strikebreakers--children.³⁹

In addition to all of these challenges, public sector unionism lacked even the vaguest legal framework in Illinois. While much of the labor movement in the late 1920s existed in a legal limbo, the situation of public-sector workers proved especially murky. Considered outside of the normal conventions of contract law, many believed that signing a contract with a public union would be a breach of the Illinois law. These conditions further complicated bargaining because, even after successful organization, at best a union could achieve a formal, yet difficult-to-enforce, agreement with employers.⁴⁰

Some, however, believed that these challenges could be overcome. Prior to the formation of the BSEIU, a young woman named Elizabeth Grady gained a charter from the AFL for the organization of school janitors. Grady was noted by the *Chicago Tribune* as having the “distinction of being the first woman business agent of a union composed of both men and women.”⁴¹ Grady attempted to change conditions for school janitors through direct, piecemeal negotiations with Custodian-Engineers as an adjunct to lobbying the CBE for direct employment.⁴² While Grady proved herself to be a superb organizer, her efforts to organize school janitors met with little success. As she recalled in 1940, all the original efforts accomplished “in those days [was collecting] 50c a month dues.”⁴³ Despite this, Grady's efforts gained the attention of William Quesse and the Flat Janitors

38 Otto Schmidt Papers.

39 Otto Schmidt Papers.

40 Slater, 113.

41 “No Rough Stuff” Edict of Woman Business Agent,” *Chicago Tribune*, December, 11, 1920, 1.

42 “No Rough Stuff” Edict of Woman Business Agent,” *Chicago Tribune*.

43 *Proceedings of the Eighth General Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 38

Union, who saw her small organization as a potential bridgehead into the public sector. Recognizing that her organization needed the backing of an international union, Grady became the chief architect of the transformation of the Flat Janitors Union into the BSEIU.⁴⁴

Beginning in 1927, the BSEIU of Chicago began to focus significant resources into organizing school janitors. Emboldened by their increasing political prominence, the union funded a drive to organize school maintenance workers into two locals. The significantly smaller Local 7 was headed by Grady and held jurisdiction only over janitresses. The larger Local 46, headed by the rising organizer McFetridge, held jurisdiction over male janitors and furnace maintenance staff, known at the time as assistant firemen.⁴⁵ The division between the locals would continue until they were finally merged in 1955.⁴⁶

In 1927, a court case masterminded by Grady provided the BSEIU with an opportunity to effectively organize school janitors. An 1898 decision of the Illinois Supreme Court placed all CBE employees, except for teachers, under the city's civil service regime. By employing janitors and technicians who maintained furnace systems indirectly through Engineer-Custodians, the CBE effectively dodged this requirement. After years of abuse at the hands of Engineer-Custodians, John J. Brennan, a fireman, filed a BSEIU backed lawsuit against the city.⁴⁷ The judge decided the resulting case, *Brennan v. Ellicott*, in Brennan's favor in March of 1927. After the city ran out the appeals process that June, the CBE became legally bound to replace the system of paying

44 "General Executive Board Meeting: meeting minutes, September 1955"Box 1, Folders 49, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

45 The cause of the newly gendered split in what had been an integrated local prior to the organization of the International is obscure. As some other locals were not gender segregated, my guess is that this was the result of men and women working in slightly different jobs--men tended to be more involved with external maintenance than women and to facilitate the organization of assistant firemen, who were exclusively men. It is also a bit difficult to pin down the exact numbers of workers in each Local but by 1940, Local 46 was approximately three times the size of Local 7. See BSEIU, *Proceedings of the Eighth General Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, (Chicago: BSEIU, 1940), 6-7.

46 "General Executive Board Meeting: meeting minutes, September 1955"Box 1, Folders 49, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

47 Interestingly Brennan's job, the highest grade of fireman, was never covered under the BSEIU's negotiations. However, it was covered under negotiations conducted with the Firemen and Oilers.

lump sums with the direct employment of janitors and firemen.⁴⁸ *Brennan v. Ellicott* redefined the legal situation of Chicago's school workers. In the same way that the growing dominance of the Chicago Real-Estate Board helped promote the organization of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union by centralizing bargaining, *Brennan* provided Locals 7 and 46 with a single politically accountable bargaining partner.⁴⁹

While centralized bargaining cleared the path for unionization, the CBE had little inherent reason to bargain with the newly organized locals. Indeed, the CBE had a very real reason to resist any increase to labor expenses—namely a massive fiscal shortfall due to the growth of the school system. Between 1915 and 1925, the population of Chicago grew by 21% but elementary enrollment grew by 29.8% while high school enrollment grew by 130%. The discrepancy between population growth and school enrollment, partially the result of truancy laws that increased attendance, led to an explosion of expenses. In addition to this demographic growth, educational reform in Chicago greatly increased the cost of teaching students. Free textbooks, implemented by a 1921 referendum, helped to reduce educational inequalities but strained the school finances. Similarly, McAndrew's implementation of a junior high school system and the creation of a CBE funded junior college created significant new expenses without new income sources. All of these factors, combined with various grafts run by members of the CBE, resulted in the aggregate cost per student to the city rising from \$37.54 in 1913 to \$95.01 in 1925. Revenues collected from the notoriously corrupt Chicago property tax system simply could not cover these expenses. The cold, hard reality was that Chicago's schools were only operating thanks to the liberal attitude the CBE took towards accruing massive debts. An increase in wages to school janitors, while the humane course of action, did not represent the CBE's self-interest—or even the interest of Chicago as a whole.⁵⁰

In the wake of *Brennan*, organizers from Locals 7 and 46 moved to quickly expand their membership. Their

48 Herrick, 165. Slater, 136.

49 See Chapter Two.

50 Herrick, 177- 180.

efforts were assisted by a peculiar quirk of civil service laws in Chicago. While civil service laws theoretically protected workers from political hiring and firing, in Chicago they were used as a tool to ensure patronage. In theory, the civil service system mandated that employees be hired from non-partisan lists of qualified candidates. However, an often used emergency clause in the law allowed for the arbitrary appointment of temporary workers. Though these workers would, theoretically, be replaced with workers from lists, in reality the emergency clause could be continually re-invoked, permitting political appointees to keep their jobs indefinitely. From the initial transfer of janitors to civil service in 1927 through the end of 1928, most janitors were employed on this basis with the CBE renewing their employment every 60 days.⁵¹

Through their political influence, the BSEIU took control over this temporary employment system and turned it to their own purposes. As the BSEIU's journal noted somewhat coyly in 1931, "Where [were new school janitors] recruited? Was it a gang of payrollers sent over to draw pay? The answer is [President of the BSEIU] Jerry Horan. Trained under a great idealist, William F. Quesse, the man who liberated thousands of serfs from the coal holes and furnace rooms of the city and placed them in livable quarters at a living wage; Jerry Hogan [sic] knew where to pick his force. Trained men were placed at the disposal of the [CBE]. Overnight the school system had a force that were technicians in their way."⁵² In other words, the union replaced children and less skilled janitors with their own men and women, ensuring their loyalty and the success of the unionization drive. Even William McFetridge admitted, "When [the new corp of civil service school janitors was] first hired it is true that all were political appointments."⁵³ Ironically, civil service reform helped to support patronage in Chicago's public schools, not impede it.

51 William McFetridge, "Vice-President McFetridge Outlines Chicago School Operation," *Public Safety*, September 1931, 6. Herrick, 165, 173-174.

52 "Schools Safe Haven for City Children," *Public Safety*, June 1931, 7.

53 McFetridge, "Vice-President McFetridge Outlines Chicago School Operation," 6.

At the time, such arrangements were common in Chicago. As Bukowski notes, “Labor leaders [asked Thompson] for jobs and favors... Reformers always had condemned this type of arrangement without comprehending its appeal.... Patronage meant an alternative to factory work in blue-collar Chicago, and it gave unions access to city hall jobs in exchange for votes, counted not in hundreds but hundreds of thousands. Thompson found that the politician, public employee, and union all benefited in the process. [Chicago] Democrats would put his discovery to work over the next four decades.”⁵⁴ Patronage is often portrayed simply as graft or nepotism but sometimes it found practical use in extending unionism and structuring political power. Through the use of patronage, the BSEIU managed to establish something like craft governance in the schools of Chicago. Legally prevented from signing contracts and practically bound from using most labor tactics, McFetridge and Grady successfully used influence as a substitute.⁵⁵ Through their political leverage on the CBE, they created unionized conditions among school workers while avoiding the potential risks of strikes or other more common labor activities. While the benefits to public workers came as much from the state as from the union, McFetridge believed that this did not challenge the legitimacy of the union as workers recognized the union as their *de facto* intercessor with the state.⁵⁶ In return, McFetridge and Grady used their janitors as a political force to buttress Thompson's regime. Tellingly, the union declared election days as a holidays not only to ensure that their members could vote but also so that they could marshal their members into supporting the election day activities of Thompson's political machine.⁵⁷

After the CBE recognized the school janitors as civil service employees in August of 1927, the board raised salaries for men to \$140 per month while women were paid \$125 per month. Objective measures of janitorial performance were implemented and replaced the previously arbitrary judgments of Custodian-Engineers.

⁵⁴ Bukowski, *The Politics of Image*, 188-189.

⁵⁵ Slater, 108, 110.

⁵⁶ Slater, 105, 114..

⁵⁷ Herrick, 174.

Special bonuses were awarded to janitors who took on additional or technical tasks such as assisting in boiler rooms.⁵⁸ The agreement banned the use of child labor.⁵⁹ These reforms changed school janitors from incidental employees who could be arbitrarily discarded into state workers guaranteed a decent wage and at least three months of work a year. While the CBE did not yet formally recognize the BSEIU as the representative of the school janitors, M. J. Kelly, head of labor for the CBE, noted that “[it is] the policy of the Board of Education when employing help to pay Union wages at Union hours,” indicating that the board accepted the extension of craft worker conditions and protections to school janitors.⁶⁰

After the CBE enacted the initial agreement, McFetridge and Grady entered into formal negotiations with the CBE.⁶¹ Despite the increasingly dire financial situation of the CBE, the union negotiated an effective nine percent pay raise for school janitors. In addition, the new contract provided overtime pay and vacation time for janitors who were employed for more than a year. The ability of Custodian-Engineers to command the presence of their janitors at virtually any moment was curtailed by a provision that mandated double pay on “Saturday afternoons, Sundays and holidays, with a four-hour minimum if a man is called out on a Sunday or holiday.”⁶² Perhaps most importantly, a rule banned the firing of school janitors without cause.⁶³ Though the union did not achieve a traditional closed shop, as they did not have the formal ability to control employment, their influence over the appointment system and an agreement with the Custodian-Engineers Union that banned non-union janitors from schools established a *de facto* closed shop.⁶⁴

The union-brokered agreements transformed the working conditions of school janitors, not only improving wages but also providing guarantees of work. Perhaps even more importantly, school janitors now enjoyed the

58 Chicago Board of Education, *Chicago Board of Education Proceedings*, August 3, 1927.

59 McFetridge, “Vice-President McFetridge Outlines Chicago School Operation.”

60 Otto Schmidt Papers.

61 Chicago Board of Education, *Chicago Board of Education Proceedings*, May 23, 1927.

62 William McFetridge, “Report of Delegate William L. McFetridge,” *Public Safety*, July 1930, 11.

63 McFetridge, “Report of Delegate William L. McFetridge,” 11.

64 Slater, 113. F. R. B., “Improved Conditions of Public School Janitors,” *Public Safety*, November 1929, 22. Article signed only with initials.

protection of a political process in which their union possessed significant influence. The contract sharply curtailed the arbitrary authority of the Custodian-Engineers. By 1931, the union even broke some of its dependence on political bosses by throwing its support behind a more honest application of civil service laws. While school janitors were required to pay significant initiation fees, the gains that McFetridge and Grady negotiated quickly paid these fees back.⁶⁵

William McFetridge used these successes to become the most prominent of the union's second generation of leaders. These new leaders were somewhat different from their predecessors. Unlike William Quesse and his organizers, most of whom labored for years as janitors prior to becoming activists, McFetridge was a highly-educated, union professional. Born in Chicago, though spending a significant amount of his childhood in Wisconsin, McFetridge began his working life as a clerk for the Milwaukee Road Railroad. To help him pay for law school, Quesse brought McFetridge, his nephew, into the union as a researcher. After obtaining his law degree, McFetridge used successes like Local 46 to become one of the most important leaders of the BSEIU. By the 1940s, McFetridge expanded this role into becoming a liaison between the city's labor and political establishments. His power became so significant that in 1971, several years after his death, the *Chicago American* still remembered McFetridge as being "widely regarded as Chicago's most powerful labor leader."⁶⁶ While McFetridge continually displayed loyalty to and respect for his members, his background arguably began the tradition of professional leadership that critics of the modern SEIU often decry as anti-democratic.⁶⁷

65 Herrick, 175. Herrick accuses the union for charging overly high initiation fees, sometimes with an element of intimidation, based largely on hearsay. Overly high initiation fees and kick-backs to union agents certainly fit larger patterns in the unions' history. Despite this, even if high initiation fees were an issue for some janitors it is difficult to imagine them offsetting the long-term pay improvements gained by Grady and McFetridge.

66 *Chicago American*, June 7, 1971. It would be fair to say that from the late 1940s through the early 1960s William McFetridge served much the same role in Chicago that Victor Olander served in the 1930s.

67 See for example: Steve Early, "Bidding Adieu to SEIU" *Huffington Post*. December, 7th, 2012 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steve-early/bidding-adieu-to-seiu-les_b_2258963.html Accessed October 1st, 2014. Note that I do not entirely disagree with Early in his indictment of this tendency towards professionalism and bureaucratization. Certainly McFetridge was a professional union leader with little direct connection to his members. However, I also feel that it is unreasonable to let this critique completely overshadow what he and Grady accomplished.

Though somewhat remote from the school janitors, McFetridge helped to dramatically change and improve their lives. Writing in 1931, in the midst of the collapsing finances of the CBE, a member of Local 46 noted several benefits from unionization, “We might mention the security of our job through the protection of the Civil Service Law. The opportunity for promotion to a higher grade of service. Our freedom from the interference of politicians, and the higher regard in which we are generally held through the stabilization and systematic regulation of our worker.”⁶⁸ The increased application of civil service laws even provided a path for older, more experienced janitors to become Engineer-Custodians.⁶⁹ While the conditions of school janitors still lagged behind those of the flat janitors, the worker concluded that unionization “elevat[ed] the dignity of [the school janitors'] trade and [set] a standard for other cities, in the clean and sanitary condition of the Chicago schools.”⁷⁰

In many ways, the idea of “elevating the dignity of [the school janitors'] trade” became fundamental to the efforts of Locals 7 and 46. Recognizing that the increased cost of janitorial service required public justification, McFetridge and his janitors rarely missed a chance to loudly proclaim their status as crucial public servants. Janitors proclaimed that “[experts] recognize that one of the primary factors in educating the rising generation, is the health of both the teachers and the pupils.”⁷¹ One editorial in *Public Safety* reminded janitors that the “work of a good janitor, considering the health of those affected by his activities, is as important within its limits as is that of a physician.”⁷² Another editorial declared that given the high standard of hygiene achieved through union labor, “Is it then, a broad statement to make, when we say that the schools of Chicago are even a safer haven for our children than our homes?”⁷³ BSEIU President Jerry Horan even symbolically re-christened the

68 “Well Done McFetridge,” *Public Safety*, January 1931, 16.

69 Elizabeth A. Grady, “Radio Talk” *Public Safety*, March 1931, 14.

70 “Well Done McFetridge,” *Public Safety*, 16.

71 “Well Done McFetridge,” *Public Safety*, 16.

72 F. R. B., “Improved Conditions of Public School Janitors,” 22.

73 “Schools Safe Haven for City Children,” *Public Safety*, 6

union's public workers as the "Public Service Corp."⁷⁴ As one janitor observed, "[It] is being constantly impressed upon us by [President McFetridge] that... only by constant and intelligent interest in our work can we hope to command the support and the respect of those who are in a position to help us to better our condition."⁷⁵ To ensure the maintenance of these high standards, Local 46 voted to provide McFetridge with extensive disciplinary powers, including the ability to compel members to attend educational meetings.⁷⁶ While many of these appeals were directed at the union's membership, McFetridge became a noted speaker around the city, regularly propounding the virtues of his janitors to groups such as the Chicago Women's Club.⁷⁷

Beyond Flat Janitors

"[Where] does the wom[a]n come in?"

- *Public Safety*, January, 1930

The successes of Local 7 and 46 dramatically broadened the demographics and interests of the BSEIU. In particular, the success of Local 7 forced the union to confront issues of gender and equality. As the head of Local 7, and Trustee of the BSEIU, Elizabeth Grady became the *de facto* voice of women in the union and received praise for consistently reminding other leaders, "You men must know that you cannot get very far or make any real progress, if you have women workers who compete with you, unorganized and working for less wages."⁷⁸ *Public Safety* praised Grady for forcing the other, all male, leaders of the BSEIU to answer the question "What [are the organizers] doing for the women; it is always the men; where does the women [sic] come in?"⁷⁹

Grady's efforts resulted in a union that, rhetorically at least, aggressively promoted the role of women in the

⁷⁴ "Schools Safe Haven for City Children," *Public Safety*, 6.

⁷⁵ "Well Done McFetridge," *Public Safety*, 16.

⁷⁶ "Schools Safe Haven for City Children," *Public Safety*, 6. How McFetridge actually used this power is somewhat more obscure. His ability to compel attendance may have had as much to do with ensuring that politicians had a captive audience in school janitors as it did with improving the skills of his members.

⁷⁷ Slater, 104.

⁷⁸ *Proceedings of the Seventh General Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 21.

⁷⁹ "Organizing the Women," *Public Safety*, January 1930, 11.

labor movement. A 1930 editorial in *Public Safety*, for example, chastised the labor movement for rarely devoting resources to the organization of women. The article concluded that “we must admit women should be heard from more generally in organized labor.”⁸⁰ Other editorials reminded readers that women did not earn “pin-money” but worked to support families and deserved respect.⁸¹ The journal described Grady's union as composed of a “fine type of bread winners-women who not only support themselves, but usually have dependents who look to them for food and clothing.”⁸² In 1940, the union even banned the term “scrub woman” from contracts because Grady believed that other terms, such as janitress, provided women with dignity equal to their male peers.⁸³

While these efforts helped the BSEIU to become known as an active organizer of women, they did not necessarily translate into an expanded role for women in the union. Despite their increasing numbers, Grady remained the only representative of women in the BSEIU's leadership. Though she often received praise for her efforts and tenacity, internally she became marginalized. At the 1935 convention, for example, Grady's major responsibility was “Chairman of the Ladies' Entertainment Committee,” whose main responsibility was “to take care of the wives and lady folks of the delegation.”⁸⁴ Sarcastically, Grady accepted the appointment by noting that her committee would also “take care of the husbands.”⁸⁵ Similarly, her formal position in the union's leadership, Trustee, revealed in a 1940 corruption probe to be largely powerless.⁸⁶ Despite having been effectively the co-founder of the BSEIU with Quesse, Grady slowly receded into being a symbolic presence in the union. Even though the union continued to organize among women, and 28% of the members of the union were women in 1957, an internal study from 1963 found that the “number of women who serve as officers in

80 “Organizing the Women,” *Public Safety*, 11.

81 Slater, 99.

82 “Honor Elizabeth Grady,” *Public Safety*, April 1936, 6.

83 *Proceedings of the Eighth General Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 75.

84 *Proceedings of the Seventh General Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 7.

85 *Proceedings of the Seventh General Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 7.

86 “We Never Knew Say Union Chiefs of Scalise Raids,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 10, 1940, 9.

the local unions and in the joint councils is very low in proportion to the total number of women members in the International union....Too many women are very active members in their local union... without ever holding an elective union office.”⁸⁷ Grady would be the only significant female leader in the national union until the 1970s.

However, the marginalization of Grady in the BSEIU's leadership did not stop her from becoming a well-known figure in the Illinois labor movement. Grady cultivated connections with politicians in Chicago and in the Illinois State legislature—connections that she commonly used to promote the expansion of Local 7. By 1931, Grady's Local 7 effectively achieved closed shop conditions for janitresses in Chicago's city hall and other municipal buildings, including police stations, and courts.⁸⁸ In 1931, *Public Safety* described her as one of the union's key political assets with “many friends among the senators and representatives... [She spends time in] Springfield to assist in an effort for favorable legislation on the behalf of labor.”⁸⁹ Her political clout cemented her reputation as an expert in public sector unionism. Through her many consultations with other union leaders, Grady largely established the union's approach to the public sector and ensured the future of the union among public workers.⁹⁰

The agreement between the Hospital Nurses and Attendants Union, Local 39 of the BSEIU, and the Illinois Department of Public Welfare (DPW) provides a useful example of her approach to public sector unionism. The leaders of Local 39 believed that a broad group of hospital attendants and nurses who worked in mental institutions were under their jurisdiction. Initially, Local 39's organizational efforts were fruitless due to the united opposition of the twelve superintendents who oversaw the institutions. Instead of fighting the superintendents, the local followed Grady's advice and negotiated directly with the superintendents' superiors in

87 SEIU Research Collection, Folder 6-18 “Women Members of the BSEIU (January 1963).”

88 Grady, "Radio Talk," *Public Safety*, 14.

89 Grady, "Radio Talk," *Public Safety*, 14.

90 “Organizing the Women” *Public Safety*, January 1930,11; Grady, "Radio Talk," *Public Safety*, 14.

the DPW. In 1932, union negotiators reached a recognition agreement with the State of Illinois. The agreement reached was imperfect but still exceptional. While it provided for a permanent, binding arbitration system for union members and banned pay-reductions, it neither provided closed-shop conditions nor a clear system of bargaining for wages. Despite these weaknesses, the agreement, according to the union, was “the first union contract ever signed by any political division of any state with a union of organized labor.”⁹¹ Every institution under the DPW became obliged to take at least a neutral position towards organization. Rodney H. Brandon, director of DPW, even praised the union and wished it success, “[I am] a firm believer in the virtues of organized labor and the advantages and justice of such a set-up as makes possible the forceful presentation of the virtues of any position in which any employee may find himself.”⁹² While limited in power, the arbitration board quickly proved useful to the union in reinstating fired workers and ensuring that they were paid the full amount they were owed under their contract. A leader in the local praised the BSEIU for supporting their organization, because “hardly any other international union would attempt a campaign of organization during this time of ponderous depression and out-of-work situation.”⁹³ The BSEIU used similar approaches to expand organization to semi-private institutions like the Cook County Psychiatric Hospital, providing the union with a foothold among health care workers.⁹⁴

The model of organization favored by McFetridge and Grady became commonly emulated as the BSEIU sought to expand into the public-sector and out of Chicago.⁹⁵ Recognizing that few public unions would ever gain a legal right to strike, organizers were encouraged to focus on gaining public support and political leverage. Sometimes the union generated this pressure by providing political candidates with grassroots political assets. Other situations required subtler methods. For example, the BSEIU commonly courted the favor of school

91 “Labor Conditus Vincit Omnia” *Public Safety*, May 1932, 12.

92 “Labor Conditus Vincit Omnia” *Public Safety*, 4.

93 “Labor Conditus Vincit Omnia” *Public Safety*, May 1932, 12.

94 Slater, 108.

95 Slater, 104.

boards by vocally supporting bond drives and other efforts to increase school funding.⁹⁶ The objective of these efforts tended to not include explicit union recognition, but instead focused on increasing wages and expanding civil service protections.⁹⁷

By 1930, public-sector locals following in 7 and 46's footsteps would make up a third of the total number of locals in the International. Scattered organizational efforts, sometimes initiated by local workers who sought help from the BSEIU, established locals in cities as different as San Francisco, California and Minot, North Dakota.⁹⁸ These locals were concentrated in public school systems but also worked in a wide variety of other settings, such as universities and public parks. Most members worked in maintenance, generally as janitors.⁹⁹

The central union continually advised these new locals to behave in the self-consciously political ways championed by Grady and McFetridge. Secretary Paul David, who was responsible for providing advice to new unions, advised public sector locals to project an image as “a benefit to the Community.... Being public Employees, you must have the Public's support.”¹⁰⁰ Maintaining this support might require the union to make sacrifices. David advised school janitors in Milwaukee to limit their demands because, “School Boards only have so much money.”¹⁰¹ David even cautioned school unions from striking, advising a local in Minneapolis that they would benefit more from “[getting] out pamphlets or [having] Public Meetings.”¹⁰² Instead of engaging in a potentially disastrous, and often illegal strikes, locals were instructed to emphasize the value of the service they provided to the community and to make unionization appear to be a means to achieve the

96 Slater, 106.

97 Slater, 112.

98 Slater, 99-100. Slater's *Public Workers* provides a superb and quite comprehensive treatment of the non-Chicago public-sector locals. I won't dwell on them more than is necessary to my argument because Slater's work provides an excellent discussion.

99 Slater, 99-100.

100 Quoted in Slater, 114.

101 Quoted in Slater, 114.

102 Quoted in Slater, 121.

public good. While strike actions did occasionally gain sanction from the International Union, in most cases McFetridge and David preferred to curry public support or work through politicians.¹⁰³

Despite this, few locals outside of Chicago gained the kind of influence that Locals 7 and 46 possessed. In Chicago, the union was the beneficiary of the legacy of strong craft unions. In addition, the early success of Local 1 provided the embryonic public-sector locals with crucial financial and political support. Taken together these factors allowed the BSEIU to exercise extensive, at times coercive, power over politicians. However, in most other cities the union simply could not achieve this kind of leverage. Without clear legal sanction for many of their organizations, most “contracts” were based on informal agreements with city or state governments. While civil service protections and political clout protected the jobs of some members, many members still owed their jobs to simple patronage and were subject to the whims of political elites.¹⁰⁴ As David told a struggling local at the University of Illinois in Urbana, “It is not so easy to deal with politicians as it is with an industrial firm.”¹⁰⁵ In other correspondence he made his opinion a bit clearer, “[The] best politician [is] a dead one.”¹⁰⁶ Despite the difficulties of dealing with politicians, in many cases influence remained the union's only avenue to success.

Payless Paydays

“While columns of newspaper were filled daily on the work of city and county relief committees, not a word of comment on the plight of the penniless school janitor.”

- *Public Safety*, August 1934

The BSEIU's drive to organize the public sector proved badly timed. As the bite of the Great Depression became acutely felt by city governments in 1930, the union's efforts to raise wages and improve conditions found an increasingly hostile audience. Within a few years, the BSEIU's public

¹⁰³ Slater, 121.

¹⁰⁴ Slater, 115.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Slater, 112.

¹⁰⁶ Slater, 116.

sector locals would be besieged on all sides by critics and economic realities.

The bite proved particularly harsh in the Chicago school system which, by 1929, was in the grips of a financial crisis. The finances of the CBE were always exceedingly delicate and based around unsustainable cycles of issuing new debt. By one estimate, from 1919 to 1928 the CBE spent an average of 110% of its yearly tax income. While the CBE under Thompson engaged in constant corruption and spent money inefficiently, the deeper reason for the chronic under-funding of the CBE was that over 90% of the school's funding came from property tax assessments. Though this might be a stable form of funding in some cities, Chicago's property tax assessment process was notoriously corrupt, and wealthy real-estate owners commonly bribed aldermen and assessors to ensure the value of their property was under-represented.¹⁰⁷ These practices were so pervasive that Margaret Haley estimated only 16% of the increased value of Chicago's property between 1913 and 1921 was ever taxed, amounting to 480 million dollars in untaxed property value.

The corruption embodied in property tax under-valuation was somewhat different from the more mundane corruption of Thompson's administration. Practiced by both Democrats and Republicans, property tax corruption was primarily a tool used by the elites of Chicago to dramatically cut their tax burden. Property tax corruption therefore was an expression of class privilege in a way that other forms of corruption were not. Ironically, the primary culprits of this kind of corruption came from the very group of economic elites who rallied against the form of corruption which favored groups like the BSEIU.¹⁰⁸

The issue of funding reached a head in 1927 when a tax commission supported by Haley declared Chicago's tax rolls fundamentally flawed and demanded a comprehensive re-assessment. While this process was initially lauded by progressives in Chicago, it would take nearly two years for the re-assessment to take place. As a result, no property taxes were collected from 1927 to 1929. Even then, the re-assessment, which significantly

¹⁰⁷ Herrick, 177-180.

¹⁰⁸ Haley, 232-233.

increased the taxes of many of the wealthiest land owners in Chicago, was challenged in court by the elite-backed Association of Real Estate Tax Payers. Further weakening city finances, many of the members of the Association declared a “tax strike” in which they refused to pay taxes until the re-assessment could be evaluated by the Illinois Supreme Court.

By the time that the Supreme Court affirmed the re-assessment in 1932, the already shaky financial house of cards built by the CBE collapsed. Combined with the impact of the Great Depression, the CBE rapidly lost all capacity to pay its employees. Pay days for school janitors in the early 1930s often came months apart, with their total pay rarely coming up-to-date. At times, the CBE even paid their employees in debt scrip which cash strapped workers often sold to banks for well under its face value. Debt scrip profiteering became, ironically, a way for the elites of Chicago to profit from the fiscal crisis that they themselves created.¹⁰⁹

These so-called “payless paydays” took a terrible toll on the members of Locals 7 and 46. School janitors found that they could neither pay their bills with scrip nor live on the amount that banks were willing to give them for their debt. Some unionized janitors even became homeless when they were unable to raise sufficient hard cash to pay their rent. Even after the city managed to lobby for and receive a significant bailout from the state legislature in 1933, the CBE prioritized repayment of debt to the city's banks over payment of back-pay to its employees.¹¹⁰

The plight of the city's public workers attracted little public sympathy or support. As one school janitor remarked, “While columns of newspaper were filled daily on the work of city and county relief committees, not a word of comment on the plight of the penniless school janitor.”¹¹¹ Though relief programs provided some help for the unemployed in Chicago, the employed but unpaid workers of the city often fell through the cracks.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Slater, 102. Haley, 235- 243.

¹¹⁰ Slater, 102-103.

¹¹¹ William McFetridge, “Janitors” *Public Safety*, August 1934, 4.

¹¹² McFetridge, “Janitors,” 4.

McFetridge and Grady were unable to balance these pay shortfalls with union treasury, but they attempted to establish ad hoc relief programs for unpaid members. A school janitor described them as providing insecure but crucial support, saying, “When members of the union were threatened with eviction, when a member of their families were sick [sic]; when coal and food were needed to feed and clothe the janitor and his family; the union officials were on the job night and day devising means of meeting the dozens of emergencies which were tragedies in the lives of distressed members.”¹¹³ When it was financially feasible, the union would even buy scrip from its members at face value, but these efforts fell short of providing members with the income they needed.

The pressures this placed on the union even promoted internal divisions between McFetridge and Grady. With Locals 7 and 46 fighting over a shrinking budget, McFetridge actively lobbied the CBE against the conversion of men's jobs into women's jobs.¹¹⁴ Some of Local 46's negotiators went even further, promoting the reduction of the female workforce in favor of hiring more men. Grady angrily responded to this at the union's 1935 convention by “[sounding] one note of warning to you men delegates. I want to serve notice that I do not intend to permit the men to take any jobs that properly belong to women workers. I know that efforts have been made to supplant janitresses with janitors. I have had to fight at the Board of Education to prevent that.”¹¹⁵ While Grady's efforts seem to have prevented these moves, the financial crisis clearly undermined the union's commitment to women workers in the schools.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ McFetridge, “Janitors,” 4.

¹¹⁴ McFetridge, “Vice-President McFetridge Outlines Chicago School Operation” *Public Safety*, 18.

¹¹⁵ *Proceedings of the Seventh General Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 21.

¹¹⁶ The struggle between Local 7 and 46 can be seen as part of a larger struggle for gender identity in the union. The Flat Janitors Union explicitly defined workers as masculine. Core to the Flat Janitors Union's organizational efforts in the 1910s was the objection to the forced employment of their wives as janitors. To many janitors this employment was seen as an affront to their status as bread-winners. Yet with the inclusion of Local 7, the union was faced by a contradiction between this objection to the labor of women and their new membership. While this might have been rectified through the distinction between the essentially forced labor of janitor's wives and the paid labor of janitresses, instead many of the union's leaders were never fully willing to admit that the employment of a woman was as important as the employment of a man. See Chapter Three,

The tightening economic conditions and financial collapse of the CBE led to public criticism of the high cost of school maintenance in Chicago. A 1933 editorial in the *Chicago Tribune* titled “Teachers v. Janitors” exemplified this criticism by declaring that “there is no room to doubt that, in comparison with the teachers, the school engineers and janitors are overpaid.... The school system could do with fewer janitors... and they should be paid considerably less than they are receiving.”¹¹⁷ Adding bite to these criticisms was a 1931 study commissioned by the CBE and carried out by the Cleveland Audit Co., which suggested the janitorial force in Chicago was both too large and overpaid.¹¹⁸

The response of the BSEIU to the study illustrates the importance that the union placed on public perception. In an extended critique of the CBE study, McFetridge lambasted the auditors for evaluating the need for janitors based solely on the amount of sweeping each building needed. McFetridge argued that this was not only false, but completely ignored the larger scope of a janitor's job in ensuring the health of children and teachers. Viewed from this perspective, the schools actually employed too few janitors to ensure sanitation, and “our health experts say that our school buildings should be scrubbed daily whereas [current CBE rules] prescribe for scrubbing monthly... It is our suggestion that some health and sanitation experts be given an opportunity to make a survey to determine the proper cleanliness of the schools for the best interest of the health of the children.”¹¹⁹ Responding to claims that janitors received less wages in other cities, McFetridge lambasted his critics, “If other cities choose they can use their children or unfortunate widows, foreigners and other cheap labor to their janitorial work. We will not be governed by what they do, but we do insist on our people having American standards of living.”¹²⁰ Any efforts to degrade the position of school janitors would result in “so-called 'sweat-shop' and piece work conditions [that are] un-American... it is just as essential to have sober,

117“Teacher Vs. Janitors,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 25, 1933, p. 12.

118McFetridge, “Vice-President McFetridge Outlines Chicago School Operation” *Public Safety*, 5.

119 McFetridge, “Vice-President McFetridge Outlines Chicago School Operation” *Public Safety*, 18.

120 McFetridge, “Vice-President McFetridge Outlines Chicago School Operation” *Public Safety*, 6.

moral, physically able [workers] to do this work as it is to have proper persons for teachers, principals and other help in the Board of Education.”¹²¹ In a few pages of effective, sometimes wryly funny rhetoric, McFetridge sought to portray the union's critics as being fundamentally opposed to the public good by promoting unsafe, unhygienic, and un-American schools.

McFetridge hoped that by supplying effective facts and eloquent rhetoric he could prepare his membership to deal directly with public criticism and maintain pride in their work. Responding to one of his articles, a member of Local 46 described the effect these efforts had on him as profound. Comparing McFetridge to the almost revered founder of the union, William Quesse, the member called the article “a complete refutation of the slurs cast upon the janitor and his work... by careless or misinformed people..... we can also gather from reading [the article] the great amount of personal exertion our president has given in protecting our interests against the attacks of those who seek to belittle the importance of our work.”¹²²

McFetridge even inspired janitors to justify themselves directly through the press. In August of 1931, for example, the *Chicago Tribune* published a letter from a school janitor which used McFetridge's research to challenge the critics of the union. The janitor begins the letter by complaining, “In recent months there has been undue and unreasoning criticism directed towards those people whose job it is to maintain the Chicago public schools... No doubt this was brought out in the Cleveland Audit company's report.” The janitor goes on to astutely criticize a comparison the audit made between school janitors and office janitors by reminding readers that schools are very different from offices, “When the boys and girls return to their classes a great quantity of mud is tracked into the classrooms... What office building has the muddy playground problem? Constructive art is taught in the classrooms. This is the cutting up of paper into various projects and much of it gets on the floor... It is next to impossible to sweep it up in the same time an ordinary... floor surface would take.” Despite these

121 McFetridge, “Vice-President McFetridge Outlines Chicago School Operation” *Public Safety*, 19.

122 “Well Done McFetridge,” *Public Safety*, 16.

challenges, the school janitor is “expected to clean [the schools] in a presentable and workmanlike manner.”¹²³ Through McFetridge's efforts, individual members became a part of the union's public relations campaign and developed self-consciousness about the unique and valuable service they provided.

Behind the scenes, McFetridge and Grady moved to use the union's political clout to protect their members and even expand their locals. By 1940, Locals 7 and 46 grew to over 2,300 members working for diverse municipal institutions and representing nearly all publicly employed janitors in Chicago.¹²⁴ However, this success was bittersweet. While they were able to preserve and even increase employment levels, back pay remained a contentious issue. Even after the state legislature provided the CBE with a substantial bail-out in 1933, payless paydays continued as the funds were largely diverted to pay interest to banks.¹²⁵ During 1935, the CBE was briefly caught up with its payroll but by 1936 fell behind again.¹²⁶ Since public-sector unions in Illinois did not operate in a formal, legal framework, the union did not have a legally enforceable contract with the CBE, and thus found little legal recourse against its actions.¹²⁷ Without such a legal recourse, the union found that political power provided a limited solution to the great problems of the Great Depression.

Conclusion

The 2014 Supreme Court case *Harris v. Quinn* forcibly thrust an SEIU local of Illinois home health care workers into the national consciousness and news cycle. While commentators were unaware of the parallel, the process through which these workers had been organized bore a striking resemblance to the civic unionism of Grady and McFetridge. Though the SEIU had pursued some

¹²³ “Cleaning The Schools,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 9th, 1931, p. 11.

¹²⁴ *Proceedings of the Eighth General Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 7. Locals 7 and 46 managed this feat even after their early patron, Mayor Thompson, lost his 1931 re-election campaign. Despite their longstanding connection to the Republican party, the BSEIU appears to have easily moved into the good graces of new Mayor Anton Cermak. And, as we shall see in Chapter Eight, became close allies of the Democratic machine established by Cermak's successor, Edward Kelly.

¹²⁵ Slater, 103.

¹²⁶ *Proceedings of the Eighth General Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*.

¹²⁷ Slater, 112.

grassroots organizing in Illinois, the main victory of their campaign was an executive order issued in 2003 by the union's close ally Governor Blagojevich. Blagojevich's order not only provided the SEIU with a legal framework through which they could be recognized as the legitimate representatives of the home health care workers paid by the state of Illinois, it also empowered the union to collect so-called “agency fees” from workers who did not join the union. Such a provision protected the union against “free riders” who would otherwise gain the benefits of a union contract without helping to pay for bargaining. Under these terms, the SEIU quickly won a representation election and successfully bargained with the state. Through their alliance with Blagojevich, the SEIU won a significant victory and redefined the labor market of home care workers throughout the state.

Writing for a narrow 5-4 majority in *Harris v. Quinn*, Justice Alito declared the collection of agency fees unconstitutional. Alito contended that, while *Abood v. Detroit Board of Education* (1977), permitted the unions of public sector workers to charge agency fees, home care workers were not public workers. Individually hired by their disabled clients, Alito argued that home care workers were merely paid by the state, not employed by the state. Following this logic, home care workers were not public workers in the terms of *Abood*, and thus agency fees violated the First Amendment by forcing non-members to be represented by the union. Since there was no “compelling state [interest]... that cannot be achieved through means significantly less restrictive of associational freedoms” the agency fees were unconstitutional.¹²⁸

While Alito's decision stopped short of the broad denunciation of public-sector unionism that some feared, it provoked a furious outcry from labor activists and scholars. The historians of home

¹²⁸ Samuel Alito “Opinion of the Court,” *Harris v. Quinn*, 30. Page numbers are from the Cornell Law version of the decision accessible at <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/pdf/11-681.pdf>. Accessed on January 10, 2016.

care work Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein, for example, accused Alito of “[showing] little respect for history [and] for women's work.... [Alito] colludes in [the] misidentification [of home care workers] as 'just moms' and... ignores that home aids and personal attendants are the linchpin of long-term care and that its workforce, 1.4 million and growing, has replaced the iconic auto or steel worker as the new face of labor.”¹²⁹ While *Harris v. Quinn* affected a limited number of workers, Joshua Freeman similarly argues that the decision might sufficiently undermine the orderly institution of collective bargaining enough to result in a breach of “labor peace” and lead to widespread protests.¹³⁰ Joel Rogers perhaps best captured the feelings of labor scholars towards Alito when he asked, regarding the court's disregard of labor rights, “[W]hy dear citizen, would you ever think that this Court... thinks you have a right to be part of a society fit to live in?”¹³¹ The nullification of a legal concession bought with the union's political power was, in other words, seen as a grievous injury to the labor movement.

Given the common outrage prompted by the court's decision, it is ironic that the modern SEIU's emphasis on using political leverage as a tool of organizing serves as a major target for criticism from labor activists and scholars alike. In *The Civil War in U.S. Labor*, his study of the modern SEIU's internal struggles, Steve Early describes the 2003 organizing campaign purely in terms of politics. Early notes that during Blagojevich's 2002 campaign, the SEIU not only provided the

129 Eileen Boris & Jennifer Klein, “Reducing Labor to Love” *The Nation* July 2, 2014.

<http://www.thenation.com/article/after-harris-v-quinn-state-our-unions/> Accessed on January 10, 2015. Justice Kagan's dissent is somewhat less vitriolic but hits many of the same notes. In particular, Kagan agrees with Boris and Klein's basic position that Alito's position cannot be explained simply through legal logic. As Kagan declares, “I begin where this case should also end—with this Court's decision in *Abod*.” (dissent, 2-3) Kagan goes on to challenge Alito's basic assertion that home health care workers are de jure or de facto different from other state workers.

130 Joshua Freeman, “Is *Harris v. Quinn* a Threat to Labor Peace?” *The Nation* July 2, 2014

<http://www.thenation.com/article/after-harris-v-quinn-state-our-unions/> Accessed on January 10, 2015.

131 Joel Rogers, “How *Harris v. Quinn* and *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* Turned the First Amendment into a Weapon,” *The Nation* July 2, 2014 <http://www.thenation.com/article/180478/after-harris-v-quinn-state-our-unions> Accessed on January 10, 2015.

prospective governor with seed money to run a viable campaign but also enlisted a thousand people for his get-out-the-vote campaign during the primary. After Blagojevich was elected, he not only issued the executive order that permitted home health care worker organization, but also appointed Quesse's distant successor, head of Local 1 Tom Balanoff, to the Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board. Between these two acts, he provided the SEIU with all of the “leverage” it needed to organize home health care workers as well as expand significantly in the state's health care sector.

Despite the success of the SEIU's campaign, Early criticizes the union for backing Blagojevich because it tightly associated them with a notoriously corrupt figure. As the scandal around Blagojevich's various pay-to-play schemes became well known, the union's connection to the governor undermined the larger political agenda of the labor movement by providing a “propaganda jackpot for the right-wing foes of organized labor.”¹³² Similarly, by backing a politician who flagrantly mis-managed the state's budget, the union bears some responsibility for creating such budgetary chaos that health care workers, the very group the union was supposed to represent, often faced trouble getting their paychecks. Not only did this present an immediate problem for the SEIU, it also resulted in such negative press that Governor Pat Quinn, Blagojevich's successor and SEIU ally, “remained a bit gun-shy about signing any executive orders that might be viewed as overly friendly to [sic] SEIU.”¹³³

By focusing on gaining organizational advantages through alliances with shady political figures, Early argues, the SEIU not only pursued a failed strategy but undermined the moral legitimacy of their entire campaign. Even Jane McAlevey, who served as the SEIU's Deputy Director for Strategic Campaigns of the Health Care Division from 2002-2004, retrospectively argues that the union

¹³²Steve Early, *The Civil Wars in U.S. Labor: Birth of a New Workers Movement or Death Throes of the Old?* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011), 93.

¹³³ Early, *The Civil War in U.S. Labor*, 94.

placed far too much emphasis on political influence. She lamented in 2010 that the labor movement has “mistaken access [to politicians] for power” and emphasized politics over cultivating worker militancy.¹³⁴ In the wake of *Harris v. Quinn*, McAlevey expanded on this point, arguing that, if the SEIU pursued an approach devoted to encouraging worker militancy and participation, the loss of agency fees would have been harmless.¹³⁵

Taken together these critiques seem to present a damning indictment of the modern labor movement's political fixation. However, the example of the BSEIU's success at organizing school and municipal janitors provides a balance to this critique by reminding us of the potential power of a campaign based around legal and political leverage. The union's influence in City Hall allowed it to quickly exploit the shifting legal terrain to achieve wide-spread organization. By making alliances with politicians who make Blagojevitch seem ethical, the BSEIU re-defined its members as public workers who were entitled to respect and decent pay.

To be sure, we must not idealize the approach taken by McFetridge and Grady or ignore their personal faults. Through their participation in the corruption of the CBE, they both helped to destabilize the already shaky finances of Chicago's schools and implicated many of their members in graft. The moral ambiguity of the school janitor's efforts mirrors current controversies over the SEIU's support of tort reform as a means of forming alliances with nursing home operators.¹³⁶ From the perspective of proponents of union democracy, the structure established by Grady and McFetridge also proves problematic. Workers in the school janitors' union owed their appointment to politicians and labor leaders. Union members owed their jobs not only to their employers and

134 Jane McAlvey, “Making Union Matter Again” *The Nation* December 20, 2010,

<http://www.thenation.com/article/156811/making-unions-matter-again> Accessed January 10, 2015.

135 Jane McAlevey, “Labor's Only Real Choice: Beating *Harris v. Quinn* and Right-to-Work Attacks From the Inside Out” *The Nation* July 2, 2014 <http://www.thenation.com/article/180478/after-harris-v-quinn-state-our-unions> Accessed January 10, 2015.

136 Steve Early, “Reutherism Redux,” in *Against the Current* Issue 112 September-October 2004.

<https://www.solidarity-us.org/node/1122> Accessed September 1, 2016.

their union, but also the broader structure of corruption and graft in Thompson's administration. Under such circumstances, internal democracy could not easily exist. Though Grady and McFetridge appear to have received the enthusiastic support of their memberships—after all, they achieved a massive success for their members—no clear evidence of participatory democracy exists in either local.

There remained limits to what Grady and McFetridge could achieve for school janitors. Though they certainly possessed intimidating access and influence, they could not change the political or financial realities of the CBE. As the crisis of the Great Depression approached, school janitors, like most other city workers, suffered through payless pay-days and other forms of deprivation. Without legal bargaining rights or an aggressive, militant membership, the power of the school janitors in Chicago was limited to the political leverage that their leaders could exert. However, these sorts of hardships were common during the Great Depression and the union often succeeded in buffering and reducing their bite.¹³⁷

Despite these faults, the school janitors achieved something amazing. In a time of tightening city budgets, they gained elevated wages and a degree of symbolic respect. While McFetridge's sentiment that it was “as essential to have sober, moral, physically able [workers] to do this work as it is to have proper persons for teachers” may never have been shared by the majority of the Chicagoans, the union achieved conditions that implied the high value of school janitors' labor.¹³⁸ Even if McFetridge and Grady could not prevent payless paydays, their influence over the CBE protected the union's gains through the depths of the crisis. Indeed, during the Great Depression

¹³⁷ For a modern parallel see Eileen Boris & Jennifer Klein, *Caring for America: Home Health Workers in the Shadow of the Welfare State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 221.

¹³⁸ William McFetridge, “Vice-President McFetridge Outlines Chicago School Operation,” *Public Safety*, September 1931, 19.

many school reformers complained that school janitors received more respect and support from the CBE than did teachers.¹³⁹ The means used by Locals 7 and 46 were imperfect, but these imperfect means achieved a previously unimaginable victory.

Throughout Chicago, the BSEIU began to transform janitors from an underclass of abused workers into well-paid service workers protected by a powerful union. These successes did not go unnoticed by the employers, and common citizens, of Chicago. Justifying the improvements achieved from the union grew into one of the organization's foremost concerns. Taking cues from the rhetoric of school janitors, McFetridge and his followers proposed that all janitors were—in their own ways—servants of the public good. Over time, union leaders encouraged workers to view themselves as not only having value, but being professional defenders of the health and safety of their city. Though these efforts failed to fully re-frame the place of janitors in Chicago, they provided the BSEIU with a distinctive internal ideology that violates many easy preconceptions of what union, or working-class, identity should look like.

¹³⁹ Herrick, 189.

IV

WE ARE NOT JANITORS

Introduction

“We Are Not Janitors, We Are Saniticians” proclaimed the lead article of the January 1930 edition of *Public Safety*. The author, John J. Riley, went on to explain that janitors were an integral part of public health in the urban world. Indeed, through their stalwart efforts janitors prevented “more disease than all medicine or surgery can cure... [janitors] do as much to fight plagues and epidemics as the Department of Public Health.”¹ To Riley, not only were janitors lifesavers, they were among the very pillars of civilization; after all “the foundation of every religion and code of morals is based on sanitary regulation. No community can exist without sanitary measures.”² Janitors were thus “as important to the welfare of the community... as the man of medicine, the lawmaker, the man of finance or the merchant prince.”³ Riley concluded by noting, “We should not be ashamed of our profession; it is more ancient than most and as honorable as any.”⁴

While Riley's enthusiasm for janitors was not surprising—in addition to writing for *Public Safety*, he worked as a school janitor—the language that he used to dignify their labor is intriguing. Instead of focusing on familiar union appeals for improved material conditions or human dignity, Riley anchored his appeal to the importance of janitors in their communities. Far from being simple maintenance employees, Riley proposed that his fellow janitors were critical public health professionals without whom civilization itself might collapse. Though Riley's description of janitors

1 John J. Riley, “We Are Not Janitors, We Are Saniticians,” *Public Safety* January 1930, 14. Riley was a fascinating writer and a member of Local 42, William McFetridge's local.

2 Riley, “We Are Not Janitors, We Are Saniticians,” *Public Safety*, 14.

3 Riley, “We Are Not Janitors, We Are Saniticians,” *Public Safety*, 14.

4 Riley, “We Are Not Janitors, We Are Saniticians,” *Public Safety*, 14.

as professionals may be surprising, professionalism became a common discourse among the union's leaders, in the pages of *Public Safety*, and among the union's members.

William McFetridge and many of the union's other figures were captivated by the idea of the professional janitor. Writers in *Public Safety* argued that janitors were in a process of professionalization comparable to that of nurses who “[a] few years ago... [were] generally considered... on the level of a domestic servant... [but] today the uniform of this profession is honored, and its members are highly paid.”⁵ If nurses could gain a degree of professional legitimacy due to the critical role they played in society, then janitors were eagerly willing to push their claim.

To an extent, the union's new turn towards professionalism was prompted by the declining value of craft governance as a social asset. In the early days of the union the BSEIU sought to gain respect from the employers. Commonly described as having rescued their members from “slavery” or “servitude,” the union used its connection to the other craft unions of the city as a means to gain respect for their workers. By the late 1920s, however, the value of craft as a social asset declined. Battered by corruption trials and the power of Chicago's industrial elite, craft governance could no longer solely justify the superb wages and conditions that the BSEIU won in Chicago. The idea of professionalism therefore became a means through which the union could continue to legitimate their gains while distancing itself from other craft unions.⁶ Looked at this way, the professional rhetoric of the union seems to be a clever yet cynical ploy.

However, the passion and eloquence with which McFetridge and others claimed professionalism for janitors is difficult to ignore. On the pages of *Public Safety* and in countless union meetings, union leaders proposed that janitors were not simply workers but that, like doctors or lawyers, they

5 F. R. B, “Improved Conditions of Public School Janitors,” *Public Safety*, November 1929, 22.

6 See Chapter Two for more details on the rhetoric of slavery in the union.

held a larger obligation to their occupation and to their society. In many ways these appeals follow the theories of professionalization later articulated by many scholars, including Burt Bledstein, Magali Sarfatti Larson, and Eliott Friedson.

That janitors—a group of workers considered unskilled and a union rooted in craft unionism—embraced professionalism challenges the pervasive sense amongst labor historians and scholars that working-class identities and middle-class or professional identities cannot be mixed. Robert Johnston argues that the scholarly disregard of the middle class is the result of “social theorists who have characterized the middle class as politically retrograde, morally inert, and economically marginal for more than a century.”⁷ Despite commonly having roots in the middle class, most academics have portrayed it as at best a form of false consciousness and at worst as the incubator of fascism.⁸ Academics heap even more criticism on professionals. Magali Larson—whose work defines much of the modern sociological understanding of professionalism—views professionalism first and foremost as a scheme through which professionals assert their dominance over the world.⁹ Burton Bledstein's work similarly portrays professionals in the nineteenth century as self-interested and venal.¹⁰

Viewed through such a dark lens, the middle class and professionals simply cannot be—or perhaps should not be—hybridized with the protagonists of class conflict: the working class. Indeed, modern labor activists often argue that the associations of workers with the middle class injures the labor movement as a whole. Economist Michael Zweig argues in *The Working Class Majority* that,

7 Robert Johnston, *The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 3.

8 Johnston, *The Radical Middle Class*, 4.

9 Magali Sarfatti Larson *The Rise of Professionalism: Monopolies of Competence and Sheltered Markets* (Livingston: Transaction Publishers, 2012 [1977]).

10 Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle class and the Development of Higher Education in America*. (New York: Norton, 1976).

“Even though the middle class is only about thirty-six percent of the workforce, almost every aspect of politics and popular culture, with help from the media, reinforces the idea that 'middle class' is the typical and usual status of Americans.”¹¹ The perpetuation of such a false understanding of the nation's class structure creates an impression of class mobility that reinforces the “myth of a classless society.”¹² Steve Early similarly blames the modern labor movement's affection towards the rhetoric of the middle class for their failure to fully connect with and capitalize upon the Occupy Wall Street movement.¹³ Larson makes a similar point, arguing that the concept of professionalism often serves as an anti-union tool that divides workers from each other, ultimately damaging the solidarity of the labor movement.¹⁴

Despite this, a growing number of labor historians challenge this resistance to hybridity and class fluidity. Among the new historians of craft workers, such an acceptance appears common place. Robert Johnston's work, as mentioned previously, vividly explores the tight interactions and shared identification between the petit bourgeois and the workers of Portland.¹⁵ Andrew Wender Cohen's concept of craft unionism derives much of its structure from the fluidity between the small-scale employers and craft workers.¹⁶ Precursors to this view can be found in many earlier, significant works of labor history, such as Leon Fink's *Workingmen's Democracy*, in which middle-class figures play a supportive role in labor activism.¹⁷

11 Michael Zweig, *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2000), 39.

12 Zweig, *The Working Class Majority*, 41. I should note that my criticism of Zweig is largely limited to his resistance to the concept of hybridized class identities, his broader points about the continuation of economic inequality and the myth of advancement are useful.

13 Steve Early, *Save Our Unions: Dispatches from a Movement in Distress* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013), 12.

14 Larson, 237.

15 Johnston, *The Radical Middle Class*, 59-61.

16 Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 16.

17 Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy*, 223.

As most trends in modern labor history, E. P. Thompson's work *The Making of the English Working Class* likely initiated the movement towards an acceptance of hybrid identities. In his introduction, Thompson famously wrote, "By class I understand an historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness... I do not see class as a 'structure'... but as something which in fact happens... in human relationships."¹⁸ Thompson's conception of class as a fluid occurrence, not structure, allows for a far broader conception of how working people might construct their identities. Or as Johnston puts it, "Let us take Thompson to his logical conclusion... if people are genuinely making their own history, they are making their *own classes* as well [which may not] fit into standard academic or political conceptions."¹⁹

The leaders of the BSEIU certainly would have agreed with Thompson and Johnston: they saw no inherent contradiction between professional legitimacy and inclusion among craft workers. Calls for professional respect often appeared alongside more traditional appeals for wages, working conditions, or respect as skilled workers. To the leaders of the BSEIU, particularly McFetridge, there was no contradiction between the rhetoric of craft and the rhetoric of professionalism—they were both means through which janitors could describe their value to society. Instead the approach of the BSEIU became a hybridization of professionalism, craft unionism, and political activism—a combination that I describe as civic unionism.

Beyond their co-existence in the identities of Chicago's janitors, professionalism and craft proved compatible on a deeper level. In his superb, and often overlooked, final work, Friedson proposed that the crafts and the professions shared a basic outlook on the world and could easily find

¹⁸ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968 [1963]), 9.

¹⁹ Johnston, *The Radical Middle Class*, 13.

solidarity with each other. In *Professionalism: the Third Logic*, Friedson proposes that sociologists have traditionally identified two kinds labor organization—the free market described by Adam Smith and the bureaucratic model described by Weber—while missing a recurrent third model. This third model, which Friedson calls occupationalism, replaces bureaucratic or market relationships with negotiations between autonomous, privileged trade and professional organizations. Finding this logic present throughout history, Friedson argues that it represents a superior alternative to capitalism and socialism. Unlike workers in the free market or in bureaucratic structures, occupational workers maintain their privileges “not by buying it or capturing it at point of a gun [but through] a project of successful persuasion.”²⁰ Such workers “appraise what they do in light of that larger good... which licenses them to be more than passive servants of the state, of capital, of the firm, of the client, or even of the immediate general public.”²¹ Since the power of their association protects them from the harsh and immediate demands of the marketplace, they are less willing “to aim at maximizing gain at the expense of the quality of their work.”²² Far from encouraging passivity, the emphasis that professions place on the public good could inspire its members to political agitation.²³ Further, by giving workers a sense of agency and ownership of their labor, occupational structures help workers to find meaning in their work and decreases the impact of alienation.

There are many similarities between Friedson's concept of occupationalism and Cohen's concept of craft governance. Both propose a political economic structure which, while not fully rejecting the value of the marketplace, rejects the brutal logic of unfettered capitalism. Instead, both systems

20 Friedson, *Professionalism, the Third Logic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 214. Interestingly Friedson was best known in his early career as a trenchant critic of professionalism, and as Magali Larson's dissertation adviser.

21 Friedson, *Professionalism, the Third Logic*, 217.

22 Friedson, *Professionalism, the Third Logic*, 218.

23 Friedson, *Professionalism, the Third Logic*, 221.

propose that workers achieve equitable regulation of the market through the creation of agreements based on larger relationships between trades or associations. Professional identity, so often associated with the middle class, then becomes a closely related concept to craft unionism, not its antithesis. Where they differ is in the larger sense of what these structures mean to the workers that participate in them. Cohen tends to frame the ideology of craft workers in terms of legitimacy and community decision making, but Friedson proposes that occupationalism can mean something more. He proposes that workers under this structure seek not only material gains, and their conception of what a moral market should look like, but also seek to contribute to the common good. In this way, Friedson argues, workers gain not only material benefits and control over their lives but a sense of meaning from their labor.

The civic unionism of the BSEIU represents a model of labor activity that resembles Friedson's occupationalism as much as it resembles craft unionism. Leaders in the union sought not only to improve the material conditions of their members, but also to achieve a truly extensive transformation of how building service workers viewed their own labor. They proposed that janitors worked not only for themselves and their employers, but for society. Though the rhetoric of figures like McFetridge and Riley can seem almost comical in its extremes, they rooted their efforts in a vision of their city's labor market as a structure that could, and should be governed for the benefits of their members and, ultimately, the public. In doing so they not only justified the elevated conditions of their members, but provided them with an ideological framework through which they increasingly understood their labor as meaningful to society. The unionism of the BSEIU became something profound, a re-framing of the existential value of janitorial labor itself. For all the faults of the union, such an audacious effort deserves note and consideration.

Janitorial Professionals?

Were the janitors of Chicago truly professionals or did they simply use the rhetoric of professionalism to achieve their goals? While intuition suggests that they were not professionals, defining who is and is not a professional is a thorny task. In the first section of his weighty tomb *The Sociology of the Professions*, Keith M. Macdonald admits that “when the word 'professions' is used in this book, it is a kind of shorthand, not... a closely defined technical term.”²⁴ In the 1970s, Sociologist Magali Larson similarly argued that “the professional phenomenon does not have clear boundaries. Either its dimensions are so devoid of a clear empirical referent, or its attributes are so concrete that occupational groups trying to upgrade their status can copy them with relative ease.”²⁵ Reflecting the confusions and lack of coherence in the scholarly study of professions, Eliot Friedson complained in 2001, “Instead of building a sturdy tower of knowledge [sociologists who study professionals and professionalism have] created a number of scattered huts, some very elegant indeed, but huts nonetheless.”²⁶ Clearly the definition of professional is fuzzy enough that it would be unfair to arbitrarily dismiss janitor's claims.

Academic discussions of professionalism often begin with the grandfather of structural functionalism, Emile Durkheim. Durkheim viewed professions and professional associations as an intermediary between workers and the larger structure of society. Professions thus provided a crucial means through which the economic and social activity could be organized and directed to common goals. Beyond a simple means of organization, Durkheim believed that the professional associations

24 Keith M. MacDonald *The Sociology of the Professions* (New York: Sage Publications, 1995), 1.

25 Magali Sarfatti Larson *The Rise of Professionalism: Monopolies of Competence and Sheltered Markets* (Livingston: Transaction Publishers, 2012 [1977]), 11.

26 Eliot Friedson, *Professionalism, the Third Logic: On the Practice of Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001), 4.

could provide workers meaning by allowing them to regulate their own labor. As Macdonald puts it, “[Durkheim believed] that the division of labour and occupational groups represented the moral basis of modern society... [thus professions could] save modern society from the breakdown in moral authority, which in his view threatened it.”²⁷ Ultimately, Durkheim believed that such associations could collapse the management-labor dichotomy, and restore a less decisive and more collaborative system of labor organization.²⁸ Durkheim's understanding of professions is different from that of most British and American sociologists in that he tended to view all occupations as professions. Durkheim's theory of professional autonomy is thus a broader vision that encompasses the laborers of an entire society.²⁹

Talcott Parsons, one of Durkheim's contemporaries, discussed professionalism in ways more in-line with the common English use of the word. As Bryan S. Turner notes in the introduction to Parsons' *Social Systems*, “[Parsons'] sociological views were strongly influenced by his admiration for professional medicine as a secular calling.”³⁰ To Parsons, professional behavior was part of an “implicit moral theory [that guides] the doctors' relationship to the (subordinate and often helpless) patient.”³¹ Professionals could be defined by their adherence to a professional-ethical code that allowed them to be entrusted with critical roles in society. Parsons' professionals were motivated less by economic concerns and more by the symbolic rewards of obeying and promoting an abstract

27 MacDonald, 2.

28 Friedson, *Professionalism, the Third Logic*, 54.

29 This is partially the result of a peculiar linguistic quirk between French and English. As Elliott Friedson explains, “There has been much misunderstanding of Durkheim's position, some stemming from confusing one particular usage of the word 'profession' that is shared by both French and English – the general sense referring to *any* sort of occupation – with another that is more limited to English usage – the specific sense that refers solely to *particular* prestigious occupations.” (*Professionalism, Third Logic*, 52). On this point and many others Friedson's clear explanations of the evolution of sociological concepts were key to the process of building this chapter and I am deeply in-debted to him.

30 Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (London: Routledge, 1991 [1951]), 6.

31 Parsons, *The Social System*, 8.

code of professional behavior and life.³² Following Parsons, some sociologists sought to classify professionals based upon shared traits. While numerous topologies were developed, most followed Parsons' general approach of identifying professionals based upon their social function. Other sociologists following Parson's view simply uncritically accepted his ideas about the superior ethical traits of professionals.³³

Beginning in the late 1960s, the functionalism of Parsons fell under increasing criticism throughout the sociological profession. Central to this discontent was a new emphasis on power rising out of a new generation of academics influenced by feminism and Marxism. More skeptical of authority, these scholars began to speak of the professions in less glowing, moralistic terms. Everett Hughes, for example, rejected the ethical superiority of professionals and argued that they were simply workers who gained a social mandate to control their own labor. To Hughes, all workers were professional depending on the degree to which they achieved this position.³⁴ Somewhat surprisingly considering his later work, Friedson's 1970 *Profession of Medicine* sounds a similarly skeptical note, arguing that Parson's beloved doctors attained their position by cynically manipulating the state and elites into granting them power and autonomy.³⁵ Similarly Michel Foucault's insight that the monopoly of knowledge is a form of discipline caused many academics to doubt professional altruism.³⁶

Much of this skepticism is crystallized in Magali Larson's field-defining work *The Rise of Professionalism*. One of Freidson's students, Larson proposed that professionals were workers who successfully engaged in conscious professional projects. Through this project they sought to

³² Friedson, *Professionalism, the Third Logic*, 203.

³³ MacDonald, 2.

³⁴ MacDonald, 7.

³⁵ MacDonald, 8.

³⁶ Larson, 19.

“translate one order of scarce resources—special knowledge and skills—into another—social and economic rewards” by gaining monopolistic control on the training and practice of certain skills.³⁷ Larson argued that professionals claimed that by “virtue of principles that reside *outside the market* [they possessed] superior competence [to serve the] greater good... better than lesser (and unsanctioned rivals) would serve it.”³⁸ They accomplish this by leveraging their social, political, and rhetorical capacities to achieve “cognitive exclusiveness” in which they gained full control over the theoretical and practical knowledge of a field.³⁹ Through institutional structures such as universities, professionals claimed exclusive right to self-regulate both the production of new knowledge in their field and the certification of workers in their field as legitimate. Critically, Larson did not see this process as flowing from the altruism of professionals, but from an effort to liberate themselves from market competition and to ensure that they would continue to enjoy the social and material benefits of prestige. Professionalism thus rests not on skills, knowledge, ethics, or service, but upon the professionals' ability to fool the public into giving them exclusive power over the knowledge base of their trade.

While some objected to Larson's Marxist rhetoric, her concept of a professional project became the basis of many of the subsequent efforts to define and delimit professionals. If we use Larson's terms as a general definition of professionalism it becomes clear that, despite McFetridge's claims, the janitors of Chicago were not true professionals or even semi-professionals. Though they achieved market regulation, the BSEIU failed to monopolize the knowledge necessary for becoming a janitor. Whatever influence the BSEIU could claim over public attitudes, they certainly never

³⁷ Larson, 17.

³⁸ Larson, 25.

³⁹ Larson, 15. Cognitive exclusiveness is a complicated concept that can be explained through the old lawyers' joke that in court “a man who defends himself has a fool for a client.” In this example, lawyers have achieved cognitive exclusiveness through the joke's implicit assumption that the law is too complex for a layman to possibly engage with without professional help.

achieved the level of social closure which would have rendered the concept of non-union janitors as nearly unthinkable.

However, what the BSEIU sought was not professionalization in academic terms, but new forms of self-respect and legitimacy. By attempting to use professionalism as a source of legitimacy, they joined many other historical trades. As Burton Bledstein argues, many groups in the late 19th and 20th century cloaked their labor in the mystique of professionalism. Doctors and lawyers were the most successful at gaining legal monopolies over their fields, but many groups sought a degree of protection from professional status. People who provide mortuary services, for example, became “*morticians*,” which suggested that they bore a close connection to the scientific and professional world.⁴⁰ Similarly, plumbers and other skilled laborers sought to present themselves as professionals who served special roles in society.⁴¹ Each of these groups argued, as janitors did, that they deserved special privileges and self-regulation of their labor due to the complexity and importance of their tasks.⁴² Beyond this, promoters of professionalism argued that only the strictures of professional ethics would ensure that such critical figures in society were worthy of trust.⁴³

To Bledstein, the pervasiveness of this “culture of professionalism” had ambiguous results for professionals and for society. While professionals provide valuable services for their communities, Bledstein argues that “the culture of professionalism... has taken an inestimable toll on the integrity of individuals.”⁴⁴ By asserting special knowledge and claiming special rights, professionals created a power imbalance between themselves and their clients. This inequality ensured that “regard for professional expertise compelled people to believe the voices of authority unquestioningly thereby

40 Bledstein, 5.

41 Bledstein, 7.

42 Bledstein, 90.

43 Bledstein, 89.

44 Bledstein, 11.

undermining self-confidence and discouraging independent evaluation.”⁴⁵ By undermining the ability of common people to regulate their own lives, professionals protected monopolies on skills and activities that they leveraged into prosperity. However, even Bledstein admits that people found professionalism “enormously satisfying to the human ego.”⁴⁶ For whatever its faults, the “culture of professionalism” helped workers to find meaning in their labor.

McFetridge hoped to inculcate this “enormously satisfying” culture among the members of the BSEIU. It would be easy to dismiss this as simply a bargaining ploy to make the labor of janitors appear to be something more than mundane or unskilled. If this were true then, according to Bledstein at least, the janitor's union was acting as any other professional group might. However, in Chicago, professionalism provided more to the union than a crass bargaining ploy, it helped to secure and define a respectable place for janitors in the structure of society—and defined much of ideology of the early BSEIU.

The Art of Self-Respect

“Tenants resent our bettering ourselves. When we got our ten per cent raise a short time ago they didn't like it.... You see how nice [my apartment looks,] there ain't another apartment in the building that's decorated as nice as this one. I had all those cabinets in the kitchen tore out and got new ones put in. That brick glass and ventilator in the transom opening I had done. Tenants didn't like to see me do all that. They resent it.”

- *The Chicago Flat Janitor* (1950)

Through the process of unionization and political mobilization discussed in the last two chapters, the BSEIU became quite successful. Prior to unionization, Chicago janitors occupied an unenviable position. Janitors complained that they were treated “like serfs” by their employers. While this might sound like hyperbole, the comparison was apt. Flat janitors often lived in the buildings they

⁴⁵ Bledstein, 11.

⁴⁶ Bledstein, 11.

served and were expected to be on-call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Further muddling their home and work lives, their wives were often expected to spend long, unpaid hours working alongside their husbands. As one union official noted, “[Prior to unionization, janitors] had to have a strong husky wife to do the scrubbing.”⁴⁷

Through unionization, janitors gained similar wages and conditions to skilled workers such as carpenters, but their occupation still garnered little respect from employers and tenants. Living in the buildings they maintained, janitors were often at the “beck and call” of their tenants.⁴⁸ Due to the dangerous nature of the steam-heating system, which could, if poorly maintained, explode, janitors remained accessible to tenants at all times.⁴⁹ Many tenants would abuse this accessibility and treat janitors like domestic servants. As one janitor noted, “Any time you [have] fifty bosses [by which he meant the tenants] you got it tough. A lot of them think you are their personal servant instead of working for the owner.”⁵⁰ Whatever the achievements of the BSEIU, convincing skeptical tenants of their value proved difficult.

The struggle for respect is universal among workers, but it is particularly poignant in the service sector. Working in jobs often dismissed as unskilled, menial, or dirty, basic appreciation of their labor often eludes service workers. Indeed, the hunger of service workers for basic respect is often a spur to labor organizing. As Dorothy Sue Cobble argues in her field-defining work on unionized waitresses, many restaurant service workers turned to labor unions as a means to “elevate waitress

47 *Proceedings of the Seventh Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 4.

48 Raymond L. Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, unpublished M.A., Thesis (University of Chicago, 1950), 7. Hereafter *The Chicago Flat Janitor*. Note that most of these quotes are drawn from interviews conducted in 1949 and 1950 by the University of Chicago sociology student named Raymond L. Gold who later went on to be a professor at University of Montana. While the interviews focus on conditions during the 1930s-1950s, many of the sentiments contained in the interviews arise from aspects of the janitorial job that extend back into the 1910s and 1920s.

49 Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 15.

50 Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 25.

work and achieve the dignity they felt was rightfully theirs.”⁵¹ In this light, the social and emotional benefits of unionization move to the very center of a union's appeal to service sector workers.

From the early days of the union, William Quesse recognized this desire and placed dignity at the core of the Flat Janitors Union. Internally, the union described this as Quesse's campaign to teach janitors the “art of self-respect.”⁵² *Public Safety* argued that prior to unionization, “The Janitor was looked upon as some dumb animal, a sort of a nondescript tramp who had inveigled some equally nondescript female animal to become his wife.”⁵³ To combat this, Quesse went “into the dark, dark recesses of the basements and cellars of the city and [dug] the human debris [flat janitors] out of the coal and cinder piles.”⁵⁴ As he organized janitors, Quesse encouraged them to take pride in their work and to behave in a way that demanded respect from employers and tenants alike. Through this pride, janitors found a new sense of value which “rekindl[ed] the spark of ambition in [janitor's] breasts.”⁵⁵

Quesse recognized that janitors would need to justify their sense of value to their employers, their tenants, and the general public. He pushed his members to improve their methods to do whatever they could, within the confines of their contract, to ease the lives of their employers and residents. All of this was an effort to improve the self-image of janitors, as Quesse believed that a “man who cannot go forward is lost and he cannot [go] forward unless he respects himself.”⁵⁶ In other words, flat janitors could not advance materially if they were not comfortable demanding respect for their labor.⁵⁷

51 Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and the Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana:University of Illinois Press, 1992), 120.

52 “William F. Quesse With His Stub Pencil and a Pad of Paper” *Public Safety*, July 1931, 25.

53 “William F. Quesse With His Stub Pencil and a Pad of Paper” *Public Safety*, 12.

54 “William F. Quesse With His Stub Pencil and a Pad of Paper” *Public Safety*, 25.

55 “William F. Quesse With His Stub Pencil and a Pad of Paper” *Public Safety*, 25.

56 “William F. Quesse With His Stub Pencil and a Pad of Paper” *Public Safety*, 25.

57 For much more on this theme see Chapter Two.

The practical improvements gained by the Flat Janitors Union helped them to develop this sense of self-respect. John Jentz suggests that far from being pariahs in their community, unionized janitors were often highly respected in Chicago's immigrant communities. Since the ethnicity and race of the union's leaders closely mirrored the backgrounds of their membership, Jentz argues that they were “examples of men who had power, who had 'made it,' and thus who had the authority to instruct others in how to work, live and act in an urban society new to most of the members.”⁵⁸ Ultimately, through their leadership and Quesse's janitorial boosterism, the union “instill[ed] in [its members] enough self-esteem and discipline to make them a potent political power.”⁵⁹

Janitors also sought this “self-esteem” and legitimacy through their connection to other craft unions. While craft governance primarily served as a means of regulating wages and conditions, it also possessed profound symbolic meaning in Chicago. As Andrew Wender Cohen argues, through craft governance workers sought to define “legitimacy and criminality for themselves.”⁶⁰ In this system of legitimation, workers deserved respect if they worked within the craft structure and defended their peers.⁶¹ Just as Bledstein's physicians used the discourse of professionalism and science to defend their prerogatives, carpenters and other craft workers claimed respect based on their place in craft governance.

As janitors became deeply integrated into the world of craft unions, their social position became elevated through their connection with other craft workers. Craft solidarity made janitors the brothers and sisters of Teamsters, plumbers, and bricklayers. To reinforce this, union leaders

58 John B. Jentz, "Citizenship, Self-Respect, and Political Power: Chicago's Flat Janitors Trailblaze the Service Employees International Union, 1912-1921," 5.

59 John B. Jentz, "Citizenship, Self-Respect, and Political Power: Chicago's Flat Janitors Trailblaze the Service Employees International Union, 1912-1921", 5.

60 Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 71.

61 Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress* 71.

continually criticized non-union janitors for being disloyal to other craft workers and for having “botched every job he attempted.”⁶² In this story, unionization gave the janitor “his place in the sun with the most respected of the community's citizens” by enforcing craft lines and ensuring that every janitor was qualified for their job.⁶³

However, the veneer of legitimacy claimed by craft workers began to wear thin in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Through the early 1920s, well-funded critics of craft governance used the court system to assault the mechanisms of craft governance, though failed to de-legitimize the system.⁶⁴ In the late 1920s, anti-union groups like Chicago's Employers Association (EA) began to sharpen their rhetorical assault on craft unions. Where the EA once sought to portray craft workers as dangerous radicals, now they emphasized their connection with organized crime. As the EA's firebrand Gordon Hostetter explained, racketeers were “human parasites [that] graft themselves upon... the industry of others, maintaining their hold by intimidation, force, and terrorism.”⁶⁵ Far from being upstanding communities of hard-working citizens, craft unions were remade as vampires that sucked the productivity out of Chicago and consorted with the city's vice-merchants.

Even though public support for craft unions remained high, the association between craft unions and crime was an easy one to make. Deprived of the legal power of state sanction, craft workers used violence alongside strikes and boycotts as a means of enforcing their agreements. In addition, the extra-judicial structure of craft governance made it extremely vulnerable to corruption and criminal exploitation. As commercial expansion and Prohibition greatly increased the scope of organized crime in Chicago, many gangsters sought to use labor unions for their own ends. While

62 “William F. Quesse With His Stub Pencil and a Pad of Paper” *Public Safety*, 13.

63 “William F. Quesse With His Stub Pencil and a Pad of Paper” *Public Safety*, 13.

64 Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 260.

65 Quoted in Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 260.

some gangsters were actually praised by the EA for their violent assaults on union members, other gangsters effectively infiltrated and took control of craft unions. These corrupt unions became part of an escalating cycle of violence as gangsters sought to settle disputes with guns, not picketlines.⁶⁶ Though the EA's efforts to brand craft unions as gangsters failed to result in the overwhelming public backlash they sought, the connection between craft unions and the underworld was a difficult one for unions to shake. As Cohen notes, by the mid-1930s “racketeer” became “a code word to condemn labor leaders without issuing any precise charge against them.”⁶⁷

The public image problems of craft unions were particularly troubling to the BSEIU because they were unusually dependent upon maintaining a degree of public legitimacy. Both the flat janitors and the union's public sector members achieved their conditions largely through their association with Mayor Thompson's political machine. The political nature of the union, along with the intimate connection that flat janitors shared with thousands of Chicagoans, made the BSEIU in Chicago uniquely vulnerable to a loss of public legitimacy. The union's political situation was further complicated when Anton Cermak defeated Big Bill Thompson in 1931. As a linchpin in Thompson's political machine, the BSEIU faced potential hostility from the ascendant Democrats. While McFetridge would eventually become a key part of the Democratic machine, in the wake of Thompson's defeat the union faced a tenuous political situation.⁶⁸

The union's political uncertainties were compounded by mounting public criticism of their political power and rough methods. These criticisms were most strident in the pages of the *Chicago*

⁶⁶ Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 250-260.

⁶⁷ Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 289. It is important not to overstate this point. While craft unions struggled to maintain rhetorical legitimacy, the Great Depression so deeply de-legitimated their corporate opponents that craft unions managed to maintain a decent level of public support through the 30s and 40s.

⁶⁸ The somewhat astonishing tale of how McFetridge, a life long Republican, managed to become a major player in the Kelly machine and one of the founders of the Daley machine will be discussed in Chapters Seven and Eight.

Daily Tribune. In 1926, for example, the newspaper declared that the “Flat Janitors’ union has one of the most unsavory records of any Chicago labor organization” and accused the union of regularly using violence to enforce its demands.⁶⁹ Associations between the union and the violent “bomb politics” of Thompson portrayed the union as a violent organization with a disturbing amount of political influence.⁷⁰

Given the political nature of the union’s success, McFetridge and other leaders recognized that a loss of public support could be devastating. The preface to the 1940 edition of the union’s *Instructions to the members of the Chicago Flat Janitor’s Union*, for example, reminded janitors, “Public opinion is a powerful influence and must be respected. We have the good will of the public as well as that of our employers, and we must do all in our power to maintain this valued relationship.”⁷¹ Building a successful service sector union required more than organizing, it required workers who respected themselves and a sense of public legitimacy. Through the thirties and forties the union fought to secure this legitimacy and “good will” by arguing that janitors were public-minded professionals.

His Majesty, The Professional

All professions are conspiracies against the laity.

— George Bernard Shaw, *The Doctor’s Dilemma* (1906)

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While some might accuse Shaw of cynicism, many scholars view professionalism as fundamentally exploitation of non-professionals. As Larson and others argue, the true power of a profession is its ability to obtain, justify, and maintain a privileged market position. Even if janitors

69 “A Test Case,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 18, 1926, 8.

70 “Vote 3 True Bills,” *Chicago Tribune* September 27, 1930, p.2; “Apartment Owner Charges Janitors With Terrorism,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 10, 1932, 2.

71 *Instructions to the members of the Chicago Flat Janitor’s Union*, 89.

could not become professionals in a classic sense, these qualities possessed an obvious appeal to leaders like McFetridge. Using the rhetoric of professionalism was surprisingly easy for the BSEIU because of its similarity to the rhetoric of craft. Like the interwoven structure of Chicago's craft unions, professional associations claimed the right to legitimately monopolize a labor market—unilaterally setting the terms of entry and working conditions of an occupation. Professionals and craft unions, particularly service-oriented unions like the BSEIU, justified this power based on their importance to the community. Critical services, they argued, could not be exposed to the vagaries of the marketplace lest unskilled and unprincipled practitioners become the norm.

The lines between craft unions and professional associations are, in fact, blurrier than they initially appear. Professionalism and craft governance in the United States both sprang from the same historical moment. As Robert Wiebe famously argued in his monumental *Search for Order*, the urbanization and industrialization of the late 19th century profoundly disrupted traditional social structures and hierarchy. To cope, many groups sought to organize themselves to preserve (or improve) their place in society.⁷² While this process is usually discussed in terms of elites establishing professional organizations, craft workers also sought to use their political weight to legitimate an elevated place for themselves in the social structure.

Of course there were differences between the two responses. Where craft workers justified their place through ability to enforce craft rules and the practical skills of their workers, professionals justified their place through claims to esoteric knowledge and sterling ethics. In Bledstein's words “Laymen were neither prepared to comprehend the mystery of the tasks which professionals performed, nor—more ominously—were they equipped to pass judgment upon special skills and

72 Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 21, 39-44.

technical competence. Hence, the culture of professionalism required amateurs to 'trust' in the integrity of trained persons, to respect [their] moral authority."⁷³ Professionalism, more than craft governance, justified itself through an invocation of its value in the promotion of the public good.

To combine the BSEIU's craft appeal with a new discourse of professionalism, leaders in the union self-consciously sought to portray janitors as servants of the public good. Through editorials, membership meetings, and presentations to diverse civic groups, McFetridge and other leaders compellingly argued that janitors play a critical, if little appreciated, role in society. Clever assertions of the importance of janitors were particularly common throughout the run of *Public Safety*. In a 1929 editorial, for example, International President Jerry Horan quipped that "[the janitor] is indeed one of the guardians of public safety, on him depends a great deal of sanitation and health of the persons who make use of the building... therefore it is natural to expect that these building service employees be men of character and ability and if these are two of the requirements then there should be a real compensation in wages to... stimulate their interest in the proper upkeep of a building."⁷⁴ Higher wages were thus not simply fair compensation, but a means of ensuring that people of ability, character, and commitment chose janitorial work over other options.

The janitor envisioned by authors in *Public Safety* focused on the public good, not on his own selfish desires. As Bledstein and others argue this claim to the public good is used by professionals as the key justification of their privilege.⁷⁵ *Public Safety* repeatedly argued that janitors pursued their vocation or calling as a service to their employers (or clients) and to the public noting that "a great responsibility rests on every Janitor (Caretaker) in protecting health and property in the building in

⁷³ Bledstein, 90.

⁷⁴ Horan, "President's Letter," *Public Safety*, 1.

⁷⁵ Bledstein 87-89.

which they have charge... [Janitors are an] organized force ready to give service to their fellowman.”⁷⁶ Like a doctor or a lawyer, a janitor was encouraged to view himself as a servant in a larger cause.

Such publicly minded, unionized janitors were a boon to their employers. Through training in the union hall, janitors gained the skills that they needed to provide excellent service. In the pages of *Public Safety* building owners raved that “trained janitors are keeping the buildings filled.”⁷⁷ These skilled janitors could negotiate the sometimes Byzantine world of city ordinances through their intimate knowledge of sanitary regulations and building codes. Such knowledge saved building owners “millions of dollars” each year.⁷⁸ Janitors provided more than sanitary services, they also performed “most of the managerial duties” in numerous high-class apartment buildings.⁷⁹ Businessmen employing unionized janitors were like “careful automobile [drivers]” who are always taking care to prevent accidents.⁸⁰

The unionized, professional janitor's ability to secure these savings came not only from experience but also from their understanding of the janitorial arts. The BSEIU prided itself on providing its members with an up-to-date understanding of the science of sanitation.⁸¹ In the same way that a medical professional “grasped the concept behind a functional activity [and] penetrated beyond the rich confusion of ordinary experience,” the union claimed that their janitors could use scientific knowledge to protect the prosperity of their employers.⁸² The justification for the union's power was thus more science than solidarity.

76 Jerry Horan, “Message of Our International President” *Public Safety*, March 1935, 1.

77 “Horan Trained Janitors Keep Rentals Up, Says Big Estate Manager,” *Public Safety* January 1932, 5. To be fair, the quote was anonymous.

78 “Union Janitors Honest,” *Public Safety* April 1936, 18.

79 “Horan Trained Janitors Keep Rentals Up, Says Big Estate Manager,” *Public Safety*, 6.

80 Jerry Horan, “Message of Our International President,” *Public Safety* January 1936, 1.

81 “Janitors” *Public Safety* August 1934, 4.

82 Bledstein, 88.

Equally important to the janitor's scientific skills was a commitment to the public that transcended the crass marketplace. Janitors employed in public buildings, for example, were not just employees, they were the stewards of the public's trust. The modern, scientific maintenance methods of unionized janitors saved the city money by making "paint and varnish [last] from eight to twelve years longer than it would if left to the devices of untrained help. [Skilled janitors] save [the Chicago] equivalent of the yearly wage every six months."⁸³ The union argued that any resistance to unionization by employers could only be the result of "unreasonable prejudice" compromising an employer's capacity to see the many benefits offered by skilled janitors.⁸⁴

Employers who overcame this "unreasonable prejudice" played a key role in reinforcing the professional self image of the union's members. The union's 1940 manual, *Instructions to Janitors*, for example, began with a tribute from Morgan L. Fitch, the President of the Chicago Real Estate Board, saying, "The janitor is the [property manager or real estate agent's] superior officer... the janitor draws more wages than the agent [and] the employment of the agent is directly dependent upon the efficiency of the janitor's work.... indifferent service [by janitors] soon reflects their damage in reduced income with the first result [being] that the agent loses [his] job."⁸⁵ Thankfully, unionization resulted in the ready availability of professional janitors who "as a class have been valuable partners in real estate enterprise."⁸⁶ Fitch concludes by praising the "willingness and desire [of BSEIU janitors] to apply intelligence and modern methods to their jobs."⁸⁷

While Fitch's effusive praise may have been an attempt to ingratiate himself with the union's leadership and ensure labor peace, it was also indicative of the professional relationship that existed

⁸³ "Janitors" *Public Safety*, 4.

⁸⁴ "Union Janitors Honest," *Public Safety*, 18.

⁸⁵ *Instructions to the members of the Chicago Flat Janitor's Union*, 1.

⁸⁶ *Instructions to the members of the Chicago Flat Janitor's Union*, 1.

⁸⁷ *Instructions to the members of the Chicago Flat Janitor's Union*, 1.

between building owners and janitors. Since the 1917 contract, flat janitors were paid partially based upon the rent of the buildings in which they worked. In this way, the success of a janitor was tied to the success of his employer. With time, janitors who could successfully justify higher rents by providing better service to their tenants often found jobs working at luxury flats with high rents. Such a relationship encouraged workers to think of janitorial work as a career with a particular hierarchy that they might, with hard work, rise through. For their part, employers like Fitch recognized that good flat janitors could find employment elsewhere.⁸⁸

However, the janitor's most important duties were not to their employers but to their tenants. *Public Safety* proposed that only professional janitors could provide tenants with the “feeling of security” that they deserved.⁸⁹ Janitors were told that they carried a “great responsibility” on their shoulders in “protecting health... in the building which they have charge.”⁹⁰ Flat janitors were the stewards of many people's homes, who had a duty to help their tenants through their daily lives.⁹¹

Ensuring that unionized janitors were public-minded, respectable, and trustworthy became the central goal expressed by the union. As the union's 1940 *Instructions to the members of the Chicago Flat Janitor's Union* noted, “Before seeking recognition, President Quesse sought to get a better class of men interested in taking jobs as flat janitors.... many of those [who were employed prior to unionization] were considered unfit to be a part of [the union]... Where men were discharged for drinking or neglect of duty, President Quesse had responsible men placed... and in this manner built up the caliber of his organization.”⁹² Just as a medical or legal association ensured the quality of their members, the union sought to define themselves as the defenders of janitorial quality.

⁸⁸ See Chapter Two.

⁸⁹ Jerry Horan, “President's Letter,” *Public Safety*, October 1929, 1.

⁹⁰ Horan, “Message of Our International President” *Public Safety*, 1.

⁹¹ “William F. Quesse With His Stub Pencil and a Pad of Paper” *Public Safety*, 24.

⁹² *Instructions to the members of the Chicago Flat Janitor's Union*, 1.

In terms that would have appealed to Parsons' veneration of professional ethics, the union tried to ensure that its janitors were viewed as respectable and trustworthy. For example, in an extended description of a flat janitor's recommended schedule, Vice President Gus Van Heck noted, "It is the aim and purpose of the [BSEIU] to place the work of the members of the various locals on the highest possible plane, so that every member of the International will have reason to be proud... In that way we will be able to command respect for the Union and for ourselves and be considered as skilled workmen and entitled to be paid and treated as such."⁹³ To be successful, however, Heck argued that janitors need to do more than simply work with skill, they needed the respect and trust of the general public. To ensure this, Van Heck recommended that "[w]hen the janitor has finished his work... he should clean himself up and look clean and neat."⁹⁴ Such a janitor would be recognized as "a good janitor, fully earning his pay [who is] entitled to the respect and gratitude of building owners, tenants, and the public generally for his good citizenship."⁹⁵ In this way the union re-framed the discussion of skilled labor to include an element of professional public-mindedness.

In contrast, *Public Safety* described non-unionized janitors as "a menace to [themselves]... [and] the costliest member of society."⁹⁶ Unskilled and without self-respect, these non-union (and by implication non-professional) janitors performed shoddy work for their employers. Unionized janitors "[conducted] themselves in a manner that compels respect. Quite the contrast to the unfortunate floater who because of poverty accepts basement shelter for his services."⁹⁷ These unfortunate floaters were more than incompetent and pathetic: they were potentially criminals. One article in *Public Safety* displayed this vividly by contrasting stories of janitors returning lost money

93 Gus Van Heck, "Schedule of Daily Work for Flat Janitors" *Public Safety*, January 1936, 4.

94 Van Heck, "Schedule of Daily Work for Flat Janitors" *Public Safety*, 5.

95 Van Heck, "Schedule of Daily Work for Flat Janitors" *Public Safety*, 5.

96 "William F. Quesse With His Stub Pencil and a Pad of Paper" *Public Safety*, 13.

97 Horan, "Message of Our International President" *Public Safety*, 1.

clips with stories of ex-convict, scab janitors stealing tens of thousands of dollars from tenants. Many articles seemed to darkly suggest that a non-union janitor was a threat to the very sanctity of a renter's home and family.⁹⁸

At times the BSEIU described the value of janitors in apocalyptic terms. Without skilled janitors, the journal warned, poorly repaired plumbing would create “clouds of sewer gas [that would] invade [people's] homes” and improperly operated furnaces would blacken the sky with soot.⁹⁹ The union's efforts to enhance its own importance through fear of death and illness are surprisingly similar to the efforts of other medical professionals. As Bledstein notes, “Professionals tended to confide the worst, often evoking images of disaster and even a horrible death. The physician might hint at the possibility of an undetected cancer.”¹⁰⁰ However, janitors did not simply evoke such timeless existential terrors, they also tapped into contemporary currents and trends around public health and sanitation.

Understandings of health and sanitation underwent revolutionary changes during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As Nancy Tomes describes it, the increasing understanding of the microbial world resulted in what is “often referred to as the 'golden era' of the American public health movement.... [and] a period of intense interest in... the reformation of individual and household hygiene.”¹⁰¹ The collective result of this movement was what Tomes calls the “Gospel of Germs”—a somewhat obsessive social concern with sanitation and hygiene. In this new and terrifying world, contagions were ever-present and could only be held back by constant vigilance. The heroes, and financial beneficiaries, of this gospel were the doctors and public health officials who could use

98 “Union Janitors Honest,” *Public Safety*, 18.

99 “William F. Quesse With His Stub Pencil and a Pad of Paper” *Public Safety*, 25.

100 Bledstein 99.

101 Nancy Tomes, *The Gospel of Germs: Men, Women, and the Microbe in American Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 6.

their understanding of “science” to hold back the tide of devastating illness.

During the Progressive Era, these new but inchoate fears slowly crystallized into a demand for a more extensive public health system. Progressives, in the words of historian Dorothy Porter, sought to implement “[u]niversal standards of public hygiene [that] must be administered by a uniform system of public health organization... [They] argued that public health should become a profession.”¹⁰² Such professional public health officials were distinct from doctors in their greater concern for large-scale issues of sanitation and hygiene.

Concerns about hygiene and sanitation were particularly pressing in the city of Chicago. The marshy conditions around Lake Michigan and rapid growth of Chicago during the mid-19th century resulted in persistent sanitary crises that continued through the Progressive Era. As Harold Platt notes in his superb study of Chicago, *Shock Cities*, the widespread belief in the ability of Lake Michigan to purify waste resulted in a sanitary infrastructure that dumped effluence straight into the city's water supply. Such waste, combined with growing amounts of industrial pollution, resulted in “ideal conditions for the spread of a waterborne infection” resulting in common cholera outbreaks.¹⁰³ The essentially unclean conditions of the city caused many medical experts to believe that Chicago was beset by an invisible cloud of illness known as a miasma.¹⁰⁴ The effect of this sense of formless illness on Chicagoans was profound, “The smells emanating from the accumulation of rotting organic wastes in the river had exceeded some undefinable tipping point and were no longer tolerable. Its foul odors could not but stimulate nervous anxieties about infection

102 Dorothy Porter, *Health, Civilization, and the State: A History of Public Health from Ancient to Modern Times* (New York: Routledge, 1999) (New York: Routledge, 1999), 136.

103 Harold L. Platt, *Shock Cities: the Environmental Transformation and Reform of Manchester and Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 95, 138.

104 Platt, 147.

with every breath of suspected poisonous air.”¹⁰⁵ While sanitation would, thankfully, improve in Chicago, the legacy of these “nervous anxieties” would ensure that sanitary reform remained on the minds of many Chicagoans.

During the Progressive Era, calls for a more developed public health system in Chicago coalesced into what Platt describes as an “environmental justice movement.”¹⁰⁶ Motivated partially by a desire to decrease inequality and partially by a desire to prevent the spread of typhoid and other diseases, reformers sought to expand sanitary utilities and services to poor areas of the city. Led by Jane Addams and Dr. Alice Hamilton, the movement resulted in new sanitary regulations and building-inspection requirements.¹⁰⁷ These reforms, along with later struggles around water and air quality, led to the creation of an increasingly professional and science-based public health infrastructure in Chicago.¹⁰⁸

To janitors seeking the protection of professional identity, associating themselves with this public health infrastructure was an obvious move. While fear of germs was universal, true understanding of bacteria was uncommon, and many people in the 1930s still believed that germs were spread through dust. Responsible for the day-to-day sanitation of many of the city's buildings, janitors were easily re-framed as an essential defense against the threat of disease-causing grime. From this perspective, janitors could claim that they were medical professionals who worked alongside doctors and public health officers in defending their city.

During Chicago's long winters, for example, janitors served the public health system by ensuring the proper maintenance of boiler systems. According to Local 1's operations manual, *Instructions to*

¹⁰⁵ Platt, 140.

¹⁰⁶ Platt, 333.

¹⁰⁷ Platt, 344-360.

¹⁰⁸ Platt, 440.

the members of the Chicago Flat Janitor's Union, such a critical task could only be trusted to janitors with an extensive and scientific knowledge of boiler systems. The *Instructions* sought to teach members about not only the operation of boilers but also about the theory of their operation. Boilers which were producing too much smoke, for example, were to be evaluated through a scientific procedure to classify the smoke based on the Ringelman scale.¹⁰⁹ If the smoke rated too high on the scale, janitors were instructed on complicated procedures to improve efficiency, “When filling the boiler with water after cleaning, be sure you have a true water level in your glass... open the pet cock at the bottom of the water glass and assure yourself that the water returns to the indicated level... keep valves packed as a leaky valve stem denotes a poor mechanic... keep a close watch on the turn damper of [the] breaching damper to prevent chimney heat loss.”¹¹⁰ By following such procedures throughout the city, the manual proudly noted that airborne solids in Chicago decreased by 17%.¹¹¹ Such an achievement, the union contended, could only be achieved by janitors with intimate understandings of the boilers that they tended.

The BSEIU encouraged janitors to think of themselves as front-line soldiers in the war for sanitary conditions. While health reformers in Chicago fought diligently for health regulations, the union argued that the size and complexity of the city made their enforcement extremely difficult. With the help of janitors, reformers could turn the hygienic city from a fantasy to a reality. Through their wide distribution, janitors were the ideal enforcers and apostles of sanitation.¹¹² The work of janitors thus became part of the larger march of scientific progress and efficiency. Workshops, mandatory in some locals, ensured that janitors were up-to-date on the latest sanitary techniques.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ *Instructions to the members of the Chicago Flat Janitor's Union*, 44.

¹¹⁰ *Instructions to the members of the Chicago Flat Janitor's Union*, 22.

¹¹¹ *Instructions to the members of the Chicago Flat Janitor's Union*, 22.

¹¹² “William F. Quesse With His Stub Pencil and a Pad of Paper” *Public Safety*, 25.

¹¹³ “Janitors” *Public Safety*, 4.

Public Safety regularly ran articles intended to help janitors make proper and safe use of modern cleaning agents such as chlorine.¹¹⁴ Doctors and sanitary experts were commonly invited to examine janitor's buildings to provide commentary on how conditions could be improved.¹¹⁵ Some experienced janitors even published articles on the work process to encourage their fellow janitors to work in a scientific fashion.¹¹⁶ As doctors and nurses before them, janitors cloaked their profession in the mysteries of science while ultimately linking themselves to the progress of civilization.¹¹⁷

The linkage of janitors and progress was clearest among the janitors of Local 46 who provided services to the schools of Chicago. Local 46 faced significant criticism for their high wages and corrupt hiring practices.¹¹⁸ School janitors were accused of being—and indeed often were—purely political appointees who received their jobs due to the union's connections to the Chicago Board of Education.¹¹⁹ McFetridge, however, fought this notion vigorously in the pages of *Public Safety*. Noting that school janitors passed civil service exams, he argued that they should be considered public servants who supported the education of Chicago's children.¹²⁰ Editorials in *Public Safety* similarly argued that, “[Chicago's] school buildings are in a more sanitary condition than any of our homes... Indeed, we must go into the surgical wards... to find the same sanitary conditions.”¹²¹ Only unionized janitors could defend the health of the city's children because unskilled janitors could

114 William McFetridge, “Vice-President McFetridge Outlines Chicago School Operation,” *Public Safety*, September 1931, 5.

115 “William F. Quesse With His Stub Pencil and a Pad of Paper” *Public Safety*, 25; September 1931, *Instructions to the members of the Chicago Flat Janitor's Union*, 77.

116 Van Heck, “Schedule of Daily Work for Flat Janitors” *Public Safety*, 5.

117 Riley, “We Are Not Janitors, We Are Saniticians,” *Public Safety*, 14.

118 Oscar Hewitt, “Predicts School Fund Deficit or New Tax Rate,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 19, 1927, 14.

119 McFetridge, “Vice-President McFetridge Outlines Chicago School Operation,” *Public Safety*, 5.

120 “Well Done McFetridge,” *Public Safety* January 1931, 16; McFetridge, “Vice-President McFetridge Outlines Chicago School Operation,” *Public Safety*, 5.

121 “School Safe Haven for City Children,” *Public Safety* June 1931, 6.

neither deal with the modern fixtures in schools nor provide scientifically verifiable sanitation.¹²²

While *Public Safety* likely exaggerated the surgically precise sanitation of the city's schools, the flourish of their descriptions was meant to convince their fellow janitors that they were as important as “teachers, principals and other help.”¹²³ To some extent these efforts were successful. In 1931, for example, a school janitor argued that his job was part of the educational process because “[one] of the primary factors in educating the rising generation, is the health of both the teachers and the pupils.” He continued that this understanding of his role in education was “constantly impressed upon us by our president [McFetridge].”¹²⁴ Even if school janitors never professionalized in the same way that teachers had, some achieved a kind of parity in their own minds.

At times McFetridge's descriptions of janitors were truly grandiose. In many articles McFetridge argued that the ideal janitor was more than simply the defender of sanitary conditions, he was the heir of classical civilization. Perhaps his most stunning assertion came in a 1932 editorial in which he declared that January was “The Janitor's Month.” McFetridge noted that the original janitors were the followers of Janus who established the first hospitals in ancient Rome. Understanding that “a healthy city is a city where there are well defined rules on sanitation,” these ancient Janitorial Corps undertook all of the initial projects of sanitation in the western world such as the first aqueducts.¹²⁵ The janitor was thus the forbearer of all modern health care; doctors, nurses and city planners were all fundamentally offshoots of the janitor's craft. While McFetridge's interpretation of medical history was questionable, his point was clear, “We find that there is hardly a profession or craft which did not spring from the honored profession of the... janitor. Other professions have

122 McFetridge, “Vice-President McFetridge Outlines Chicago School Operation,” *Public Safety*, 5.

123 McFetridge, “Vice-President McFetridge Outlines Chicago School Operation,” *Public Safety*, 18.

124 “Well Done McFetridge,” *Public Safety* January 1931, 16.

125 William McFetridge, “The Janitor's Month” *Public Safety* January 1932, 16.

encroached on ours and have taken away a lot of our duties but the incontestable fact remains that ours is the oldest profession in the world... the fountainhead of all crafts and public service boards.”¹²⁶ In this way janitorial professionalism was more than a handy rhetoric, it was the right of all who claimed janitor as a “calling.”

Though McFetridge's association of janitors and Rome would be easy to parody, it also displayed an understanding of the conceptual link between public health and civilization. In her extensive *Health, Civilization, and the State*, Dorothy Porter compellingly argues that the process of defining civilization is often deeply interwoven with the process of defining public health. As she notes, public health was commonly, “involved in changing the historical relationship between the civilizing process [that] definitively contributed to the formation of autonomous states.”¹²⁷ From this perspective McFetridge's rhetoric seems, if exaggerated, at least grounded in a reasonable understanding of the significance of the public health system.

To be sure, it is difficult to disentangle McFetridge's efforts to gain a better bargaining position from his personal belief in the value of janitors. To some extent, janitorial professionalism was simply a bargaining ploy. As Elizabeth Grady noted during her 1940 campaign to eliminate the term scrub woman from contracts, “You will get more money for janitresses. That is a high-toned name.”¹²⁸ William McFetridge quickly agreed, suggesting that a title like “sanitation attendant” might be even better.¹²⁹ Certainly the leadership of the union was well aware that the proper framing of their membership could provide them with leverage against their employers.

¹²⁶ McFetridge, “The Janitor's Month” *Public Safety*, 17.

¹²⁷ Porter, 7. For more on the connection between sanitation, civilization and order see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966).

¹²⁸ *Proceedings of the Eighth General Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 75.

¹²⁹ *Proceedings of the Eighth General Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 75.

Professionalism did not replace earlier appeals to craft or skilled labor. *Public Safety* commonly used the language of professionalism and the language of craft together in arguing for the importance of janitors. In October 1929, for example, Jerry Horan declared that the “building service employee is no different than any other craftsman.”¹³⁰ On the next page the journal described janitors in terms which might easily apply to doctors, “[A union janitor] gives [a client] a feeling of security. They feel safe and confident.”¹³¹ A month later, an editorial in *Public Safety* compared the aspirations of janitors to the professionalization of nurses.¹³² Ideas of craft and professionalism did not appear contradictory or incompatible for the BSEIU, but were simply different parts of their appeal.

Despite the union's best efforts, the union never achieved McFetridge's ultimate dream of elevating janitors into the realm of medical professionals. Yet a series of interviews conducted among flat janitors in 1949 reveal that the union's high-toned rhetoric became internalized by many of the union's members. In Chapter Six, these interviews will be extensively explored, but a few vignettes here illustrate this point. The interviewer, sociologist Raymond L. Gold, was struck by the ways in which janitors commonly associated themselves with the ideals of professionalism. Like Bledstein's prototypical professionals, the janitors Gold interviewed sought to portray themselves as defenders of their clients and society. As Gold puts it, his interviews revealed that the “janitor thinks of himself as the very capable and responsible guardian of the apartment building.”¹³³ Such crucial

130 Horan, “President's Letter,” *Public Safety*, 1.

131 Horan, “President's Letter,” *Public Safety*, 2.

132 F. R. B, “Improved Conditions of Public School Janitors,” *Public Safety*, 22. The same issue also includes an article entitled “Should Colleges Be Burned” in which a writer complained that “too many of our educational plants apparently are more interested in turning out star quarter-backs than they are in intellectual stars.... Maybe it is better to hope for the coming time when the emphasis will be placed on ideas.” (33). The article is not directly related to anything happening inside the union but it is a fascinating tidbit of the way that janitors and their union viewed the great arbiters of professionalism: the universities.

133 Gold, 1.

responsibility, janitors argued, justified their high wages and control of the marketplace. However, instead of defining success in purely economic terms, Gold argued that the janitor “feels he cannot be a success unless he interacts with [his tenants] on a level which is characterized by mutual respect. Anything short of this level seriously damages his self-integrity. The janitor sees himself as a very capable and respectable man whom the tenants must recognize as such.”¹³⁴ Even if the BSEIU could not remake their members into professionals, the ideas and justifications of the culture of professionalism influenced their members and shaped how they understood their work.

Conclusion

“One must imagine Sisyphus happy”

-Albert Camus, *the Myth of Sisyphus*

Magali Larson's *The Rise of Professionalism* opens by noting that her “interest in the professions was initially awakened by practical experience. During a strike of college teachers in the sixties, the accusation was heard that these professors were behaving 'like longshoremen.' Later I was told by organizers of a union of employed architects... that most of their potential members resisted unionization, as something 'unprofessional.’”¹³⁵ To Larson professionalism seemed to be a deceptive promise that offered the middle class a fable of upward mobility. By promising workers autonomy and status, she argues, professionalism “deflects the... critical vision of society [and] functions as a means for controlling large sectors of educated labor.”¹³⁶ Since professional status brought workers little actual control, “[P]rofessionalism' legitimize[s] the class structure by introducing status differentials, status aspirations, and status mobility at practically all levels of the occupational hierarchy.”¹³⁷ Through this legitimation professionalism “transforms structure into personality [and]

¹³⁴ Larson, 24.

¹³⁵ Larson, 10.

¹³⁶ Larson, 237.

¹³⁷ Larson, 239.

thus prevents [professionals] from even conceiving that there may be collective and cooperative ways of challenging the very structure of social inequality.”¹³⁸ In the professional mind, systemic understandings of inequality or failure become fully obscured by the mystique of meritocracy.

Professionalism also damaged the very foundation of democracy as it is a “technocratic ideology [that] regards democratic participation and political debate and accountability with impatience: superior ability and rational knowledge should not and cannot be hindered by an ignorant citizenry and non-rational political process.”¹³⁹ As the fable of meritocracy becomes widely accepted “power and privilege tend to become automatic warrants of superior competence.”¹⁴⁰ Professionalism justifies the power of elites by implying that prestige can only be achieved through talent and ability. This “not only prevents *alliances* with other workers or clients. It also works as preventive against the unity... of professional workers themselves. Unions are... an instrument of power of the working class, and as such are symbolic of a loss in general social status; for analogous reasons, even when there are unions, professionals are more reluctant than other workers to engage in militant tactics.”¹⁴¹ Professionalism, in this rendering, is a social acid that erodes egalitarian politics and institutions.¹⁴²

Though academics are, of course, among the prototypic professionals, the ideology of professionalism has often been subject to their suspicion and scorn. Burt Bledstein provides one of

138 Larson, 241.

139 Larson, 243.

140 Larson, 243.

141 Larson, 237.

142 Larson later softened her views on professionalism somewhat. In introduction to the 2013 edition of *the Rise of Professionalism* she notes, “I am no longer willing to defend the theory that professionalism spreads something akin to false consciousness among the expert workers upon which global capitalism increasingly depends.” (Larson, xxix) However she maintained a doubt of the technocratic assumptions that underlay professional ideology noting that. “The power-effect of cultural capital is pervasive and it may be harder to discern and perhaps more lasting than the effect of economic capital. This is the laity’s problem with experts, one of understanding as much as one of trust. Confronting it is a problem of democracy, not of expertise.” (Larson, 32)

the pithiest denouncements of professionalism, indicting them for their “arrogance, shallowness, and potential abuses of the vertical vision by venal individuals who justify their special treatment and betray society's trust by invoking professional privilege, confidence, and secrecy.”¹⁴³ Famed social critic Christopher Lasch similarly accused professionals of “invent[ing] many of the needs they claim to satisfy. [Professionals] played on public fears of disorder and disease, adopted a deliberately mystifying jargon, ridiculed popular traditions of self-help as backward and unscientific, and in this way created or intensified... a demand for their own services.”¹⁴⁴ Examining the impact of early century professional experts on women's health, Barbara Ehrenreich argues that they “betrayed the trust that women had put in them. Claiming the purity of science, [medical professionals]... persisted in commercialism inherent in a commoditized system of healing.... They turned out not to be scientists—for all their talk of data, laboratory findings, clinical trials—but apologists for the status quo.”¹⁴⁵ Though more positive discussions of professionalism exist, in the eyes of many, professionals emerge as, at best, useless and, at worst, cruel and venal exploiters of the vulnerable.¹⁴⁶

Many of these critiques have merit, but the civic unionism of McFetridge and Riley suggests that in professionalism there also exists a potential to inspire people to fight against economic exploitation. The union explained how professionalism could inspire labor activity through an analogy to nurses. Nursing, an editorial in *Public Safety* noted, had once been merely an occupation. However, as nurses convinced doctors and the general public of their critical place in the public health infrastructure, they became recognized as professionals and secured higher wages. The

143 Bledstein, 134.

144 Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1978), 385.

145 Ehrenreich, 285.

146 These feelings are, of course, not universal in the academy. See Bruce Robbins, *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture* (London: Verso, 1993). For a good overview of more positive literature.

BSEIU sought to follow the same path by using the trappings of professionalism to get janitors “the measure of respect, and remuneration to which they are entitled.”¹⁴⁷ Janitors needed to convince the public that the “work of a good janitor... is as important within its limits as is that of a physician.”¹⁴⁸ The union never achieved this feat, but their efforts to do so illustrates the compatibility between professionalism and working-class political power and labor activism.

Obviously theoretical issues did not concern the writers in *Public Safety*. Yet in their continual invocations of public health, the common good, and the value of self-regulating janitors, they expressed a vision quite similar to Friedson's occupationalism. This vision represented a new evolution in the way that the union justified its demands. At the outset, the union used the concept of an American standard of living to inspire immigrants to push for better wages and conditions. After the union gained a measure of success, leaders sought to justify expansion throughout Chicago through its association with legitimate trades. In the 1930s, the union justified the gains it made as serving the public interest. Though these approaches each expressed different themes, they all displayed an understanding of the emotional and existential values of unionism. Leaders in the BSEIU argued that their union not only provided material advantages, it helped janitors to find their place in society.

In this context, professional identity became part of the larger bundle of ways that the union encouraged each member to demand respect from employers and the public. For janitors, professionalism did not encourage false consciousness; instead it helped them to become conscious of their value to society. Much of the modern literature around community unions, and labor movement revival in general, takes as unstated assumption that middle-class or professional identity

147 “Improve Conditions of Public School Janitors,” *Public Safety*, November 1929, 22.

148 “Improve Conditions of Public School Janitors,” *Public Safety*, November 1929, 22.

cannot serve as the basis of unionization.¹⁴⁹ However, the example of the BSEIU in Chicago suggests otherwise.

As industrial laborers have been replaced by service workers and the new proletariat of digital freelancers, labor unions are being forced to re-think the role that they play in the lives of workers. For these new workers, professionalism may be a more meaningful rhetoric than craft or industrial solidarity. Though such a move requires us to change how we think about labor unions, the example of the BSEIU suggests that such conceptual flexibility may open up new opportunities for organized labor—as it has in the past.

The realities of the BSEIU in Chicago, and beyond, tended to be less idealistic than the pages of *Public Safety* suggested. Though the union's leadership remained committed to improving the lives of its members, corruption slowly inundated the organization. Eventually corruption would nearly destroy the union. However, prior to that the BSEIU expanded eastward. In New York a new generation of labor activists fused the civic unionism with new ideas generated through the rise of the CIO. As the BSEIU locals in New York expanded exponentially a process began that would eventually displace Chicago from its central role in the union.

¹⁴⁹ Early, *Save Our Unions*, 12.

V

HIS MAJESTY ARRIVES IN NEW YORKIntroduction

Over the course of a few months in the winter of 1934, the BSEIU added 45,000 new members in New York City. The union achieved such a success without money or planning, and while fighting an extremely hostile group of employers. Despite this, elevator operators and building janitors, organized under BSEIU Local 32B and its siblings, achieved nothing less than a widespread uprising in New York City's apartments and office buildings. Under the skilled hands of a former printer's union official named James Bambrick, the New York locals, most prominently 32B, secured favorable contracts that eventually reshaped the jobs of some 75,000 workers. Their victory stands as one of the most dramatic successes of a service sector union in history, yet labor historians rarely discuss it as such. Local 32B became marked by the corruption of the BSEIU's representative in the city, George Scalise. Scalise's regime proved so heinous, so extensive, and so sensational that it damaged the entire labor movement. The taint that Scalise left on the success of Local 32B may not have erased their success, or even any of the gains they achieved, but it largely defines the discussion of the union. Such a historiographic outcome conceals both the success of the union and its use as a foil to better understand the peculiar brand of unionism practiced by the union in Chicago.

The portrayal of Bambrick by labor historians remains largely unfriendly. Though Bambrick only embezzled a small sum from his union and did so only after being threatened by Scalise, John Hutchinson's *The Imperfect Union*—a monumental book which helped to define the framework

through which labor historians view corruption—describes Bambrick as “basically a trade unionist, was by no stretch of the imagination a hoodlum or a racketeer, but unfortunately because of the pressures of that time became involved [in corruption].”¹ Hutchinson argues that despite Bambrick's role in changing the lives of tens of thousands of workers, his ideological commitment to trade unionism made him unwilling to risk literal death in the face of Scalise's gun men and left him vulnerable to corruption. Hutchinson goes on to argue that this weakness came essentially from the limited moral visions of leaders like Bambrick whose adherence to bread-and-butter unionism “made few demands on the social conscience of its adherents.”² Through this Bambrick becomes not only a man who failed to resist corruption, he becomes an emblem of ethical and moral emptiness. All of his accomplishments simply disappear in the face of this moral failure.

Hutchinson's account remains the cruelest and most damning, but the general treatment of Bambrick and Local 32B continually diminishes the union's real success. James B. Jacobs's *Mobsters, Unions, and Feds* makes no mention of Bambrick and provides little sense that, despite Scalise's continual drain on the union's resources, the BSEIU of New York represented a tremendous success story for organized labor.³ Even David Witwer—whose work *Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union* did a tremendous service in complicating the concept of corruption—uses Local 32B in *Shadow of the Racketeer* as little more than a backdrop to the perfidy of Scalise.⁴ There is no question that corruption is an important topic in labor history. As Witwer does a superb job of exploring in *Shadow of the Racketeer*, enemies of labor have transformed accusations of corruption, and its reality, into a broad based assault on the totality of the labor movement. Such

1 John Hutchinson, *The Imperfect Union; a History of Corruption in American Trade Unions* (New York: Dutton, 1970), 126.

2 Hutchinson, *The Imperfect Union*, 22.

3 James B. Jacobs, *Mobsters, Unions, and Feds: The Mafia and the American Labor Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

4 David Scott Witwer, *Shadow of the Racketeer: Scandal in Organized Labor* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

a discourse does damage to the labor movement by undermining its claim to moral authority, and transforms workers into victims under the sway and power of brutal bosses.

However, the corruption of Local 32B should not obscure the accomplishments that the organization made despite, or in some cases because of, corruption. If corruption becomes thought of as a moral stain that can easily outweigh any good that a union accomplishes, then leaders like William Quesse must be rendered as immoral and valueless. The purpose of this chapter is to push back against this by considering the successes of Local 32B as meaningful and worthy of consideration on their own. None of this should suggest that corruption does not deserve a place in the discussion of the BSEIU—it obviously does. Indeed, Chapter Six is devoted to the corruption of Scalise and the cruel ironies that often come with reform. However, by stepping back from the fixation on Scalise the focus falls upon the union itself.

Focusing on Local 32B provides critical context for the development of the Chicago locals. In New York, the BSEIU faced a radically different context than in Chicago. Employers in New York fought the organization with a fury and rhetoric that simply did not exist among the building owners in Chicago. Such resistance encouraged a different kind of militancy in New York, and prevented the formation of any sense of shared identity between workers and their employers. Emboldened by the rise in union militancy during the mid-1930s, Local 32B pursued conflict, not accommodation. The more flexible, less machine-driven politics of the Great Depression in New York allowed the union to establish relationships with reformers instead of corrupt bosses. Though the locals in New York practiced elements of civic unionism, these differences ensured that Local 32B resembled a far more idealized image of community or social movement unionism than the locals of Chicago did.

It would be easy, and satisfying, to portray the locals of New York as morally superior to those in Chicago. Giving in to such a simplistic distinction, however, misses the point. The Chicago locals embraced a model of

unionism that required moral compromises, not because they lacked commitment to the ideals of the labor movement, but because of their radically different context. The comparison between the civic unionism of Chicago and the social movement unionism of New York illustrates how union tactics and approaches evolve through limitations—not through imaginations of scholars, theorists, or moralists.

Social movement and community unionism can be difficult concepts to define. As Gay Seidman notes, “The phrase [social movement unionism] is used rather vaguely, often idiosyncratically, almost as labour’s version of a Weberian ideal type: it invokes broad-based mobilisation in support of militant challenges to economic inequality... but the details and indicators are always a bit sketchy.”⁵ Seidman goes on to describe social movement unionism as a broad category of approaches that does not necessarily coalesce into a single tactical prescription.⁶ As Janice Fine reminds us, social movement unionism can only occur during moments where conditions favor social change—suggesting that social movement unionism is as much an event as it is a tactical form.⁷ Kim Moody, on the other hand, defines social movement unionism in structural terms. As he notes “in social-movement unionism neither the unions nor their members are passive in any sense.” Such passivity is replaced by the “activation of the mass of union members as the leaders of the charge... Social movement unionism implies an active strategic orientation that uses the strongest of society’s oppressed and exploited... to mobilize those who are less able to self-mobilize.”⁸ Moody argues that for such a movement to remain relevant and active, it must embrace democratic participation and community involvement.⁹

The New York locals became the beneficiaries of a preexisting push for militancy among the members of building service occupations in their city. Their movement rooted itself in exactly the kind of moment that Fine

5 Gay Seidman, “Social Movement Unionism: From Description to Exhortation,” *South African Review of Sociology* 42 (2011), 94.

6 Seidman, “Social Movement Unionism: From Description to Exhortation,” 100.

7 Fine, “Community Unions and the Revival of the American Labor Movement,” 161.

8 Kim Moody, “Towards an International Social-Movement Unionism,” *New Left Review* (September 1997), 59.

9 Moody, “Towards an International Social-Movement Unionism,” 60.

views as essential and acted with the sort of grass-roots militancy that Moody describes. In comparison to Chicago, common workers played a much larger role in their own initial organization. For all of his talents as an organizer, Bambrick more rode the wave of this activism than created it. Given this, it is fair to view Local 32B as a kind of precursor to current models of social movement unionism.

Why did Local 32B pursue social movement unionism while Local 1 pursued civic unionism? Here Fine's note about the importance of historical context provides an explanation. Local 32B emerged during a moment of militancy whereas Local 1 emerged at a time when craft unions fought for their very survival. These different contexts defined them as radically different organizations. Once the initial structure of each local became set in place, transformation proved difficult. Initially these differences proved highly productive for the union, allowing the BSEIU to flourish in different contexts. Ultimately, however, these differences helped to create a crisis that nearly ripped the union apart in the late 1960s. That context played such a large role in defining the difference between Chicago and New York suggests that it is the initial conditions, not ideological commitment that structures the tactical toolkit that a union develops. Local 32B provides a fascinating alternate look at how civic unionism might have evolved in Chicago under different circumstances.

Building Service Employee International Union, New York Style?

“[Local 32B is] one of the most magnificent achievements in the annals of the American labor movement.”

- William McFetridge, circa 1955

The BSEIU desperately wanted a presence among the city's elevator operators and building janitors, but could not gain a foothold among them.¹⁰ These failures came from a combination of factors that made organization in New York very difficult, including employer opposition, lack of a strong real estate organization that could conduct centralized bargaining, and a lack of resources.

¹⁰ “William McFetridge Years: clippings, 1960-1962,” Box 2, Folder 2, SEIU Historical Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

The rising militancy of workers in New York during the mid-1930s overcame all of this. Riding a wave of popular support for unionization, BSEIU Local 32B expanded dramatically. Led by the dynamic organizer James J. Bambrick, the local rapidly grew into the largest division in the BSEIU.

Bambrick began his career in the labor movement with the typographers union, eventually becoming a leader in the organization and gaining respect in the New York labor movement. In 1934 he joined Local 32B, a largely inactive local with only loose associations to the rest of the BSEIU, as general organizer.¹¹ Though Bambrick's impact on the organization should not be overstated—unlike the Flat Janitors Union in Chicago, Local 32B organized militancy, it did not create it—he proved to be a talented bureaucrat who put the local on positive footing prior to its expansion.

Initially, Bambrick planned to slowly build the union through small, piecemeal gains for individual members. Formal union recognition remained elusive until a building owner refused to rehire a West Indian union member, future union leader Tom Young, and the local engaged in a small protest strike. The strike succeeded in gaining Young's reinstatement. During this first phase, Bambrick followed Quesse's playbook by focusing on small, building-level successes which would build the credibility of his organization.¹² The success of the protest strike emboldened Bambrick to expand and pursue larger victories. In the same way that the flat janitors moved from small successes to negotiations with larger groups, Local 32B began talks with the city's Real Estate Board.¹³ Here the different contexts of New York and Chicago resulted in different outcomes. Unlike the CREB, in New York the Real Estate Board claimed that, while they did not oppose the

11 Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, 8. Bambrick's account of the internal politics of local 32B is the most complete by far but cannot always be verified with other sources. Despite this, his narrative largely fits the later revelations about Scalise and the court record.

12 See Chapter Two for more on Quesse's initial strategy.

13 James Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, Box 4, Folder 5, SEIU Historical Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Hereafter James Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*.

union in principle, they lacked the power to negotiate a universal contract for their members. Where the CREB had actively sought this power, giving them an incentive to work with the Flat Janitors, their New York equivalent demurred and sought to delay and derail centralized bargaining. Tiring of such evasions, Bambrick threatened to order a strike of 8,000 elevator operators and building service workers.¹⁴

On November 2nd, Local 32B went on strike against over 400 buildings in the garment district. The *New York Times* reported that by shutting down elevators, the strike quickly “transform[ed] the busy garment zone... into a community of stair climbers and... start[ed] a rush of many landlords to settle with the union.”¹⁵ Large numbers of garment workers refused to cross the union's picket lines, putting tremendous pressure on building owners. By the end of the day, more than half of the building owners had made peace with the union and signed an agreement providing workers with higher wages and union protections. Eager to avoid the economic costs of a prolonged strike, Mayor LaGuardia intervened and helped the union to negotiate a temporary agreement with all but fifty of the remaining buildings. In this early moment, a significant distinction between Local 1 and Local 32B emerged—in New York the stick of militancy proved more effective than the carrot of collaboration.

The success of the initial strike revealed the latent power of the elevator operators and janitors of Chicago. Controlling the vertical traffic of many buildings, elevator operators sat at an unexpected choke-point in the city's economy. Fear of economic damage forced employers, and the mayor, to the bargaining table quickly. Unlike the flat janitors in Chicago, who had to seek non-economic forms of leverage, elevator operators in New York could easily threaten the bottom lines of their

14 “Service Employees Near Strike Move” *The New York Times*, October 27, 1934, 9.

15 “400 Loft Buildings Tied Up by Strike,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 1934, 17.

employers, their tenants, and the functioning of the city of New York itself.

No one expected 32B's success. However, when the intervention of Mayor LaGuardia made the local a fixture in the media, Bambrick called for all building service workers to join up and began preparing a city-wide strategy. Over the next month over 45,000 workers joined 32B, swelling its ranks beyond anyone's expectations. The union's expansion took place with little organization effort, as building service workers simply joined the union as quickly as they could be recorded in its rolls. Such an easy expansion is both understandable and surprising.¹⁶ Prior to unionization, the elevator operators and superintendents of New York worked under poor conditions that closely mirrored those janitors once faced in Chicago. Jobs were typically only obtained through employment agencies that demanded high fees. Young and single people without facial hair were, except in times of a labor shortage, the only people who actually obtained jobs through the agency. Once hired, employers exercised arbitrary authority over their new employees. As Bambrick recalled, "A superintendent lived on the premises and could be fired without a minute's notice. Many of them were summarily dismissed and their furniture thrown on the sidewalk."¹⁷ Wages for building service workers were commonly seen as too low to effectively maintain a family.¹⁸ These conditions provided an impetus for organization, but crisis levels of unemployment in New York provided employers with an intimidating source of strikebreakers—a fact that the building owners' negotiators continually reminded the press.¹⁹

16 "True is Reached in Building Tie-Up," *The New York Times*, November 3, 1934, 17; "Building Workers Plan New Strikes," *The New York Times*, November 4, 1934, 3; "Strike in Hotels Looms," *The New York Times*, November 6, 1936, pg. 35; "Elevator Operators Ask to Be Licensed; Thousands Sign Petition to LaGuardia," *The New York Times*, November 10, 1934, 3; "Elevator Walkout Again Postponed," *The New York Times*, November 14, 1934, 15; "Elevator Walkout in All Manhattan Near as Talks Fail," *The New York Times*, November 15, 1934, pg. 1; "Realty Men Ready to Oppose Strike," *The New York Times*, November 16, 1934, 4; "Seeks to Prevent Building Strike," *The New York Times*, November 17, 1934, 3.

17 Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, 4.

18 "Threat is Revived on Building Strike" *The New York Times*, January, 8, 1935, 23.

19 "Job Rush-held Bar to Building Strike," *The New York Times*, November 18, 1934, 26.

In victory, Local 32B benefited from their context. The conditions of the Great Depression resulted in a broad questioning of the unfettered marketplace. As Barbara Griffith puts it, “The breakdown of the economic system was a fact... that no amount of free enterprise rhetoric could conceal.”²⁰ With the rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, as well as major expansions in some AFL unions, the tide of the labor movement rose to new levels. The alliance between these unions and FDR's administration pushed the labor movement into the mainstream across the country—as John L. Lewis famously put it, “The President wants you to join the union”—lending a new sense of legitimacy and shared purpose to the movement.²¹ The transformation of the labor movement in New York was particularly dramatic. Riding on the wave of the CIO's success, unions in the city surged. The International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), for example, expanded dramatically in the city. Similarly, though somewhat later, the Transit Workers Union (TWU) would succeed at organizing rapid transit workers due to what Robert Zeiger describes as the CIO's “mystique.”²² The success of the CIO in New York, and their association with FDR, helped to secure broad public support for unionism, which eased the public acceptance of the Local 32B.

The new power of the labor movement in New York also transformed the city's politics. Union members and sympathizers helped to elect reformist politicians that weakened the old hold of Tammany Hall on the city. Roosevelt Republicans like Mayor La Guardia developed their own vision of the coming economic structure which called for, if not socializing production, balancing the needs of the workers and employers to produce a just outcome. Always threatened from the left

20 Barbara S. Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 10.

21 Mason B. Williams, *City of Ambition: FDR, La Guardia, and the making of modern New York* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2014), 215.

22 Robert H. Zeiger, *The CIO: 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 81.

by increasingly prominent, and politically viable, socialists, politicians like La Guardia had a compelling interest in being seen as friends of the labor movement. The calculus of power pushed La Guardia, who had been narrowly elected by a coalition of reformers, to give a more than fair hearing to the interests of labor leaders like Bambrick.²³

With the support of the mayor, and eager to maintain the momentum gained from the garment district strike, Bambrick threatened to “paralyze... the city's vertical traffic” if employers did not accept throughout Manhattan.²⁴ La Guardia again intervened but, despite delaying the strike in favor of negotiations on several occasions, his arbitrators could not achieve an agreement between the union and the various real estate associations representing employers. Indeed, the employers' associations treated the negotiations as a means to delay strike actions. While these delays were in place, owners attempted a variety of anti-union tactics including efforts to establish a company union, investigating labor saving devices and importing strikebreakers. Far from breaking the union's spirit, however, employer resistance provided organizers with time to organize new workers. By late December, Bambrick claimed that 32B had over 74,000 enrolled members and the loyalty of nearly 70,000 non-members.²⁵ Reporters, politicians and business people all agreed that a city-wide labor struggle seemed inevitable.²⁶

23 Williams, *City of Ambition*, 215-221.

24 “Mayor Acts to Bar Elevator Strike as Public Menace,” *The New York Times*, November 20, 1934, 1.

25 “Agreement Averts Elevator Strike,” *The New York Times*, November 22, 1934, 8; “Elevator Men Push Unionization Drive,” *The New York Times*, November 23, 1934; “Banbrick Sees A Victory,” *The New York Times*, November 24, 1934; “Building Strike Again Threatened” *The New York Times*, December 28, 1934; “Terrorism Denied in Service Dispute,” *The New York Times*, December 30, 1934, 15. It is unclear how accurate these numbers were, however it is clear that the union was growing at a tremendous rate.

26 “Threat is Revived on Building Strike,” *The New York Times*, January 8, 1935, 23; “Strike Held Near in Building Union” *The New York Times*, January 9, 1935, 4; “Elevator Men Ignore Employers Threat,” *The New York Times*, “Union Truce Asked in Building Strike,” *The New York Times*, January 30, 1935. “Building Strike is Deffered Again,” *The New York Times*, February 1, 1935; “City-Wide Strike in Buildings Voted” *The New York Times*, February 9, 1935, January 13, 1935. “Buidlings Strike to Shift Each Day,” *The New York Times*, February 15, 1935.

When the Mayor's Arbitration Committee's final decision only provided a ten to thirty percent increase in wages and excluded building service workers in offices and lofts, the membership of Local 32B rebelled against the arbitration process. While Bambrick urged caution and another period of negotiations, a young elevator operator named John M. Holly rose during the local's mass meeting at the Star Casino and argued that “[f]or three months your chairman has done his best—here is the answer.... Is \$70 a month enough?” The assembled membership responded with a resounding “No!” and overwhelmingly voted for a general strike. Though he expressed misgivings, Bambrick agreed to follow the majority's decision, saying that “[i]f [employers] are looking for a fight, we will give it to them... New York City will see the worst strike in its history.” While 32B's membership was centered in Manhattan, other locals throughout the city rapidly pledged their solidarity to the general strike. Bambrick became the apparent leader of a city-wide labor action that he could only barely control.²⁷

Bambrick's relationship with 32B was quite different from William Quesse's relationship with Local 1. Despite providing guidance and structure to Local 32B, Bambrick did not provide the primary impetus of the organization. In his memoirs of the years with Local 32B, Bambrick paints a vivid picture of a union that grew beyond his wildest dreams—and his control. He recalled that the local succeeded not through tactics but through the “[s]pontaneous parades of thousands of... union-conscious men and women [who] marched through the district, singing songs and helping to distribute our tabloid paper... And then a tidal wave of members rolled in from every section of the city.”²⁸ Quesse, on the other hand, struggled to build his organization out of the tattered remnants of post-1902 janitorial unionism in

27 “City-Wide Strike in Buildings Voted,” *The New York Times*, February 16, 1935, 1. The regional structure of the locals in New York City can be confusing as the unions regularly changed names and territories. These distinctions become important later in the history of the BSEIU. However during the 1935 strike 32-E (Brooklyn) and 10-B (Bronx) largely followed Bambrick's lead.

28 Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, 23.

Chicago. For better or worse, Local 1 arose out of the efforts of those early organizers, not out of a spontaneous uprising among workers. The civic unionism of Chicago thus never developed the kind of wide-spread, movement culture that characterized Local 32B.

Union decision making proceeded along very different lines in the two organizations. Quesse ruled through the force of his personality and developed a cult-like following. Bambrick, on the other hand, could never be anything more than a facilitator because the real agency in the union belonged to its membership. In Local 32B, Bambrick did not necessarily encourage union democracy—he could not prevent it. The different relationship between the leaders and their members changed the way that the union related with arbitrators and negotiated settlements. Where the flat janitors trusted Quesse and his lieutenants to negotiate the best deal possible, the members of 32B believed that they could extract better terms through a show of force.

The conflict in New York became increasingly acrimonious after the membership refused the arbitration. Shortly after the meeting ended, violence broke out between union members, strike breakers, and the police, resulting in the hospitalization of several union members. Frustrated by the union's refusal to accept the arbitration and fearing a city-wide crisis, La Guardia called in Edward F. McGrady, Assistant Secretary of Labor, to arbitrate the dispute. While McGrady met with Bambrick, the union leader stood by the decision of his membership, stating, “We refuse to abide by an award which is in crying violation of the [preliminary] agreement [to include all of local's membership].”²⁹ Bambrick's resolve forced La Guardia and McGrady to pressure the arbitrators into including all of Local 32B in the decision and to encourage higher wages.³⁰

The arbiters decision vindicated the independent action of the members of Local 32B. Through their refusal of a moderately bad agreement, the building service workers of New York City achieved something greater than their leaders could. Through this compromise the union both staved off a hasty general strike and broke the

29 “Mayor Plans to Operate Key Buildings in Strike” *The New York Times*, February 17, 1935, 1.

30 “Service Strike is Settled on Terms Set By Mayor,” *The New York Times*, February 19, 1935, 1.

solidarity of the building owners, some of whom refused to recognize the new agreement. While the union did engage in a series of smaller strikes against specific buildings, the promised general strike never came, and the union gained wide-spread pay increases for its members along with employer commitment to the mayor's arbitration and negotiation framework.³¹

Though the ultimate result was quite similar—a politically mediated arbitration and material improvements—the lesson that Local 32B's success taught the membership was quite different than the lesson learned by Chicago's flat janitors. In Chicago, the flat janitors gained long sought acceptance into the community of craft unions and the extension of pre-existing structures of market governance that emphasized a degree of collaboration with employers. Under these circumstances members, of the union were encouraged to behave in a disciplined manner that emphasized obedience to the rules, and interests, of their craft and union. As the union developed the framework of civic unionism, this discipline became important to maintaining their community alliances. The New York locals learned instead that the pathway of success lay in mass mobilization—and the rejection of moderate deals.

Recognizing the importance of maintaining this popular movement, organizers in New York held large-scale, public meetings and reached out to potential members through the mass media. Bambrick in particular became a well-known figure on the radio, delivering several extended addresses on the radio station—named after Eugene V. Debs--WEVD every month.³² While mass meetings in Chicago were common, their character was different. In Chicago, a mass meeting was an opportunity for the leadership to announce major policy

31 "Bronx Now Faces A Service Strike," *The New York Times*, February 20, 1935, p. 1; "Bronx Service Men Agree To A Truce," *The New York Times*, February 22, 1935, 3; "Agreement Signed in Service Dispute," *The New York Times*, March 2, 1935, 16.

32 "Today on the Radio," *The New York Times*, November 13, 1934, 13; "Today on the Radio," *The New York Times*, November 22, 1934, 24; "Today on the Radio," *The New York Times*, February 26, 1935; "Today on the Radio," *The New York Times*, January 30, 1936; "Today on the Radio," *The New York Times*, May 27, 1937, 41; "Political Talks Today," *The New York Times*, October 20, 1937, 7; "Political Talks on Air Today," *The New York Times*, October 31, 1937, 2.

changes and the results of negotiations, not a forum through which members could exercise influence over their union. To a significant extent, arbitration structures, such as Local 1's Permanent Arbitration Board, provided an easy and often successful means through which the union could adjudicate disputes without emphasizing grassroots activism or militancy.

Labor peace in New York proved far more elusive than in Chicago, and the settlement of 1935 did not establish a pattern or standard bargaining agreement. In early January, an eager, militant membership granted strike authorization to Bambrick. Core to the union's demands in 1936 was the establishment of a city-wide closed shop, a 40 percent wage increase, and a forty-hour week. Fully cognizant of employer intransigence, the leader publicly stated that he expected the union's terms to be rejected and that the city should prepare to be shut down.³³ Here again, Bambrick's approach contrasts with that of the Chicago union in that he actively sought conflict, not a mutually beneficial relationship.

The more confrontational approach of Local 32B resulted from the different structures of real-estate associations in New York and Chicago. The Realty Advisory Board on Labor Relations (RAB), an organization that had been set up explicitly to fight against the demands of unions, became the primary negotiators with the union. With little power to enforce contracts on building owners, the RAB could only present a united front to the labor movement and organize anti-union activities. Indeed, the RAB spent far more time on propaganda and finding replacement workers than it did on negotiation. Negotiations proved even more complex due to the presence of subsidiary real estate organizations such as the Midtown Realty Owner's Association and the Penn Zone Association. Unlike the CREB, which found common ground on market regulation with Quesse, the RAB had neither the interest nor capacity to create a collaborative relationship in New York's buildings.³⁴ In early January, building owners rejected Bambrick's terms, categorically claiming that they “cannot even be the

33 “Big Strikes Loom in Building Service” *The New York Times*, January 1, 1936, 34; “Building Employes [sic] Back Wage Demands,” *New York Times*, January 4, 1936, 16.

34 See Chapter Two for more on Quesse and the CREB.

basis for discussion.” Portraying these new demands as economically impossible, the RAB sought to essentially renew the pre-existing contracts. Not surprised by their resistance, Bambrick noted that building owners have a “magnificent disregard for accuracy” in their claims and promised a devastating strike.³⁵

The conflict began in late January when the union engaged in a series of walkouts and strikes directed against buildings organized by the Midtown Realty Owners Association and Penn Zone Association. Though this conflict involved a small fraction of the total buildings in Manhattan, it was seen as a test of the union's power. Preparing for a set of strikes that could last most of the year, union officials made plans to feed over 5,000 strikers a day and held regular mass meetings to rally the membership.³⁶ In the coming strikes, Local 32B would emphasize strategic flexibility over full-scale labor actions. As Bambrick warned that if negotiations in early February proved fruitless “the strike may begin Monday, Tuesday or on any other day, whenever we deem it opportune.” The press described the union's approach as “guerrilla warfare [by] flying squadrons” who could quickly order and coordinate walkouts based on changing conditions.³⁷ Bambrick claimed that, through these tactics, his union could shut down any building within five minutes.³⁸

To prevent the potential chaos of sudden building shutdowns, La Guardia's representative Ben Golden struggled to maintain negotiations between the two bitterly opposed parties. However, negotiations proved difficult with William D. Rawlins, head of the RAB, framing victory over the union as essential to his organization, declaring, “The time has come when we must yield or fight.”³⁹ The RAB began to import strikebreakers, open employment agencies for replacement workers, and hire thugs to fight on picket-lines.

Quite to La Guardia's frustration, the RAB had chosen to prepare for a drawn-out, and potentially violent,

35 “Realty Men Spurn Bambrick's Terms,” *The New York Times*, January 11, 1936, 17.

36 “City-Wide Strike in Buildings Near,” *The New York Times*, January 25, 1936, 4; “New Strike Likely in 1,000 Buildings” *The New York Times*, January 26, 1936, 2; “Service Strike Set for 20,000 Workers,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 1936, 2; “Strike is Called at Empire State,” *The New York Times*, January 30, 1936, 3;

37 “Service Employes [sic] Refuse to Bargain,” *The New York Times*, February 3, 1936, pg. 1.

38 “Violence Prelude to Service Strike” *The New York Times*, February 1, 1936, 1; “Valentine Orders All Police on Duty For Service Strike,” *The New York Times*, February 2, 1936, 1.

39 “Strike is Held Off in Service Dispute,” *The New York Times*, February 5, 1936, 3.

conflict. Despite this, the Mayor eventually personally brokered an agreement between the two parties that largely met the union's demands.⁴⁰

However, the fight in the garment district was a mere prelude to the larger conflict with the RAB that would involve around 8,000 buildings and 75,000 workers. The sheer scope of the strike actions proposed by Local 32B and its various allied locals was a product of its times. Despite operating as a single unit politically and obeying orders from the International, the various Chicago locals of the BSEIU were theoretically autonomous from each other. Segmented into flat janitors, office janitors, theatrical janitors, elevator operators, and other various divisions, the locals maintained a high degree of craft separation. Given the legacy of craft governance, and the importance that the union had placed on preserving craft lines as a service to other unions, these strong divisions in Chicago are not surprising. However, the more industrial approach in New York, likely inspired by the successes of the CIO, allowed Bambrick to command a massive, united group of workers.

Confident in the wake of the successes against the smaller associations, Bambrick prepared for a full-scale strike that he expected to involve 125,000 workers, including non-union workers who refused to cross the picket line. When the RAB refused to even meet with the union, walkouts began across the city. Beginning on March 2nd, elevator operators and building engineers began to leave their jobs, seriously threatening the continued functioning of both apartment and business high-rises. The potential disruption was so great that the Mayor, notionally sympathetic to the union, declared a public health emergency and sent minimal staffs to affected buildings to maintain basic heat and to operate elevators during medical emergencies.⁴¹ Despite this,

40 "20,000 Service Men Ready to Walk Out As Parley Fails," *The New York Times*, February 4, 1936, 1; "Service Peace Hits Snag," *The New York Times*, February 14, 1936; "Mayor Hold Strike in Buildings Needless," *The New York Times*, 30; "Service Strike Ordered on 1,000 Bulldogs Today," *The New York Times*, February 18, 1936, 1; "Mayor Acts Again in Service Dispute" *The New York Times*, February 18, 1936, 16; "20,000 Service Men End Strike Threat," *The New York Times*, February 19, 1936, 8.

41 "Service Men Plan New, Wider Strike," *The New York Times*, February 21, 1936, 3; "Showdown is Near on Service Strike," *The New York Times*, February 26, 1936, 16.

the disruptive impact of the strike was extreme. As the *New York Times* reported, the strike caused “thousands [to] not venture to leave their homes, being reluctant to climb twelve, fifteen and more stories above ground floor.”⁴² Even with an extensive police presence, violence commonly broke out between strikebreakers, pickets, and thugs imported by the RAB. Throughout the city, picket lines shut down businesses and apartments alike, posing a serious threat to the economic activity of the city.⁴³

As the strike continued Bambrick proclaimed during a mass meeting that “unless an agreement is reached... I will order a general strike that will paralyze New York.... If it is to be an industrial war, let it come and we will win.”⁴⁴ Bambrick's threat to “paralyze New York” illustrates the differences between his understanding of labor activity and the civic unionism of McFetridge in Chicago. Where figures like McFetridge courted political leaders and developed alliances that ultimately resulted in their critical support during arbitrated negotiations, Bambrick held the threat of disaster over the entire city. Through his threat he sought to not only bring the RAB to the bargaining table, he sought to force La Guardia to take an active, and sympathetic, interest in the negotiations.

Local 32B and its siblings remained organized as craft unions, but their engagement with a broader social movement of workers often meant that their activities crossed trade lines. In hotels, where Local 32B and its fellow locals only represented a small percentage of the workforce, the strike began to expand away from the elevators. Looking to capitalize on this, the Cooks and Kitchen Workers Union joined the union's strike and made their own demands for recognition. Many other unorganized workers similarly left their work. To the RAB, the struggle against Local 32B thus became something more than a contractual dispute; it became a principled battle against

42 “Service Strike Cripples Buildings on West Side” *The New York Times*, March 2, 1936, 1.

43 “27 Seized, 10 Hurt in Strike Clashess”, *The New York Times*, March 3, 1936; “Building Strike Spreading” *The New York Times*, March 6, 1936.

44 “Paraders Stone Park Av. Homes,” *The New York Times*, March 4, 1936, 1.

the mid-30s wave of labor activism. As Rawlings put it, “Today danger lurks in every building on strike because government is weak... The closed shop under present conditions in this city is but a stepping stone toward a general strike. It would set up a power greater than government itself.”⁴⁵ Facing a movement—not a group of power brokers with whom mutually beneficial arrangements could be made—the RAB negotiators saw fighting the demands of janitors as a battle for control over their city.

With both sides entrenched, the strike spread throughout much of the city, failing only to penetrate the buildings of Wall Street. Slowly the union began to gain an edge, with 1,480 building owners signing individual agreements by March 6. However, the RAB continued to question the legitimacy of the union, calling the strike a “wanton assault on the public without justification [that] should not be rewarded.” Enraged by the union's demand of wage increases as well as the closed shop, Gordon Merrit of the RAB described “an immediate wage increase to be paid at the point of a pistol as a reward to those who are holding up the activities of the city.” Indignant, Bambrick responded in the press by proclaiming that “by its action of permitting strikebreakers to run elevators in the apartment houses, [the RAB] is endangering the safety of the tenants... These strikebreakers are hired from the notorious criminal element.” Here Bambrick took on the rhetoric of civic unionism, pleading “For your own safety and for the safety of your families, won't you please insist that your landlord does not employ this type of low mentality to run your elevators.”⁴⁶ Through such rhetoric Bambrick hoped to enlist pro-union tenants as supporters of the strike.

As the conflict dragged on without a clear end in sight, Mayor La Guardia met with Bambrick and his negotiators to achieve a draft agreement acceptable to the union. The Mayor explicitly justified his intervention as necessary to maintaining the stability of the city. The resulting draft handed most decisions over wages to a

45 “Strike Peace hope Revived by Mayor,” *The New York Times*, March 8, 1936, 1.

46 “Owners 'Arrogant' Bambrick Charges,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 1936, 3.

future arbitration but provided the union with a preferential shop (union workers who were fired could only be replaced by union workers) and established a board for settling future controversies. Although this agreement fell short of the union's initial demands, Bambrick greeted it warmly. The RAB, on the other hand, treated the agreement with disdain and accused La Guardia of bias. Rawlins described the Mayor's willingness to work with Bambrick as a declaration "that the union is reasonable and the owners unreasonable."⁴⁷ Despite this, the RAB ultimately agreed to talks.⁴⁸

Negotiations proceeded with difficulty. At every phase, the RAB blocked and delayed, leading an exasperated La Guardia to claim that there "is no good reason why this strike should continue another minute" except for the building owners' intransigence. Among their tactics were common refusals to meet directly with union representatives, creative misunderstandings of proposals, and frequent delays. Though this was partially an effort to wait out the union, it also came from internal difficulties in marshaling support among the building owners for any agreement with the union. In one somewhat frustrated letter, the RAB's negotiators claimed that "if [the Mayor's] proposal[s] were submitted to a referendum vote of our members it would be overwhelmingly defeated." The structure of the RAB, which required referendums for all major decisions, ensured that bargaining with them would be a persistently complex problem. Indeed, unlike the CREB which continually sought to enhance its power over the market in Chicago, representatives of the RAB persistently claimed that they had little ability to negotiate agreements or compel the obedience of their members. Indeed, a truly comprehensive settlement would require the signatures of all 2,365 individual members of the RAB—many of whom remained committed to resisting the union in spite of their association. In his memoirs, Bambrick neatly summed up the difficulties this caused, reflecting that, "strangely, the real estate people had never set up a central agency authorized to negotiate a contract for building service workers. And paradoxically I sincerely

47 "Strike Peace hope Revived by Mayor," *The New York Times*, March 8, 1936, 1.

48 "Both Sides Agree to Discuss Peace in Service Strike," *The New York Times*, March 9, 1936, 1.

wished that they'd create such an agency because we certainly couldn't bargain with air.”⁴⁹ In an unexpected twist, the weakness of the employers' association served as a tremendous barrier to unionization in New York.

The weakness of the RAB is striking in comparison to the strength of the CREB. Where the CREB could serve as a centralized bargaining agent, thus tremendously simplifying the process of signing up thousands of buildings, the unity of the RAB proved illusory. Again and again the RAB could not successfully marshal its own members in support of negotiation. Negotiations in New York always looked like the reverse of the process in Chicago. Instead of holding separate negotiations with a few resistant building owners after centralized bargaining, Local 32B constantly fought individual owners at all stages of the negotiations.⁵⁰ If nothing else, Bambrick accomplished something amazing simply in managing such an amorphous blob of negotiations and labor actions. In stark contrast, negotiations in Chicago occurred in an almost neat and tidy fashion that reinforced the idea that the union's leaders could regulate the labor market for their members through comparatively peaceful channels.

As fault for the strikes' continuation came to rest increasingly on the RAB, Local 32B carefully courted the support of tenants. Holding meetings with tenants throughout the city, Bambrick personally organized rent strikes among sympathetic tenants.⁵¹ These efforts led to the formation of the City-Wide Tenants League, an organization of tenants devoted to “a just and speedy settlement of the strike... to protect the interest of tenants” but backed by the union.⁵² At the first meeting of the League, attended by over 1,200 people, Congressman Vito Marcantonio called for a general rent strike until the strike ended.⁵³ The League was part of a larger effort by 32B to portray its members as guardians of public safety and to cast strike breakers as malevolent outsiders.

49 Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, 4-5, 25.

50 “Strike Peace Plan Balked,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 1936, 1; “Service Compact Waits on Owners,” *The New York Times*, March 19, 1936, pg. 5. Which isn't to say that Local 1 didn't occasionally sign separate agreements during negotiations, but it was far more important in New York than in Chicago.

51 “Strike Peace Plan Balked,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 1936, 1.

52 Advertisement, *The New York Times*, March 11, 1936, 14.

53 “Tenants' Strike Urged,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 1936, 3.

Beginning during the 1936 strike, the union published and distributed hundreds of thousands of articles and advertisements intended to win the public relations war with the RAB. Key to their campaign was the role of their employees as elevator operators. Though elevator accidents were actually quite rare by the 1930s, stories of the potential horrific consequences of an unskilled operator allowed the union to argue that union labor was the only potential guarantee against disaster. By using strikebreakers, or simply non-unionized operators, building owners risked the very lives of their tenants. The union argued that not only were strikebreakers incompetent, they were often shady figures with suspect backgrounds who might rob or otherwise assault tenants at any moment.⁵⁴

In the rhetoric of guardianship, Local 32B echoed the civic unionism of Chicago. During the early days of Local 1, William Quesse described non-union janitors as “the costliest member of society” due to their bumbling lack of care for the needs of tenants.⁵⁵ Other pieces of Local 1's rhetorical campaign included references to non-union flat janitors as little more than hooligans who were a constant threat to the families of the buildings that they served.⁵⁶ Though Bambrick never declared, as William McFetridge did, that unionized building service workers were the defenders of civilization itself, Local 32B suggested that only unionized workers could be trusted with the safety of New York's high-rise residents. Despite taking very different approaches to unionization, in their orientation towards the public good the Chicago and New York unions found common ground.

The strike continued to wax and wane throughout March. Even after Ferdinand L. Silcox, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, agreed to arbitrate the dispute, the RAB continued to find objections and causes for delay. Finally on March 16th the RAB stopped obstructing the arbitration,

54 Daniel Levinson Wilk, “Felix Cuervo, Highrise Hero,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 62 (Fall, 2002), 80-82.

55 “William F. Quesse With His Stub Pencil and a Pad of Paper” *Public Safety*, 13.

56 “Union Janitors Honest,” *Public Safety*, 18.

and Bambrick made a formal radio broadcast calling his members back to work. Though the closed shop still remained elusive, Bambrick portrayed the RAB's submission to arbitration as the start of a tremendous victory, noting, "Your organization [32B] has emerged from this fight five times stronger than it was before... I am very thankful to Mayor La Guardia." In his speech he foregrounded the importance of the solidarity of tenants with their workers commanding that his members "personally... thank the tenants of [your] buildings... for their fine spirit and cooperation... The tenants of New York City have been so fine toward us that we can never repay them."⁵⁷ Like the flat janitors of Chicago who reached outside of the labor movement for allies, the community of New York became the critical component in the organization of their janitors. However, unlike in Chicago where connections occurred at a higher level, in New York support came from a union conscious corp of supporters and a social movement.

The flat janitors of Chicago would have eagerly embraced such public support—and indeed would gain a degree of it after organization—but could not gather it during the critical early stages of their organizational drive. In this Local 32B again became the beneficiary of their historical moment. The greater public support enjoyed by Local 32B resulted from their efforts to forge a tight connection to the New Deal. Bambrick actively portrayed the union's activities as being in line with FDR's political agenda. In particular he often vociferously criticized employers for denying workers their rights under Section 7-A of the National Industrial Recovery Act and refusing to participate in Roosevelt's Blue Eagle program.⁵⁸ These greater ideas of national, legally defined labor rights played little role in the organization of the flat janitors, or Chicago's public sector for the matter, which instead appealed to ideas of craft, skill, professionalism, and dignity. Put another way, where the early struggles of the Chicago flat janitors occurred in the context of a craft labor movement struggling to survive

⁵⁷ "Service Employes [sic] Back on Job Today," *The New York Times*, March 16, 1936, 1.

⁵⁸ "B. M. T. Held Guilty of Coercing Union," *The New York Times*, November 19, 1934, 1.

against a hostile court system, in New York, Local 32B seemed on the right side of history. However, the connection to the New Deal also limited the political scope of the union. Though Local 32B became committed to reformist politicians and a national movement instead of the corrupt political fixers, their alliance similarly limited the scope of their ambitions. As Nelson Lichtenstein writes about the larger CIO, “By politicizing so much of the nation's economic life, the New Deal had undercut the old voluntarist ideology and located the battleground for labor's struggles as much within the apparatus of state policy formulation and administration... as on the factory picket line.”⁵⁹ For all of the pressure he exerted on La Guardia and groups of employers, Bambrick—like Quesse and McFetridge—always sought to constrain his union within the bounds of the politically palatable options. Such obedience is the cost of making mainstream politicians into allies.

The Silcox arbitration did not proceed smoothly. Building owners refused to reinstate some of the strikers on the grounds that they had participated in “obnoxious conduct” during the strike, leading to a series of protest strikes involving nearly 2,000 strikers and a threat of a punitive general strike.⁶⁰ Again the union's threats forced the Mayor to intervene, resulting in the reinstatement of most workers. Still the continual delays of the RAB infuriated the membership of the union, again forcing Bambrick to struggle to prevent wildcat strikes during the arbitration. During the arbitration hearings, the union argued for wage increases while the RAB maintained that few buildings were profitable enough to pay for taxes and mortgage servicing, let alone higher labor costs.⁶¹ At times the hearings became heated, with Bambrick once exclaiming, “Mr. Merrit [representative of the RAB] doesn't care if [workers] live in sewers!” and that many building owners wanted to be “paying exactly nothing per month.”⁶² After weighing the evidence, Silcox ultimately sided with the union setting a wage range of \$936

59 Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 33.

60 “Lockouts Cause New Service Clash,” *The New York Times*, March 17, 1936, 1.

61 “Mayor Intercedes in Service 'Lockout,’” *The New York Times*, March 18, 1938, 25; “Service Compact Waits on Owners,” *The New York Times*, March 19, 1936, 5; “Tension is Eased in Service Dispute,” *The New York Times*, March 20, 1936, 25; “Service Men Urge Another Walkout,” *The New York Times*, March 21, 1936, 15.

62 “Service Hearing on Pay Hits Snag,” *The New York Times*, April 4, 1936, 8.

to \$1,456 a year. In this Bambrick saw a victory, noting that the decision “absolutely upholds the principle of the living wage for which we were fighting” which proved that the union had been “completely fair and reasonable.”⁶³

Though a permanent arbitrator had been named to deal with outstanding issues, controversies continued between Local 32B and the RAB. In September, pickets returned to some buildings over infractions against the agreement at several buildings over owners unilaterally cutting wages based on a dispute over building classification.⁶⁴ These strikes were explicitly intended to ensure that non-compliant buildings did not gain an advantage against compliant ones. As Bambrick put it, “We promised owners who signed up with the union that we would make the chiselers toe the line.”⁶⁵ In response, the RAB declared the building classification scheme as “null and void,” setting off another cycle of walkouts against non-compliant buildings which continued into January 1937.⁶⁶ By February, most buildings had finally been brought into line with the Silcox award, but that did not prevent occasional, spontaneous walkouts by Local 32B members.⁶⁷

The struggles that the BSEIU in New York faced after the establishment of an arbitration structure have no clear parallel in Chicago. Some of this may be attributed to the relative acceptance among building owners of the basic tenants of craft governance—they already employed many union craftspeople after all. Certainly the building owners of Chicago were far more concerned with removing wages from the realm of competition than in gaining a marginal upper-hand on each other. However, it is more likely that the true difference came from different economic conditions. The BSEIU in Chicago arose during a period of rising property values and rents which made granting wage increases a more palatable compromise to business owners.⁶⁸ During the

63 “Wage Rise Granted to Building Staffs by Strike Arbiter,” *The New York Times*, April 21, 1936

64 “Bambrick Leads Service Pickets,” *The New York Times*, September 13, 1936, pg. 19; “Buildings Picketed Again,” *The New York Times*, September 14, 1936, 3.

65 “Sporadic Strikes Loom in Buildings,” *The New York Times*, September 15, 1936, 31.

66 “Service Men Send Ultimatum on Pay,” *The New York Times*, January 25, 1937.

67 “Brief Strikes Held in 15 Buildings,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 1937, 13.

68 See Chapter Two for more details

Depression, on the other hand, the building owners of New York were far less optimistic about their economic futures.

Whatever the cause, it neatly illustrates why Bambrick and Local 32B never pursued the kind of stable labor relationship that Quesse sought. For all of their complaints about the power of the Flat Janitor's Union, building owners in Chicago tended to obey the dictates of the arbitration system they had agreed to, preferring stability over everything else. In contrast, the RAB fought against every union gain and some building owners even hiring thugs to assault strikers.⁶⁹ At no time did the RAB consider a profit sharing measure as was ultimately instituted for the Chicago flat janitors. The actions of the RAB ensured that the union's membership had little trust in their employers, seeking nearly constant confrontation instead. Under such circumstances the civic unionism of Quesse was impossible to achieve.

Though their approach was different, and their employers far more resistant, Bambrick and his supporters achieved successes that were similar to those of Local 1. Renewing the conflict in March of 1937, the union engaged in a series of tense negotiations with the RAB, ultimately resulting in the establishment of an arbitration system. Unlike previous attempts, this process proceeded with few bumps or overt conflicts. The new agreement provided all of the union's members with pay raises, vacation time, and a forty-five-hour week.⁷⁰ Amazingly, in only two years Local 32B had grown from being a minor, moribund organization into a successful, thriving labor organization that effectively regulated the labor market for building services in New York. William Quesse would have been pleased.

69 "Terrorism Denied in Service Dispute," *The New York Times*, December 10, 1934, 15; "City-wide Strike in Buildings Voted; 2 Shot in Harlem," *The New York Times*, February 16, 1935, 1.

70 "Parley to Avert Elevator Strike," *The New York Times*, March 14, 1937, 27; "Move to Arbitrate Eases Service Row," March 16, 1937, 7; "Fail to Pick Arbitrator," *The New York Times*, March 18, 1937, 2; "Service Wage Issue Left to Arbitration," *The New York Times*, March 23, 1937, 11; "50,00 Service Men Win Rise in Wages," *The New York Times*, May 11, 1937, 1.

Like Quesse and McFetridge, Bambrick used the success of his union to support his own political ascension. However, unlike Quesse, Bambrick became associated with political reformers, not with machine politicians. It is an oversimplification to reduce this difference to preference or ideology. Bambrick may have had a personal commitment to reform, but he was only able to pursue reform as a practical political position due to the peculiarities of 1930s New York politics. United by their opposition to Tammany Hall, reformers of all stripes organized around liberal Republicans such as La Guardia and, to a lesser extent, Thomas Dewey. These reformers were assisted by the efforts of FDR, who refused to allow his own popularity and ascension to provide political benefits to the city's Democratic machine. Indeed, by funneling New Deal dollars through his own autonomous bureaucracy, and supporting reformers regardless of party affiliation, FDR critically undermined the machine in New York. To the frustration of Tammany, La Guardia and his reformers became the major beneficiaries of the national success of the New Deal Democrats. At the same time that FDR undermined Tammany, he backed the American Labor Party (ALP), a New York political party that was intended to unite reformist Democrats and moderate Socialists behind the New Deal. Backed by ILGWU leader David Dubinsky, the ALP provided a home of labor militants and socialists who could accept the reformist politics of La Guardia and the New Deal, but would have gagged on voting for the Tammany Democrats or the Republican Party. Both Dewey and La Guardia accepted the ALP's nomination, effectively connecting them to the New Deal and the New York labor movement. To labor leaders, the ALP provided both an independent platform for political action and a way to form alliances with the city's most powerful political figures.⁷¹

During 1937, Bambrick became publicly associated with the ALP, ultimately becoming one of its vice-presidents. Political influence appealed to Bambrick for the same reasons that drew the BSEIU

⁷¹ Mary M. Stolberg, *Fighting Organized Crime: Politics, Justice, and the Legacy of Thomas E. Dewey* (Lebanon: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 193, 198, 202-208; Williams, *City of Ambition*, 218-224, 231; Zeiger, *The CIO*, 179-180.

of Chicago to political power—lacking high training or certification barriers to entry into their field, building service workers could only regulate their labor market with political support. However, in New York during the 1930s, the smart alliances were with reformers, not with declining and discredited machine politicians. Institutions like the ALP, along with the city's proportional representation system which empowered smaller parties, gave Bambrick a ready-made home that did not demand the ethical flexibility of Quesse's alliance with Big Bill Thompson. The politics of the BSEIU in New York thus grew from completely different political soil from that of Chicago. Where the Chicago machine became the steadfast ally of building service workers, in New York the machine was its enemy. Under these circumstances Bambrick would never be tempted to wield political corruption as a tool in the way that generations of Chicago BSEIU leaders would.⁷²

Using Local 32B as a base of support, Bambrick became a well-known political figure and an ALP city council candidate for Queens. Through the ALP, Bambrick cemented his alliance with La Guardia and became connected to Dewey. Aggressively campaigning, Bambrick frequently appeared beside La Guardia and Dewey at labor rallies. Though he received the endorsement of the Citizen's Union, Bambrick would ultimately fall short of the votes needed to win a seat on the council. Despite this loss, his candidacy helped to cement his political connections in the city. These connections proved critical to his continued success as a labor leader. As he recalled in his memoirs, many of 32B's successes in the late 30s came from the political leverage that he was able to bring to bear against building owners.⁷³ Interestingly, though the seat of his political power was

72 "Union Opposes Branigan," *The New York Times*, July 25, 1937, 14; "M'Goldrick Prods Mayor on Inaction," *The New York Times*, August 19, 1937, 9; "Queens Labor Party Denounces Copeland," *The New York Times*, August 21, 1937, 5.

73 Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, 50; "C.I.O Not in Service Field," *The New York Times*, July 19, 1937, 5; "Labor Party Picks Slate," *The New York Times*, July 23, 1937, 5; "Union Opposes Branigan," *The New York Times*, July 25, 1937, 14; "M'Goldrick Prods Mayor on Inaction," *The New York Times*, August 19, 1936, 9; "Labor Party Backs Democrats' Slate," *The New York Times*, September 26, 1937, 2; "Loot of Tammany and Gangs Ended La Guardia Asserts," *The New York Times*, October 1, 1937, 1; "List is Completed by Citizens Union," *The New York Times*, October 22, 1937; "Ovation by Labor," *The New York Times*, October 29, 1937; "P.R. Vote in Bronx Revised in Recount," *The New York Times*, November 12, 1937, 18; "Council Control Now is Doubtful," *The New York Times*, November 14, 1937, 1; "Tammany Elects 3 of 6 Councilmen in Manhattan Race," *The New York Times*,

dramatically different than Quesse's, such a use of political power as leverage had direct and obvious parallels in Chicago.

In all of this, 32B received little support from the International Union and Jerry Horan. Bambrick bitterly recalls that a “few experiences with the International convinced us that help [from them] was out of the question.”⁷⁴ Though Horan was involved in several negotiations, the leadership of the BSEIU remained somewhat provincial in its orientation, focusing on strongholds like Chicago instead of on expansion. Indeed, Bambrick's account portrays the BSEIU as a “racket-dominated International Union” whose “screaming for 'its per capita tax'” even during labor activity was a constant distraction.⁷⁵

There were many incompatibilities between Local 32B and the International Union. As McFetridge explained in an interview in 1960 the structure of the BSEIU was intended to maximize regional autonomy which, unfortunately, meant that local factions were inevitable.⁷⁶ The loose structure of the union allowed for significant regional variance in the philosophy and structure of individual locals. Generally Local 32B had more sympathies with the CIO than it with the craft union leaders of Chicago. In 1937, for example, the local voted to refuse to contribute to an AFL-sponsored drive against the CIO.⁷⁷ Organizationally, union organizers actively worked against craft divisions, preferring instead to organize entire buildings. In contrast to the craft-oriented rent-sharing scheme used by Local 1, 32B's negotiators aggressively, if somewhat unsuccessfully, fought against all attempts to base wages on building size or profitability. Instead Bambrick and other leaders sought to establish blanket “living wage” conditions which would be the same in every building, thus encouraging solidarity.⁷⁸ This difference powerfully illustrates the underlying ideological tensions between Chicago and

November 24, 1937, 1; “Democrats Gaining in Council Count,” *The New York Times*, November 5, 1937, 1.

74 Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, 13.

75 Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, 26.

76 David Delgado, “Report on Building Service Employees International Union,” circa December 1960, Box 6, Folder 1, SEIU Historical Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

77 “Service Men Balk at Fight on C.I.O.,” *The New York Times*, June 15, 1937, 15;

78 Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, 43.

New York. Where the building service workers of Chicago treated their union as a means through which their careers—which included moving through progressively more lucrative positions—could be advanced, in New York union leaders argued that there should be a blanket “living wage.” Similarly, where the civic unionism of Quesse and McFetridge justified high-wages through the role union members played in their city, in New York higher wages were justified through an appeal to an abstract sense of social justice.

At the time, the ability of the BSEIU to accept two fundamentally different paradigms inside the broad tent of the organization seems like a virtue. Flexibility and regional autonomy allowed the elevator operators and janitors of New York to develop a form of unionism appropriate to their unique context. However, the presence of two fundamentally contradictory versions of the labor movement in one union set up an inevitable source of tension. During the 1960s this tension would explode into a bitter factional dispute.

Conclusion

The social movement origins of Local 32B illustrated everything troubling about the civic unionist origins of the BSEIU in Chicago. Where Local 32B nurtured a vigorous internal culture and turned members into activists, Local 1 and its kin sought to maintain discipline during negotiations. Just as Quesse and McFetridge, Bambrick vigorously pursued political unionism, but did so in a way that promoted reform instead of ratifying the reign of corrupt mayors. Though Bambrick became a political ally of La Guardia, he never betrayed the ideals of the labor movement in the name of securing the power of his coalition—as McFetridge would do on several occasions.⁷⁹ Local 32B never pursued the kind of collaborative arrangements with employers that Local 1 did and thus never helped to legitimate the capitalist structure.

Although these points deserve recognition, it is important to understand why civic unionism emerged in Chicago instead of social movement unionism. As Fine argues, true social movement unionism can only

⁷⁹ See Chapter Eight for more on this.

occur during “those relatively rare moments in American history when very large numbers of people got into motion [and] the prevailing cultural norm was challenged.”⁸⁰ Most political-economic-social situations remain relatively inflexible, denying activists the kind of broad-based support that permitted Local 32B to build momentum in the way that it did. Local 1, on the other hand, emerged at a time where, if anything, conditions began flexing against craft unions. Quesse sought allies where he could—first among the craft unions but then among the powerful of Chicago. These initial differences rewarded different kinds of leaders and relationships to employers, ensuring that the paths of the unions remained divergent even as larger historical conditions shifted.

Despite their differences, the outcomes that these two sets of locals initially obtained for their members are remain remarkably similar. In both New York and Chicago, unions turned to city-wide arbitrations that allowed them to at least partially centralize and politicize bargaining. Piecemeal organization simply could not serve as a viable means of organizing and establishing contracts for such a diffuse group of workers. The contracts achieved did reveal different economic priorities—with Local 32B attempting to decrease economic inequalities between members and Local 1 expanding them to create a career path for janitors and increase top pay—but defined similar protections, such as the union shop and arbitration structures. Bambrick, Quesse, and McFetridge all sought to legitimate these gains through appeals to the public good.

That Local 32B embraced social movement unionism, and arguably based their union on more stable ethical and moral ground than Local 1, did not protect them from corruption. Indeed, Local 32B and its New York kin became the vectors through which George Scalise's corruption infected the larger organization. Such an outcome directly contradicts Hutchinson's argument that it is the moral fortitude of a union leader that protects them from corruption. Instead, again, context and circumstance prove decisive. Through the late 1930s,

80 Janice Fine, “Community Unions and the Revival of the American Labor Movement,” in *Politics & Society* 33(1) March 2005, 161.

McFetridge and the leader of the BSEIU in California, George Hardy, fought an internal war against corruption.

The outcomes of this conflict defined the modern course of the BSEIU, and further complicate our understanding of corruption in labor unions.

VI

POWER, CORRUPTION, LIES AND JANITORS

Introduction

Self-sacrifice served as the theme of President George Scalise's resignation from the BSEIU: "I have been torn with the thought that this indictment against me may have an adverse effect upon the welfare of our 70,000 members... My first loyalty and obligation must be to them... I see no alternative [to]... resigning my position as International President."¹ Delivered by Vice-President William McFetridge at the union's 1940 convention, Scalise's resignation by letter represented the low point of a dour convention.

By all rights, the convention should have been a triumph. Successes in New York helped the union to quadruple in size over a five year period. In cities ranging from New York to San Francisco, the union succeeded at signing new contracts that dramatically changed the conditions for thousands of janitors and other building service workers. Throughout the Depression, members of the BSEIU faced few layoffs or severe pay cuts. The union appeared poised to fulfill William Quesse's dreams of transforming the janitorial trade across the entire nation.

But behind the scenes, the BSEIU underwent a descent into chaos. A few weeks prior to the convention, New York State Attorney Thomas E. Dewey indicted George Scalise for extortion and embezzlement. Newspapers portrayed Scalise as an opportunistic thug who used the union for his own financial gain. Stories accused him of filling the union with gangsters and corrupt leaders who robbed union members and building owners alike. The allegations were accurate. Scalise's corruption extended to every corner of the union. More than a public relation's nightmare, the rapid

¹ *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 26-27.

fall of Scalise threatened to undermine the very legitimacy of the building service workers' labor movement.

The BSEIU was not alone. Corruption became endemic among the craft unions of Chicago. As Andrew Wender Cohen argues, the lack of legal protection for labor unions in Chicago allowed exploitation by criminals. Without protection or fair treatment from the courts, many unions turned to less than savory allies and many union leaders gave in to the temptation of petty embezzlement.² Many union members in Chicago saw this as simply an unfortunate reality, not scandalous corruption. However, during the 1930s the Chicago Outfit and the New York Mafia gained increased leverage in the labor movement. This brought corruption of a different character to the unions. Viewing labor organizations as little more than bank accounts, Mafiosos used intimidation to gain brutal influence over labor leaders. While at times these relationships could be collaborative and, in limited ways, support the goals of a union, the increased influence of organized crime significantly undermined the public legitimacy of the labor movement, and led to harsh changes in labor law. Even today the stigma of criminality that organized crime involvement cast on the labor movement remains a potent conservative talking point.³

Corruption in the BSEIU both fits and challenges this narrative. Always rife with petty profiteering, the BSEIU fit well in Big Bill Thompson's shadowy, corrupt Chicago. The union succeeded not through its idealism but through its willingness to work with flawed political leaders and figures. William Quesse did not build the Flat Janitors Union through grassroots activism and appeals to social justice, but through his organization's ability to gain leverage on the powerful. Favor trading and violence were the key tools of the early union. While these efforts resulted in

² Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 54, 74.

³ David Witwer, *Shadow of the Racketeer: Scandal in Organized Labor* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2009), 13.

improved wages and conditions for the janitors of Chicago, they also enriched the union's leadership—Quesse died an inexplicably rich man—and helped to defend and expand the power of corrupt politicians. Given the secrecy of criminal activity, it cannot be precisely known when organized crime became a significant presence in the union, but by the presidency of Jerry Horan, the union clearly became intertwined with the Chicago Outfit.

Scalise's corruption went beyond this, however. The scale and violence of his activities were unprecedented. Transforming parts of the union into appendages of the Chicago and New York Mafia, he undermined its very legitimacy. While the efforts of prosecutors and clean, or at least cleaner, leaders saved the union from collapse, the stigma of Scalise's actions became a stain on the labor movement as a whole. Put another way, though at times they were morally questionable, the actions of previous union leaders generally functioned as a tool which could improve the position of the union. Scalise's crimes proved to be far worse because he simply pursued them for his own gain.

Beyond Scalise, the lines between virtuous, good leaders and corrupt, bad leaders were blurry at best. In practice, morally ambiguous leaders—who gained power through access to patronage, influence, and corrupt politicians—were often among the most successful at making meaningful gains for their members. Conversely, reformers could be as self-interested and venal as the corrupt leaders they sought to remove. Internal reformers, such as William McFetridge, used anti-corruption as cover for cultivating their own private reserves of power. External reformers, such as prosecutor Thomas E. Dewey, similarly sought to use anti-corruption as a tool for his advancement. The efforts of these reformers resulted in ambiguous changes to the BSEIU and, arguably, damaged the labor movement as much as they improved it. However, a balanced approach requires not simplistically portraying union reformers as self-interested or, as David Witwer does with Dewey, as a

simplistically anti-union activist. For all of their faults, the evidence that exists does not show that the reformers inside, and outside, of the BSEIU maliciously sought to damage the union—though in reality damage did often occur.

Corruption inside labor unions is often a difficult issue for historians. Generally sympathetic to the cause of labor, some scholars are reluctant to pillory unions as corrupt. An anecdote by David Witwer in the journal *Labor* neatly encapsulates this, “In 1997, I was just a couple of years out of graduate school and giving a paper at the American Historical Association... My paper used the 1970s-era history of an unsuccessful rank-and-file movement in a mobbed up New York City Teamsters local to demonstrate the limited government protection available to union dissidents.... When it was time for audience questions, the first person to stand up insisted that at a time when the union movement was under attack, it was wrong for labor historians to write about union corruption. No one there challenged her assertion. I didn't either.”⁴ From experiences like this, along with an examination of a large swath of labor history written since the 1970s, Witwer argues that either due to discomfort or disinterest historians have tended to avoid the systematic study of union corruption. This absence is particularly concerning to him because he believes that the anti-labor sentiment that labor corruption encouraged is key to understanding the current decline of the labor movement.⁵

In responses to Witwer's essay, Andrew Wender Cohen, Jennifer Luff, and other major labor historians point out that corruption has received a broader treatment than Witwer allows. However, most of the responses share a common agreement, though studies of labor corruption exist, they tend to over-simplify the issue. There are some exceptions to this—such as Cohen's work, which does not portray corruption in simplified moral terms, and Witwer's own writing, which does not

4 David Witwer, “The Chapter Left Untold: Labor Historians and the Problem of Union Corruption,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 8(2), 37.

5 Witwer, “Chapter Left Untold,” 37.

simplistically vilify corrupt labor leaders, but seeks to understand their motivations—but the dominant approach treats corruption either as a red herring spread by employers, or as essentially the result of their leadership's moral failing.⁶

Though Scalise easily fits the role of villain in this narrative, framing his activities as either a creation of anti-union rhetoric or the result of a moral failure of leadership provides a false understanding. Scalise did not emerge organically from the union's membership and did not gain his power from the moral failings of the union. He corrupted his fellow leaders through violence and fear, not appeals to their own venal desires. At the same time, however, corruption in the BSEIU cannot be described as a minor issue or as a scandal created by anti-labor interests.

The story of Scalise also complicates simplistic descriptions of union reformers as selfless heroes. Instead they emerge as ambiguous figures who pursued a blend of idealistic and selfish goals. Recognizing that, in the past, the success of the BSEIU often required alliances and compromises with less than reputable figures, McFetridge and his followers attempted to only purge corrupt figures who posed an existential threat to the organization. Dewey, while entirely willing to use his prosecution of Scalise to make political hay, also sought to remove a truly problematic figure from the labor movement. Indeed, quite contrary to his portrayal by Witwer, McFetridge rapidly came to view Dewey as a useful ally and even enthusiastically supported him during his ill-fated campaign against Truman.

Corruption is fascinating. Stories of nefarious gangsters, brave reformers, and morally ambiguous labor leaders can give the study of corruption an almost cinematic quality that feels

⁶ Andrew Wender Cohen, "There Was a Crooked History,"; Rosemary Feurer, "How and Where to Look for Corruption?"; Joshua B. Freeman, "Corruption's Due (Scholarly) Reward," "Historical Contributors versus Sectoral Tendencies,"; all in *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 8(2).

entrancing. It is therefore important not to allow the lurid corruption of Scalise, and the contradictions of the reformer who defeated him, to overshadow the successes of the union. During the 1930s, the BSEIU succeeded despite the corruption of Scalise. In New York City, the union combined the tactics of a social movement with the political strategies of the BSEIU, and achieved a great victory for elevator operators and janitors. The fact that Scalise impeded these efforts and tainted many of the leaders involved, only makes the union's accomplishments even more impressive. In the aftermath of Scalise's fall, the BSEIU displayed impressive resilience in the face of crisis. Corruption could not extinguish the determination of the union's leaders and members, yet provides an inspirational example of the resilience of the labor movement that deserves praise—though not imitation.

The Functionality of Corruption

Corruption is more than mere rule-breaking: it is an institutional or moral corrosion that indicts an entire society. Though fear of corruption is common, in the United States it has a special resonance. As J.G.A. Pocock argues in his monumental work *The Machiavellian Moment*, the Founders' became concerned with corruption due to the pervasive fear, going back to Machiavelli, about the potential instabilities and perversions of the republican form of government. Pocock argues that in the wake of the English Civil War—in which virtuous Puritans opposed the corrupt monarchy—concern with corruption became the common language of political discourse. After the Civil War, the continued imperial expansion of England led many to compare the new power of the crown to the expansion of Rome which “transformed from a republic to a despotism by the conquest of an empire whose wealth corrupted the citizenry.”⁷ Such views were particularly resonant in the

7 J. G. A Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 510.

colonies where corruption became “identified with the word of the Antichrist.”⁸ Later, as discontent brewed among the soon-to-be revolutionaries of America, the Founders naturally defined the king as an agent of corruption, thus placing concern with corruption at the center of the entire project of independence.

Mindful of this, the Framers of the Constitution therefore embedded a fear of corruption into the very institutional fabric of the United States. As Pocock puts it, the Framers believed that “[c]orruption, which threatened the civic bases of personality, was irremediable except by personal virtue itself, and therefore must very soon become irreversible if action was not taken in time.”⁹ Guarding against the slow seep of corruption, thus, became key to all of their institutional plans. Legal scholar and public intellectual Zephyr Teachout goes further, arguing that the “Framers [of the Constitution] were obsessed with corruption.”¹⁰ She makes a compelling case that they were entranced by the Machiavellian idea that “great cultural and political flourishing was followed by the slow corruption of public life and then by private concerns.”¹¹ To prevent this erosion, the Founders built a constitutional structure that would resist people's natural vices. In doing so, they hoped to encourage a love and attachment to the good of the republic, which would ultimately create a polity willing to put the public good above their own interests.¹² The dichotomy of corruption and virtue thus became more than a minor concern in the United States; it effectively defined the greatest hopes and greatest fears of the fledgling nation's political leaders.

8 Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 512.

9 Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 507.

10 Zephyr Teachout “The Anti-Corruption Principle,” *Cornell Law Review* 94(341) 2009, 348.

11 Teachout, “The Anti-Corruption Principle,” 351.

12 Zephyr Teachout *Corruption in America: From Benjamin Franklin's snuff box to Citizens United* (Cambridge: Harvard university Press, 2014), 4.

The Framers's fixation on corruption ensured that it would become an enduring rhetoric in the politics of the United States. All sides of political debates during the Jacksonian era used the language of corruption. Abolitionists critiqued slavery, partially, as a form of corruption that undermined the public good.¹³ Critics of Reconstruction frequently used allegations of corruption against their opponents. Populists and progressives viewed fighting corruption as core to their movements. Followers of Barry Goldwater used political and labor corruption as justifications for their movement of crusading conservatism. The language of corruption dominated the public discussion of scandals such as Watergate and Iran-Contra. In the wake of *Citizens United*, campaign finance reformers such as Lawrence Lessig found a useful rhetoric in corruption.¹⁴ During his 2016 presidential run, Donald Trump continually invoked his immunity from corruption, supposedly due to his great wealth, as one of his core qualifications.¹⁵

Given the political and emotional power of the term corruption, it can be difficult to define precisely. Pocock's work provides many different interpretations of corruption, but argues that Americans define it simply as the anti-thesis of virtue.¹⁶ Virtue itself has various definitions but focuses around a sense of independence and public-mindedness.¹⁷ Corruption thus became rendered as S. M. Shumer describes as a turning away from the public good through dependencies upon the illegitimately wealthy or powerful.¹⁸ Teachout, following Pocock, argues that the Framers understood corruption as “the rotting of positive ideals of civic virtue and public integrity... While

13 Timothy Sandefur, *Conscience and the Constitution*, 152.

14 Kim Philips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessman's Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, reprint edition, 2010), 125, 143, 229; S. M. Shumer, “Machiavelli: Republican Politics and Its Corruption” in *Political Theory* 7(1), 6.

15 Peter Beinart, “How Trump and Carson Benefit from the Backlash against Corruption,” *The Atlantic*. October 27, 2015. Accessed October 30, 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/10/how-trump-and-carson-benefit-from-the-backlash-against-corruption/412576/>.

16 Pocock *The Machiavellian Moment*, 9.

17 Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 507-508.

18 Shumer, “Machiavelli: Republican Politics and Its Corruption,” 11.

political virtue is pursuing the public good in public life, political corruption is using public life for private gain. The purpose—the moral attitude—is essential to the definition.”¹⁹ The common theme that unites all of definitional variations is the idea of corruption as a violation or betrayal of a trust. Since such a definition has no meaning outside of its larger political, social, and ethical context.

When labor historians examine corruption, they inevitably focus on the betrayal of the interests of union members. Such a perspective is important because, as Andrew Wender Cohen writes, without a strong sense of member perspective, anti-union activists can easily portray “any leveraging of economic power [as] extortion” rendering all labor activity corruption of the free marketplace.²⁰ Defining corruption in these terms is especially useful because it is similar to the standards that union members have historically embraced for their leaders. David Witwer provides the classic formulation of this view of corruption in his *Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union*: “[T]hroughout the [Teamsters Union's] history, members viewed corruption as a significant problem [when leaders violated] a general understanding of what their union should be doing.... For members, corruption referred to cases of dishonest leaders who failed to represent the membership and thus undercut the union's ability to protect the members' dignity.”²¹ Like the classical republican thinkers, union members perceived corruption as occurring when a leader subverted the purpose of the institution for their own gain.

Throughout its early history, the BSEIU succeeded in Chicago by making connections with corrupt politicians. Through its alliance with the Thompson machine, the union gained the political influence that it used to subvert the Fitzmoris arbitration in 1920. In 1924, William Quesse parlayed

19 Teachout “The Anti-Corruption Principle,” 374.

20 Cohen, “There Was a Crooked History,” 63.

21 David Witwer, *Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union*, 3.

his support of Governor Len Small into a pardon.²² After the *Brennan* decision gave the union an in-road among school janitors, the union used its alliance with Thompson to push the CBE into signing a outstanding contract despite its financial woes.²³ In each of these cases the union benefited from politicians who were willing to put their need for the union's support over their obligation to behave in an unbiased fashion. The BSEIU both participated in and encouraged corrupt political behavior. The use of patronage and influence to subvert public officials obviously represented a form of corruption by the common sense definition, yet it did not betray the union's members.

Given the political structure of Chicago, in which influence, jobs, and patronage served as the denominations of power, such corruption helped the civic unionism of the city's BSEIU locals to function. Without the ability to spread favors and control city agencies, leaders like Quesse would have struggled to reach equitable arrangements with the owners. As Maureen Flanagan notes, the pervasiveness of such tactics in early twentieth century Chicago “blurs the distinction between machine and reform politicians and turns them into ineffective categories through which to try to understand Chicago politics.”²⁴ For the union, patronage served as the most effective tool for obtaining their legitimate goals.

The BSEIU also suffered from venal forms of corruption. Many organizers operated through a commission system through which they received a percentage of new member's dues. William McFetridge described this system bluntly to investigators, “I don't know whether you gentlemen are familiar with labor organizing, but oftentimes an organizer is put on and he is given the initiation fee... new member's pay [as a commission]... sometimes if the man is a good organizer and the field

²² See Chapter Two for more details.

²³ See Chapter Three for more details on the transformation of school janitors.

²⁴ Maureen A. Flanagan, “Fred A Busse: A Silent Mayor in Turbulent Times,” in Paul M. Green & Melvin G. Holli, eds *The Mayors: The Chicago Political Tradition* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 59.

is good, he can make considerable money.”²⁵ While providing remuneration for organizers, this system transformed union organizing into a suspect entrepreneurial endeavor. At times, union locals were organized more to gain commissions than to improve the lot of workers. Business agents similarly treated the union as a potentially lucrative source of profits, soliciting bribes and kickbacks in return for stable employment. These arrangements were particularly exploitative of flat janitors. As flat janitors wages were often based on the quality of the building they worked in, business agents could demand fees for supporting their employment at high-end buildings.²⁶

These arrangements, from all perspectives, were corrupt. Certainly they undermine the image of union leaders, activists, and officials as selfless crusaders for justice. Yet they were not uncommon among the craft unions of the day. Various profitable arrangements existed in many of Chicago's craft unions and, as long as they did not interfere with the larger interests of the membership, engendered little anger from union members.²⁷ Though the practices in the BSEIU go somewhat beyond the norm, such petty corruption represented a flawed but wide-spread approach to rewarding union officials.

After the death of William Quesse, the International Union increasingly fell to a more nefarious corrupter—the Chicago Outfit. The infiltration of the union resulted from the larger movement of criminals into Chicago's labor movement. As David Witwer reminds us, “Over the course of the 1930s at least thirteen prominent Chicago labor leaders were killed. The murders were widely credited to organized crime's efforts to control labor unions, but they failed to generate editorial outrage or draw an effective police response.”²⁸ Without real legal protection, the unions of Chicago

25 SEIU Historical Records, *A Need for Valor*.

26 See Chapter Seven for more on petty internal graft inside the BSEIU.

27 Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 74.

28 Witwer, *Shadow of the Racketeer* 49.

became fertile sources of profit for Capone's successors.

With gangsters freely murdering labor leaders, the fear of murder weighed heavily on Quesse's successor, Jerry Horan. Horan initially sought protection from Roger Touhy, one of Al Capone and the Chicago Outfit's rivals. While this arrangement initially provided the BSEIU with protection, Horan and other labor leaders came to doubt Touhy after gunmen murdered a Teamster leader under his protection. Terrified for his own life, Horan came to terms with Capone and the Outfit. Though the exact details of their agreement remains unclear, several accounts list the BSEIU as one of the unions under the control of Capone and his successors.²⁹ For members this resulted in a variety of hardships including the rumored use of violence and intimidation in extracting ever higher fees.³⁰

The 1930s were a time of strength and growth for the union. The Chicago Flat Janitors Union weathered the Depression without significant decreases in employment or worsening of labor conditions. As Patrick F. Sullivan, head of the Building Trades Council of Chicago, said, "All of the building trades international unions have been very hard hit during the five years of depression. Many of them have lost 50 per cent of their dues paying membership.... [Yet] the Chicago Flat Janitors Union has been successful in maintaining their members on the job with very little unemployment. When you stop to consider that we have had in Chicago continuously an army of 700 thousand [sic] to 900 thousand [sic] unemployed, you know that is a wonderful record."³¹ Despite the large numbers of potential scabs, the union's intimidating political power and the activism of its members prevented a major de-unionization campaign from building owners. Directly dependent on declining state revenues, school janitors in Chicago did face significant periods without pay. However, the union effectively maintained employment levels and, by May of

²⁹ Witwer, *Shadow of the Racketeer*, 50.

³⁰ Mary J. Herrick, *The Chicago Schools: A Social and Political History* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1971), 175.

³¹ *Convention Proceedings of the Seventh Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 20.

1935, the beleaguered CBE caught up on janitorial pay.³² Through craft alliances, shared interests with employers, and the utilization of corrupting influence over the city government, the BSEIU locals of Chicago comfortably weathered the storm of the Great Depression.

Pretender to the Throne

“[J]ust 'trow' the 'crums' a crust and they'll eat it up.”

— Izzy Schwartz

With their position in Chicago secure, the union began to devote more attention and resources to the rest of the country. On the West Coast, locals in San Francisco and Seattle began to gain membership and prominence. However, the union's greatest victories came in New York. With little intervention or support from the central union, James Bambrick's Local 32B, along with its allied locals like 32J, became the union's powerhouse and the numerical center of the organization. Between 1934 and 1940, the BSEIU transformed from a largely Chicago-centric union into a national organization. Though such expansion impressed the entire labor movement, it would have many unexpected costs, most prominently providing George Scalise with a claim to power in the union.

In the wake of the successes in New York, the delegates to the BSEIU's 1935 convention in Chicago were understandably jubilant. Local 32B's success greatly expanded the union and proved that dramatic successes could be achieved outside of the organization's strongholds. At a time when many craft unions were struggling against harsh economic realities, the BSEIU entered into a new age of success. Despite the new importance of Local 32B, the convention remained resolutely a Chicago-focused affair. John Fitzpatrick, president of the Chicago Federation of Labor, described the “Flat Janitors [as]

32 *Convention Proceedings of the Seventh Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 15

one of the very best local trade unions... It is a fighting organization, serving its membership and ready to assist other local unions at all times.”³³ During the convention, many of the Chicago delegates were introduced with a state title in addition to their position in the union. William McFetridge, for example, was introduced as a “Conciliator for the State Department of Labor.”³⁴ Similarly delegates were reminded that Jerry Horan served as a member of the Illinois Industrial Commission.³⁵ Other political figures in attendance included former union associates who acquired high positions in Chicago's government and court system. For example, Judge Joseph B. Hermes, who formerly served as the union's attorney, rose to speak about the “recognized fact that the Chicago Flat Janitors' Union has long been known in this community as an influence for good.”³⁶ Later in the conference, the city's Deputy Commissioner of Public Works praised the union's activism and noted that “[your union] is a great factor... not only in the labor movement, but in the political field as well.”³⁷ Through the civic unionism of leaders like McFetridge and Horan, the union gained a high-degree of political power and cross-craft solidarity, bringing the *Tribune's* old joke of “his majesty, the janitor” closer to reality.

In general the union seemed to be on solid footing for the coming years. Alderman Oscar Nelson, in his capacity as representative of Mayor Kelly, praised the union for its growth when noting, “Nowhere in the records of the American Federation of Labor can you find any other international union that has doubled its membership [so quickly].”³⁸ Patrick Sullivan noted that the union's finances were stronger than most other international unions.³⁹ The BSEIU succeeded at maintaining employment and conditions for its members when other craft unions struggled. In all of these ways the BSEIU appeared to be entering a period of great success and promise.

33 *Convention Proceedings of the Seventh Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 2.

34 *Convention Proceedings of the Seventh Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 6.

35 *Convention Proceedings of the Seventh Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 6.

36 *Convention Proceedings of the Seventh Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 17.

37 *Convention Proceedings of the Seventh Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 26.

38 *Convention Proceedings of the Seventh Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 4.

39 *Convention Proceedings of the Seventh Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 20.

Underneath the surface, however, a crisis began to brew. A delegate named Fred West from the union's local of window washers in San Francisco arrived with a series of proposals intended to reduce the central power of the union's Chicago-based leadership. While West's proposals, such as more frequent conventions and a lowered per-capita tax, were put to the delegates, the leadership strongly urged their rejection, resulting in a complete defeat of the democratization agenda.⁴⁰ Instead Horan promoted a series of measures intended to give the presidency greater power over local unions. Under the guise of fighting “[the Communist's] attempt to breed dissension and destruction within local unions” the convention gave the presidency and executive board wider authority in suspending and punishing local unions.⁴¹ Though fears of infiltration may have played a role in passing these reforms, beyond a few isolated activists there is little evidence of a communist or even leftist faction in the union. Indeed, the only openly socialist major figure in the organization was Jess Fletcher—a former IWW organizer whose politics did not prevent him from being personally loyal to William McFetridge. Instead these measures were tailor-made to empower the union's central and mob-infiltrated administration.

The union's sudden expansion also raised troubling issues for the BSEIU's leadership. The center of the organization's practical power shifted geography to the east, but its leadership, structure, and tactical approach remained definitively Chicago-centric. George Scalise, a relatively unknown figure who served as the International's representative in New York, became the only vice-president from the east. While Scalise served during the union's success in New York, Horan appointed him to the position based solely on his criminal connections.⁴² Similarly, his appointment to the leadership over Bambrick, who remained in practical control of Local 32B, resulted from mob pressure.⁴³ As the only New Yorker in the leadership, Scalise successfully claimed authority over virtually all of the union's activities east of Chicago.

40 *Convention Proceedings of the Seventh Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 9, 23, 26

41 *Convention Proceedings of the Seventh Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 15.

42 David Witwer, “The Scandal of George Scalise: A Case Study in the Rise of Labor Racketeering in the 1930s,” *Journal of Social History* 36(4) (Summer 2003), 922.

43 Witwer, “The Scandal of George Scalise,” 930.

Though many of the union's leaders did not know it, George Scalise fit the description of an archetypal labor racketeer. In 1913, a court convicted a 17-year old Scalise of moving a woman from New York to New Jersey with the intention of forcing her into prostitution. After release from prison, he became associated with the New York underworld. A fixture in various saloons and speakeasies, Scalise became friends with Anthony Carfano, a gangster who the press commonly connected to both the Luciano (later known as the Genovese) Family and Tammany Hall.⁴⁴ Scalise later described Carfano as his “partner” and split his ill-gotten gains with him.⁴⁵ Through Carfano, Scalise became associated with Frankie Yale, a friend of Capone, and a group of petty toughs including the future labor racketeer Izzy Schwartz. After working as a chauffeur at a funeral parlor, Scalise raised the capital to open his own mortuary. The mortuary served as a front for his other activities. As reporter Lloyd Wendt noted, “[Scalise's] modest mortuary was a gay place, for in the rear Scalise and Frankie Yale operated a speakeasy. Yale became the first New York beer runner to use a hearse for the transportation of his wares, an innovation that later became popular in New York and Chicago. Although Scalise had few funerals, he prospered.”⁴⁶ While Scalise remained a minor player in the grand scheme of the New York underworld, he had proven adept at building alliances and gaining the trust of significant players. Capitalizing on this, he became what amounted to a liaison between the New York underworld and labor movement. Maintaining a facade of respectability, Scalise could move between these worlds and facilitate connections and deals. By the late 1920s, rumors suggested that Scalise sat at the center of a corrupt network of criminals, labor organizers, and government officials throughout New York.

Beginning in 1927, Scalise used a local of the Teamster Union as muscle to extract payoffs from employers. Garage owners would pay Scalise a fee in return for labor peace and market regulation. Hearing of their success with the Teamsters, George Troy, the corrupt president of BSEIU Local 32-K in Brooklyn, suggested

44 “Scalise's Ann Discovers She Made an 'Error,' *Chicago Tribune*, August 17, 1940, 11.

45 Witwer, “The Scandal of George Scalise,” 928.

46 “Scalise's Ann Discovers She Made an 'Error,' *Chicago Tribune*, August 17, 1940, 11.

that Scalise become involved with the BSEIU. In 1931, Scalise helped Schwartz to set up a window washers local. Employers used window washers to police various anti-competitive arrangements such as standard fees and defined territories.⁴⁷ Superficially these arrangements were similar to the system of craft governance in Chicago, but their intent and outcomes were different. Craft governance was, at its best, a partnership between workers and employers that sought mutually beneficial market regulation. Scalise's agreements did not involve or consider workers. Instead criminals and employers made the agreements often in express contravention of the interests and needs of the workers that the union supposedly represented. Witwer aptly explains this distinction noting that, "Scalise, and others of his type, went into the labor movement to make money; they came from outside the ranks of the workers in the industry, with whom they did not really identify."⁴⁸ As most conflicts were adjudicated through violence instead of strikes or politics, workers played little role in the real activities of their organization. In Scalise's regime, workers were simply the public justification for his criminal activities. His associates even referred to workers dismissively as "crums."⁴⁹ Consequently, workers received little in terms of improved wages, conditions, or power in the workplace.⁵⁰ Scalise's regime thus embodied the worst tendencies of craft governance without preserving any element of its legitimate value to workers.

Seeking to build on his successes in New York, Scalise set his eyes on the wealthy and influential BSEIU. Shortly after founding Schwartz's window washers' union, Scalise used his connections to secure the support of the Chicago Outfit in becoming the BSEIU's representative in the East. Fearful for his life, Jerry Horan agreed to the appointment despite having little knowledge of Scalise. From his new position, Scalise accepted employer bribes in return for labor peace and treated the accounts under his control as his own.⁵¹ As Local 32B began to pick up momentum, it attracted the attention of the mob, and of Scalise. According to Bambrick's

47 "Scalise's Ann Discovers She Made an 'Error,' *Chicago Tribune*, August 17, 1940, p. 11; Witwer, "Scandal of George Scalise," 922-925.

48 Witwer, "Scandal of George Scalise," 924.

49 Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, 21.

50 Witwer, "Scandal of George Scalise," 922-925.

51 Witwer, "The Scandal of George Scalise," 930.

account, the mobster Jacob Shapiro demanded that 32B forego striking in 1934. When Bambrick refused, Schwartz contacted him on behalf of Scalise and proposed that they demand a bribe of \$1,000 from each building owner in return for protection against strike actions. As the leader of the local, Bambrick would be entitled to a 25% cut. To keep the membership happy Schwartz told Bambrick to “[j]ust ‘trow’ the ‘crums’ a crust and they’ll eat it up.”⁵² When Bambrick spoke with building owners about resisting Schwartz’s scheme, they told him that they would prefer to pay the bribers rather than face an aggressive organizing drive or Scalise’s wrath. Believing that he could succeed without Scalise’s support, Bambrick called the strike that transformed local 32B into the largest local of the BSEIU. Between 1934 and 1940, Local 32B achieved a series of successes ultimately increasing their size to 15,200.⁵³

With the temporary frustration of Scalise’s schemes, Bambrick continued to aggressively push organization. Throughout 1936, 32B threatened a series of short-term strikes while re-negotiating the short-term contracts gained in 1934. Key to the union’s strategy was the threat of shutting a building down with as little as five-minutes warning, maximizing the economic damage to building owners and tenants. In March, the union proved that their claims were more than mere threats by shutting down 1,400 buildings in Manhattan. These tactics forced Mayor La Guardia to pressure employers into good faith negotiations and to keep the issue of closed shop provisions alive.⁵⁴

Despite directly opposing the union’s successful strikes, Scalise profited tremendously from 32B’s success. Rapid expansion, and the attendant organizational chaos, provided Scalise with virtually unlimited opportunities for embezzlement and extortion. As the highest-ranked official in New York City, International

52 Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, 21.

53 *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth General Convention of the Building Service Employees’ International Union*, 8.

54 “27 Seized, 10 Hurt in Strike Clashes,” *The New York Times*, March 3, 1936, 1; “Strike Peace Hope Revived as Mayor Offers a New Plan,” *The New York Times*, March 8, 1936, 1; “Both Sides Agree to Discuss Peace in Service Strike,” *The New York Time*, March 9, 1936, 1; “New Peace Offer by Owners is Seen as Strike Spreads,” *The New York Times*, March 11, 1936, 1; “Five Names to End Deadlock in Strike,” *The New York Times*, March 14, 1936, pg. 1; “Service Employes [sic] Back on Job Today,” *The New York Times*, March 16, 1936, 1.

effectively gave the racketeer full direction over the East Coast. Among the other leaders in Chicago, Bambrick alone possessed the influence to directly challenge Scalise. Recognizing this, Scalise devoted significant time and energy to bringing Bambrick to heel. During the negotiations in 1937, Bambrick relates that “Scalise rushed down the stair to breathlessly announce that 'the Boilermaker,' a Chicago killer, 'was going to knock off Bambrick at six tonight...’”⁵⁵ It is unclear if Scalise ordered the hit against Bambrick or if it was simply an attempt by his associates to intimidate Bambrick. Whatever the reality, the intimidation significantly impacted Bambrick, who recalled that “[f]rom that moment on I lived in an atmosphere of stark terror.”⁵⁶ To placate Scalise, Bambrick agreed to embezzle \$10,000 from local 32B. In return for his participation, Bambrick received a commission of \$2,500.⁵⁷ Scalise also induced Bambrick to promote David Sullivan into the union's leadership, a move Bambrick would later deeply regret.⁵⁸ Despite this seeming surrender to Scalise, Bambrick continued to resist many of his schemes by removing union organizers and agents with links to Scalise.⁵⁹

Though Bambrick privately conceded to Scalise, his public profile continued to rise. A regular fixture on the radio, he became a well-known commentator on labor issues.⁶⁰ Using Local 32B as a base of support, Bambrick became vice-president of the New York State American Labor Party (ALP) and its city council candidate from Queens. Bambrick's alliance with the ALP placed him on the same party slate as La Guardia and Thomas E. Dewey, both of whom were Republicans but who received the endorsement of and

55 Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, 43.

56 Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, 43.

57 Witwer, “The Scandal of George Scalise,” 930.

58 Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, 60. David Sullivan's connections to Scalise are complex. Bambrick directly accuses him of being a corrupt ally of Scalise, an accusation that David Witwer accepts. I believe that the situation is somewhat more complex. Certainly the evidence suggests that Sullivan was an ally of Scalise's. However, there is little clear evidence of that Sullivan was an active part of Scalise's schemes. Given Sullivan's later significance and relatively clean record as later president of the BSEIU, it seems fair to give him the benefit of the doubt.

59 Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, 57.

60 “Today on the Radio,” *The New York Times*, November 13, 1934, 13; “Today on the Radio,” *The New York Times*, November 22, 1934, 24; “Today on the Radio,” *The New York Times*, February 26, 1935; “Today on the Radio,” *The New York Times*, January 30, 1936; “Today on the Radio,” *The New York Times*, May 27, 1937, 41; Political Talks Today,” *The New York Times*, October 20, 1937, 7; “Political Talks on Air Today,” *The New York Times*, October 31, 1937, 2.

participated in the ALP. Aggressively campaigning, Bambrick frequently appeared beside La Guardia and Dewey at labor rallies. Though he received the endorsement of the Citizen's Union, Bambrick would ultimately fall short of the votes needed to win a seat on the council. Despite this loss, his candidacy helped to cement his political connections in the city.⁶¹

Back in Chicago the internal politics of the International's executive board grew increasingly toxic as the Chicago Outfit and McFetridge factions vied for power. As Jerry Horan's health declined, this conflict transformed into a potentially violent succession battle. McFetridge's successes in the public sector helped him to become both politically influential and popular with the membership of his union—making him a natural heir to Horan. However, the Outfit refused to accept his candidacy because as Schwartz later testified, McFetridge “would not play ball with them.”⁶² While McFetridge seemed to have been physically protected, or perhaps simply unafraid of retaliation, the Outfit used its muscle on the board to promote the candidacy of Tom Burke. Burke, who headed the Theatrical Janitors Union in Chicago, was a well-known associate of the Outfit. Aware of Burke's criminal connections, McFetridge and his supporters refused to support any candidate with clear Outfit backing. When Horan passed away on April 27, 1937, the Executive Board remained deadlocked between the two factions.⁶³

61 Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, 50; “C.I.O Not in Service Field,” *The New York Times*, July 19, 1937, 5; “Labor Party Picks Slate,” *The New York Times*, July 23, 1937, 5; “Union Oppposes Branigan,” *The New York Times*, July 25, 1937, 14; “M'Goldrick Prods Mayor on Inaction,” *The New York Times*, August 19, 1936, 9; “Labor Party Backs Democrats' Slate,” *The New York Times*, September 26, 1937, 2; “Loot of Tammany and Gangs Ended La Guardia Asserts,” *The New York Times*, October 1, 1937, 1; “List is Completed by Citizens Union,” *The New York Times*, October 22, 1937; “Ovation by Labor,” *The New York Times*, October 29, 1937; “P.R. Vote in Bronx Revised in Recount,” *The New York Times*, November 12, 1937, 18; “Council Control Now is Doubtful,” *The New York Times*, November 14, 1937, 1; “Tammany Elects 3 of 6 Councilmen in Manhattan Race,” *The New York Times*, November 24, 1937, 1; “Democrats Gaining in Council Count,” *The New York Times*, November 5, 1937, 1.

62 “Scalise Depicted as Tool of Gang,” *The New York Times*, August 27, 1940, 1.

63 “Bury Jerry Horan, Union Chief; 5000 at Services,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 1, 1937; SEIU Historical Records, *A Need for Valor*.

In April of 1937, Scalise, Carfano, and Schwartz hatched a scheme to replace Horan with Scalise. The sudden political impasse in Chicago provided them with the opportunity they needed.⁶⁴ Given that, Scalise held jurisdiction over nearly half of the union's membership, McFetridge felt unwilling to directly oppose him. Without clear information from the east, McFetridge would later claim that he simply did not know about Scalise's ties to Carfano. Ultimately, BSEIU Secretary Paul David shifted his support to Scalise giving the relative newcomer a majority of support from the Executive Board. Shortly after Horan's funeral, a formal vote was taken by the Board, and Scalise became president of the BSEIU.⁶⁵

Through canny politics Scalise ascended to the presidency, but his appointment came with limitations. Though leadership of the union moved to New York, the union's headquarters remained in Chicago. In effect, regional bosses retained control of their territories. Taking charge of the union's flagship local from Horan, McFetridge strengthened his position as the union's leader in Chicago and the Midwest. Meanwhile, on the West Coast a relatively unknown San Francisco-based activist named George Hardy rose to prominence. Despite his title, Scalise's powers were limited primarily to New York and the East Coast.⁶⁶ Even though this informal system reduced the damage Scalise could cause, it structured the growing union around regional coalitions that have continued to undermine the International's cohesion to this day.⁶⁷

With his ambitions momentarily curbed, Scalise moved ruthlessly to exploit his power in New York. Throughout his corrupt empire, Scalise betrayed the interests of union members to enrich himself. By making collusive agreements with employers, he set up weak unions intended to harvest and extort money from members. As Witwer notes, "For employers, these kinds of arrangements with Scalise offered a pre-emptive

⁶⁴ Witwer, "The Scandal of George Scalise," 929.

⁶⁵ SEIU Historical Records, *A Need for Valor*.

⁶⁶ "G.E.B. Meeting: meeting minutes of the General Executive Board, May 1939," Box 1, Folder 6. SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University; Witwer, "The Scandal of George Scalise," 930.

⁶⁷ Though it would be overly reductionist to suggest that the recent feud between the United Healthcare Workers-West and the central leadership of the SEIU was structured by this, it is notable that power struggles in the union tend to break along the regional lines established in the wake of Horan's death.

strike against the possibility of a more militant union entering their workplace.”⁶⁸ Scalise continued to siphon off half of the membership dues from New York into his private accounts, making such arrangements exceedingly profitable.

Scalise's new position gave him new leverage over Local 32B. As Bambrick recalled, “From the very moment [of Scalise's election] a veritable tidal wave of hoodlumism and extortion attempts almost overwhelmed 32B and other locals.” Working through Schwartz, Scalise “succeeded in at least a few cases of blackmailing organizers into taking part in his cleaning contractor racket as well as using them as dupes in several building shakedowns.” When building owners doubted that Schwartz had the authority to ensure their protection, “He reminded them that he and Scalise had 'hired' all the Scalise-Schwartz underlings whom I had fired.”⁶⁹ Even though Bambrick maintained formal control of Local 32B, the true scope of his influence became increasingly constricted.

Bambrick used his growing political influence against Scalise by supporting his ally, District Attorney Dewey. Bambrick's connection to Dewey concerned and infuriated Schwartz and Scalise, who hatched a scheme to oust the union leader. During 1938 Scalise succeeded at fixing Local 32B's elections, allowing him to promote his ally David Sullivan as a counter-weight to Bambrick.⁷⁰ As Scalise's grip tightened over the local, the members revolted. Thousands of members signed a petition to secede and join the CIO.⁷¹ Other members founded a Voluntary Defense Committee to protect Bambrick's supporters.⁷² Despite these counter-moves, from 1938 on, Scalise operated with relative impunity in New York.

68 Scandal, 931. See also “George Scalise Years,” Box 1, Folder 11, SEIU Historical Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

69 Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, 57.

70 Witwer, “The Scandal of George Scalise,” 930.

71 Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, 57.

72 “George Scalise Years,” Box 1, Folder 14, SEIU Historical Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

Though the existing arrangement proved exceedingly profitable for Scalise and Carfano—the *Chicago Tribune* estimated they embezzled hundreds of thousands of dollars from the union—they wanted more and sought to expand their power beyond New York. The Chicago Outfit wanted control over the Elevator Operators and Starters Union. In 1936, Louis Schiavone, an associate of the Outfit, offered Matt Taylor, president of the union, \$50,000 to hand the union over to him. Schiavone claimed that the Outfit needed control of the union to help maintain their influence over Chicago's downtown loop. Taylor refused the offer and actively resisted the Outfit. When Scalise became president of the BSEIU, he began to put pressure on Taylor to merge his union with the International. While Taylor hesitated, in the eyes of the AFL, the BSEIU held jurisdiction over elevator operators. Recognizing that he could only resist for so long, Taylor eventually relented. However, in return for delivering his local into the BSEIU, Taylor forced Scalise and Burke to agree not to touch the union's funds. With the secret agreement signed, the union joined the BSEIU as Local 66.

Scalise, and his Outfit allies, eventually renounced the agreement and began to seek active control over Local 66. In 1939, Taylor received several threats and suffered assaults and robberies, all allegedly on the orders of Scalise. When Scalise and Burke continued to threaten and pressure Taylor, he agreed to kick back the nominal sum of \$3,000 to “call the heat off.” However, this payoff proved to only whet Scalise's appetite for Local 66. The president used his position to begin the process of auditing the local and suspending Taylor. Eventually Taylor paid Burke \$30,000 and agreed to allow Schiavone to become treasurer of the local. Though Taylor gave the appearance of surrender, he ordered a secret audit of the local which he intended, presumably, to use as means of exposing internal corruption.

The audit set off a peculiar set of events. Before Schiavone could become treasurer and conceal evidence of wrongdoing, Taylor's secret audit was completed. While Schiavone did not have official access to the audit, he obtained a copy through unknown means only to be shot and killed on July 5, 1939 in Oak Lawn. Taylor would

later claim that Schiavone intended to double cross Scalise, but most of the details of the murder remain a mystery. From that point on, Taylor gave up his secret war against Scalise and handed the Outfit control of his local.⁷³ The example of Local 66 demonstrates that Scalise could flex his muscles in Chicago but there remained limits to his power in the city. While Scalise and Burke could manipulate relatively unconnected leaders like Taylor, McFetridge and the locals under his protection maintained their autonomy.

When Scalise looked to the west he proved less cautious in choosing his battles and directly confronted Charles Hardy. Scalise and Hardy initially clashed for reasons other than corruption. Like many BSEIU organizers, Hardy took a relaxed attitude towards the jurisdictional claims of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees International Union and began organizing hotel workers. Under pressure from the AFL, Scalise demanded that Hardy stop his organizing. Hardy viewed this as a violation of his regional autonomy and resisted Scalise's orders. The conflict set the stage for a larger feud between the two leaders.

Scalise used both his legitimate and illegitimate powers to attack Hardy. Justifying his actions based on rumors of internal dissension in San Francisco, Scalise ordered an audit of Hardy's local of theatrical janitors as a pretext for bringing him before a disciplinary board. Behind the scenes, Scalise and Burke threatened to send hitmen after Hardy. However, Hardy refused to be intimidated. Perhaps feeling somewhat protected by his distance from both Scalise and the Chicago Outfit, Hardy sought a legal injunction to prevent the disciplinary action from going forward and to suspend his local's payment of dues. By invoking the courts, Hardy hoped to demand an impartial disclosure of the union's finances.

With the potentially damaging court case already hanging over him, Scalise faced another crisis. A well-researched pamphlet revealing details of his regime along with his past imprisonment began to spread inside

73 "George Scalise Years," Box 1, Folder 11, SEIU Historical Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University. The true story of the relationship between Taylor and Schiavone is obscure. It is entirely possible that the Schiavone murder was unrelated to Local 66. Either way, it is clear that it frightened Taylor.

the BSEIU. Though the pamphlet remained anonymous, Witwer argues that incomplete evidence points to George Hardy. Whatever its source, as the pamphlet gained wider dissemination, the infamous anti-union commentator Westbrook Pegler latched onto the story. Reveling in the details of Scalise's crimes, Pegler painted the president as a goon who funded a luxurious lifestyle at the expense of his members. Through his syndicated column, Pegler turned the Scalise story into a national scandal.⁷⁴ The Executive Board initially backed Scalise through the scandal. While it is impossible to know if his offer was genuine, Scalise said that he would willingly resign to avoid further embarrassment. The Board rejected his resignation claiming that it would not give into "motives foreign to the best interests of labor."⁷⁵ Despite the accusations, and his increasingly tenuous grasp on the West Coast, Scalise remained in firm control of the union. An external force would have to dislodge the president.

Scalise's facade began to crack on on March 1, 1940 when Dewey's prosecutors indicted Schwartz for "extortions, coercion, and conspiracy in general racketeering." Leaning on Schwartz heavily and setting a high bail, the prosecutors obtained his cooperation.⁷⁶ With Schwartz's cooperation, along with statements from several building contractors, Dewey's prosecutor Murray Gurfein moved against Scalise who was, allegedly, in the process of fleeing New York. Arresting him on April 21, Gurfein claimed that the BSEIU "is to Scalise what a jimmy is to a burglar" and indicted him for extortion. At the center of these claims were locals 32A and 32J which represented, respectively, hotel and office building janitors. Never as strong or as resistant to Scalise as 32B, these locals remained firmly under Schwartz's control. While they engaged in some labor activities, they primarily were used as part of a protection racket in which building owners and contractors paid Scalise for labor peace.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Witwer, *Shadow of the Racketeer*, 161-166.

⁷⁵ Quoted in "Scalise Discloses He Offered to Quit," *The New York Times*, January 28, 1940. 29.

⁷⁶ "Racket is Charged to 2 Union Leaders," *The New York Times*, March 1, 1940, p. 18; "Scalise Resigns Union Post As Aide Helps the State," *The New York Times*, April 28, 1940.

⁷⁷ "Scalise, Union Head, Seized in \$100,000 Extortion Plot," *The New York Times*, April 22, 1940, 1.

Dewey and most of the press portrayed the success of Local 32B as empowering Scalise's system of extortion. The *New York Times* story on April 22, for example, noted that “newspaper photographs showed Scalise standing behind Mayor La Guardia with a big smile on his face... the threats of strike by members of any of the local unions in the international that he heads have been given serious consideration by employers [as] the memory of discomfort and damage inflicted by that has been a lingering one.”⁷⁸ Through this conflation of the union's contractual gains and Scalise's extortion, the newspaper implied the illegitimacy of both.

Scalise angrily decried these charges as political maneuvering, claimed that it was a “100 per cent frame-up. I'm just being made a political football.”⁷⁹ Scalise's lawyer, John Kadel, similarly noted that Dewey's office was running the arrest as a media event by publicizing “lurid details... Apparently arrests in the middle of the night make better headlines.”⁸⁰ Ever the showmen, Dewey's prosecutors arranged every phase of the arrest, trial, and conviction for maximum public exposure, embarrassment, and political advantage. Though it is difficult to agree with Scalise, Dewey clearly sought political advantage through his prosecution. By the time that the investigation of Scalise began, Dewey already declared his candidacy for the Republican Party presidential nomination. Tellingly, when prosecutors indicted Scalise, Dewey was already on the campaign trail. During his campaign speeches, Dewey explicitly used his prosecution of Scalise as a symbol of his willingness to crack down on corrupt labor organizations.⁸¹ Given this, Dewey unquestionably saw Scalise' arrest and eventual conviction as a source of political capital. Indeed, Dewey continued to refer to Scalise during stump speeches throughout his long political career and presidential runs.⁸²

For whatever his virtues as a prosecutor, Dewey often behaved in his own self-interest. Even his allies

78 “Scalise, Union Head, Seized in \$100,000 Extortion Plot,” *The New York Times*, April 22, 1940, 1.

79 “Scalise Arrest Termed Key to Racket Empire,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 23, 1940, 9.

80 “Indictment Due in Scalise Case,” *The New York Times*, April 24, 1940, 13.

81 “Scalise, Union Head, Seized in \$100,000 Extortion Plot,” *The New York Times*, April 22, 1940, 1.

82 Witwer, *Shadow of the Racketeer* 203.

viewed him as a flagrant opportunist and narcissist. Stanley M. Isaacs, who ran for borough president in Manhattan on the same ticket as Dewey, noted “I’ve never campaigned with a more selfish individual in my life than Tom Dewey.”⁸³ Though notionally allies, officials close to Mayor La Guardia regularly described the prosecutor as unreasonable, unpleasant, and self-aggrandizing to a fault.⁸⁴ Given that Dewey’s allies felt continually betrayed and undermined by him, it is not surprising that he would use the delicate matter of Scalise in his own self-interest.

Despite this, it would be unfair to portray Dewey as an anti-union thug or zealot. In 1937, Dewey campaigned for district attorney as the Republican/American Labor Party candidate and actively supported Bambrick’s city council run. While it is easy to overlook, many union leaders, including Bambrick and McFetridge, viewed Dewey as a strong ally in cleaning up labor.⁸⁵ After becoming governor of New York in 1942, Dewey had mixed relations with the BSEIU with some arguing that he worked against the union during a 1945 strike.⁸⁶ Yet, three years later the International and Local 32B endorsed Dewey’s ill-fated presidential bid against President Truman. McFetridge even personally campaigned for Dewey telling reporters, “We know that [Governor Dewey] is going to give a fine administration as President.” McFetridge even claimed that Dewey represented the best chance for meaningful reform of the anti-labor Taft-Hartly legislation.⁸⁷ Whatever his faults and venal political motives, BSEIU leaders viewed Dewey as, at worst, an ambiguous ally.

Though driven more by a lack of care and boundless self-interest than active antipathy, Dewey’s approach to the prosecution damaged the BSEIU. As David Witwer argues, prosecutors like Dewey focused their investigations solely on labor leaders. In this way, the prosecutors concealed the reality that a businessman often

83 Quoted in Mary M. Stolberg, *Fighting Organized Crime: Politics, Justice, and the Legacy of Thomas E. Dewey* (Lebanon: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 208.

84 Stolberg, *Fighting Organized Crime* 207.

85 Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, 60-61.

86 Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, 71.

87 “Big AFL Union Gives Support to Dewey,” *The New York Times*, September 10, 1948, 1.

“pays money and thus keeps his labor force non-union or moderates the union's demands [making] it hard to see him a purely a victim.”⁸⁸ By defining Scalise's crime solely in terms of extortion, prosecutors ignored the complex relationship between the union leader and business owners and suggested that wrongdoing only existed on the side of the union. The press picked up this narrative and called the totality of the union's activities into question.

Aside from the obvious embarrassment and vilification of the broader BSEIU, Scalise's arrest intensified the union's internal struggles. Dewey's candidacy for president made Scalise's arrest into a national news story, leading leaders in the union's far flung locals to doubt the honesty of the national leadership. With the union's Atlantic City convention beginning on May 6th, many of the delegates were given explicit instructions by local members to watch for signs of corruption and to attempt to enact a reform agenda. After the union posted bail for Scalise, the president resigned to focus on his defense and distance himself from the union. While Scalise's voluntary resignation saved the union from a potentially bruising fight on the convention floor, it also triggered a succession crisis. McFetridge, Hardy, and Bambrick all immediately announced their candidacy for the post and began to consolidate their factions. Distrust ran so high among the candidates that they traveled with entourages of bodyguards as insurance against factional violence. The Convention of 1940 could destroy the BSEIU—or save it.⁸⁹

A Shadow over Atlantic City

“Scalise a shadow over union session”

⁸⁸ Witwer, “The Scandal of George Scalise,” 932.

⁸⁹ “Scalise is Indicted in 8-Year Racket; Lays Plot to Aides,” *The New York Times*, April 27, 1940, 1; “Scalise Resigns Union Post as Aide Helps the State,” *The New York Times*, April 28, 1940, 1; “Dewey, Ill, Defers Tour East 4 Days,” *The New York Times*, April 29, 1940, 1; “Scalise Retires from Union Race,” *The New York Times*, April 29, 1940, 14; “Scalise Now Faces Income Tax Case,” *The New York Times*, April 30, 1940, 10; “Union Paid Scalise \$1,500,000 in 3 Years; Books Seized in Chicago, Theft is Charged,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 1940, 1.

- Joseph Shaplen, *New York Times*, May 7, 1940

There is no detailed record of the in-fighting that preceded the Atlantic City convention. However, the ultimate result of the conflict is clear from its outcomes. Prior to his arrest, Scalise intended to use the convention as an opportunity for the final consolidation of his power. As McFetridge recalled in 1945, “At the convention five years ago, there was... ready for presentation... a constitution and by-laws that would give the International President absolute power over all of the local unions and their members.”⁹⁰ Through a series of amendments ostensibly intended to fight communist influences in the union, Scalise would gain nearly limitless investigatory and disciplinary power while side-stepping most of the union's already dysfunctional checks and balances. Without Scalise's presence, and with the holder of the presidency in question, these amendments were rejected by all three faction leaders.

Though Scalise's removal saved the union from this scheme, his lack of a successor set up a potentially divisive struggle between the union's regional leaders. McFetridge, Hardy, and Bambrick all arrived fully committed towards winning the presidency for themselves. An open convention battle could result in mass secessions as neither Bambrick nor Hardy felt particular loyalty to the International itself, and the CIO likely would welcome them. Prior to the start of the convention the three candidates held several secret meetings in which they sought to work out a meaningful compromise. The exact details of the agreement that emerged from these meetings are unknown. However it is apparent that Bambrick and Hardy ultimately gave way to McFetridge in return for regional autonomy. Under this compromise, McFetridge remained in charge of Chicago, the Midwest, and the International while Bambrick and Hardy took charge of the East and West. In addition, McFetridge and Bambrick clearly agreed to the rehabilitation of Hardy. Over the course of the next

90 Quoted in SEIU Historical Records, *A Need for Valor*.

two years, McFetridge quietly dropped all of the charges against Hardy. At the union's 1942 Convention, McFetridge publicly backed Hardy's nomination for the executive board.⁹¹

Even though these negotiations diffused the convention's most threatening conflict, the delegates remained tense and unsettled. Sitting among the delegates were lawyers from Chicago and Seattle who were there to "see that nothing irregular or illegal is gotten into these resolutions." Delegates viewed each other with distrust. At one point, the convention ground to a stop as several of the New York delegation accused unnamed delegates of spreading rumors and misinformation to the press via telegraph. Perhaps most disturbingly, the messages came to light because one of the New York delegation had been listening in on the hotel's telegraph operators.⁹² Suspicion and intrigue replaced the informal and triumphant atmosphere of the 1935 convention.

While Scalise did not attend, his shadow remained. McFetridge struggled to allay fears, declaring that the convention would be held on "an open basis, that is to say, where the press and public will be admitted. We have an obligation to the public... and we have a very particular obligation to the people who sent us here."⁹³ He declared that the convention would be run in as broadly representative of a fashion as possible, "We will adopt the policy in this convention... that no technical evasions will be used in unseating anyone. We want everybody who can possibly represent his people to be here. That is the purpose of this organization, to be represented by the people they send here."⁹⁴ Making good on his claims, McFetridge would later steadfastly resist attempts to close aspects of the convention to the press and members of the public.⁹⁵ The Executive Board attempted to highlight this new commitment to transparency by offering the union's first public accounting of finances. While only a few months prior, Trustee Elizabeth Grady admitted that she lacked information about the union's specific financial situation, at the convention the Executive Board compiled a complete ledger of the union's

91 *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 131.

92 *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 18-20.

93 *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 4.

94 *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 4.

95 *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 55.

assets and expenses. Significantly the Secretary-Treasurer did not issue this statement; instead an independent auditor issued and certified the report.⁹⁶

To formalize Scalise's resignation, McFetridge read a report from the former president. Initially the letter focused on the tremendous expansion overseen by Scalise, although the missive quickly turned to a full-throated assault on his enemies. Scalise called Hardy “underhanded, backbiting, reprehensible and disloyal” and claimed that his lawsuit had undermined the legitimacy of the union.⁹⁷ He portrayed Hardy as an autocrat who betrayed the union to the wolves of the press to protect himself from legitimate charges. To Scalise, Hardy was part of an “unholy alliance of venom and selfishness.”⁹⁸ Pegler and Dewey emerged as co-conspirators with Hardy who sought to “[use] one incident of my youth to malign and vilify my position.”⁹⁹ However, since that “incident,” Scalise claimed he “led a decent normal life....Since then I have wronged no man, I have led an honorable family life, and I have taken my place in society with that of every other law-abiding citizen.”¹⁰⁰ The report concluded with Scalise offering his resignation which the convention quickly and informally accepted.

Most of the debate during the convention focused on reform proposals from west coast locals. The reform package sought to increase the number of representatives to the Executive Board, institute direct election of all officials and provide more procedural protections for members. Taken together they would have been a significant step towards ensuring that there would be better democratic checks against autocrats like Scalise. John De Poe of the San Francisco Office Building Janitors presented many of the reforms and summed up their necessity by arguing that “we are not living up to our duty as true trade unionists if we don't adopt [the

96 *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 28-33.

97 *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 25.

98 *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 27.

99 *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 26.

100 *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 26. All quotes in this paragraph are from the same page.

reforms]... They are there. They are plain. They are for the membership, not for me, not for you but for the entire Labor Movement as a whole.”¹⁰¹ Though the amendments originated on the west coast, they drew significant support from eastern delegates who had been directly hurt by Scalise. Gabriel Goldfield of the Philadelphia Window Cleaners, for example, noted, “I was very interested to hear what the International Board was doing with our money... As far as the [additional] Vice-Presidents are concerned, that is a good idea.... We have 70,000 members today, and I believe we are entitled to more representation in the General Board.”¹⁰² For the first time in the history of the BSEIU discontent broke out of the backrooms and became part of an open floor debate.

While chastened by the experience of Scalise, McFetridge and the other leaders of the union opposed measures that would reduce or diffuse their authority. Though many of the reforms were put to a formal vote, none of them received the recommendation of the leadership backed Committee on Amendments. Burke even resisted reading them saying that if he did “we will stay here until eight o'clock in the morning.”¹⁰³ Ultimately the Committee on Amendments did not require that the proposal be read into the record but instead broadly summarized the potential amendments for the delegates.

Despite the clear opposition of the leadership, it is possible that the reforms could have gained some traction if they received Hardy's emphatic support. As the most famous victim of Scalise, Hardy possessed moral authority on the issue of reform. Contrary to expectation, however, Hardy did little to promote the reform agenda. Though he declared his support for the principles the reforms embodied, he questioned their necessity, “We did not know that conditions and circumstances were going to be changed as they are today when these amendments were sent out. Today it looks as though we are going to get a clean organization, and a very clean

101 *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 46.

102 *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 47.

103 *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 45.

one, but it was a different thing when these amendments were made up.”¹⁰⁴ Though he spoke passionately about union democracy, Hardy's unwillingness to aggressively make a case for real, meaningful reforms in the short run may have sealed the amendment's fate.

Shortly after the defeat of the last reform amendment, representatives of Thomas E. Dewey stormed into the convention hall carrying subpoenas for McFetridge, Burke, Secretary-Treasurer Paul David, and bookkeeper Kenneth Ashley. Using a reciprocal subpoena agreement between New York and New Jersey, Dewey's prosecutor Gurfein seized the men and forced them before a judge who compelled them to appear in a New York court on May 27. While they were quickly released, Gurfein's seizure appeared to be timed for maximum press exposure.¹⁰⁵ As John C. Stephenson, one of the BSEIU's lawyers complained, “In [the] twenty years [I have practiced law] I have never seen such a contemptible and flagrant abuse of civil processes... Instead of... allowing time to finish the convention business for the day, they insisted upon taking the officers from the platform. That sort of process clearly indicates to me that the intent was... to disrupt the convention.... If it is possible for a person sitting in New York City to so connive that he disrupt... a convention of Organized Labor, then all organized Labor should be concerned.”¹⁰⁶ Of course, by pulling McFetridge and his peers from a convention stage observed by several reporters, the prosecutor maximized the press coverage of the event and also the embarrassment felt by the union.

Gurfein's actions outraged the delegates. The always colorful BSEIU organizer from Seattle, Jess Fletcher, captured this feeling of the convention by describing Gurfein as the “Gestapo of Tom Dewey.”¹⁰⁷ Outrage united the delegates and for the remainder of the convention there was a notable lack of controversy. Ironically

104 *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 47.

105 “Nab 3 Chicagoans at Scalise Meeting,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 8, 1940, 1; “Judge told How Scalise Tapped Union Treasury,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 9, 1940, 1; *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 47, 50-52.

106 *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 64.

107 *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 95.

by galvanizing support and interrupting the convention while reforms were being discussed, Gurfein's actions defeated any chance of considering further reforms or anti-corruption measures. Sadly, in this case, an overly aggressive prosecutor actually united the union around its questionable leaders.¹⁰⁸

After sending a strongly worded letter to AFL president Greene requesting a formal protest over Dewey's actions, the convention turned to electing new executives. Someone, likely McFetridge, carefully arranged the election process to cement the peace between the union's factions. During the process every faction leader provided a public endorsement of McFetridge. First Hardy publicly released the delegates loyal to him from their commitments and suggested they support McFetridge. Later, Bambrick nominated McFetridge for the presidency, tacitly removing himself from the race. Bambrick encouraged his supporters to give their support to McFetridge because under his presidency, “[A]ll the terrible scandal, all the terrible recriminations directed against the Building Service International will pass away.”¹⁰⁹ Interrupting the electoral process before the formal vote, McFetridge rose to speak of the solemn duty he felt to the union, “You have started to confer a very great honor on me... I want you to know from the very beginning that there will be no change in my attitude... All I want you to do is to treat your members in the same way that I will treat you and all I ask you to do is to give the members of your organization the same treatment that you yourself would expect... If I am successful it will reflect entirely on you. Alone I can do nothing.... [The presidency] is a responsibility and I feel it.”¹¹⁰ With Bambrick and Hardy's support, the delegates unanimously appointed McFetridge to the presidency of the BSEIU, a position he would hold for nearly twenty years.

The election of other officers proceeded with little debate. Despite their known complicity in Scalise's reign, Tom Burke and Paul David were re-appointed to the Board. Traditional leaders such as Elizabeth Grady, the informal representative of women in the leadership, and Gus Van Heck, an influential leader in the Flat Janitors

¹⁰⁸ It worked so well that, if one were of a conspiratorial mindset, it almost appears planned.

¹⁰⁹ *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 90.

¹¹⁰ *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 91.

Union, were also re-appointed. Some effort to expand the leadership was made with Jess Fletcher becoming a vice-president. Perhaps fearful of Scalise's continued influence, no New Yorkers were appointed despite the fact that the city had become the numeric center of the union.

The 1940 convention was, perhaps, as notable for what did not happen during it, as what did happen. The convention in 1935 was replete with well-wishers from the worlds of both politics and labor. Judges, politicians, bureaucrats, and many fellow unionists appeared to voice their support for the growing union. By 1940 the union's loss of this goodwill was palpable. While the Mayor of Atlantic City sent a token representative to welcome the convention to his city, few political or labor figures paid tribute to the BSEIU. The only major labor representative at the convention was William Lee, a leader in the Teamsters Union and an envoy from Chicago, who attended the convention explicitly to monitor it for Scalise's shenanigans. While Lee noted that he was pleased to “see the way this meeting is being conducted [he noted that] all the advance information, press and otherwise, led us to believe back home that things were not quite as rosy as they should be.”¹¹¹ The BSEIU fell from being a darling of the labor movement to being, if not quite a pariah, at the very least a highly distrusted group, one that needed careful observation.

The Fall of Scalise's Empire

“[D]id he take the money with intent to steal it[?]”

- Judge Schurman

Revelations from Dewey's investigators came in quick succession. Early in May, the *New York Times* reported that Scalise had purchased “fifteen locals of the elevator operators union much as a baseball owner might 'buy up' a string of minor league teams.”¹¹² Scalise then expropriated their membership fees for his personal use. Prosecutors accused Scalise of embezzling over a million

¹¹¹ *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 83-84.

¹¹² “Scalise 'bought' Elevator Unions,” *The New York Times*, May 4, 1940, 19.

dollars from the union through fake expense reports and other means. The investigation rapidly expanded beyond New York as police seized union records from offices across the country. The IRS became involved, focusing on Scalise's failure to pay taxes on apparent income, and a separate inquiry began in Chicago into Scalise's relationship to Burke.

The investigation revealed a complete failure of the union's internal system of financial checks and balances. Trustee Elizabeth Grady theoretically was responsible for watching the union's internal finances, but she had been bypassed by Scalise. With Grady cut out of financial decisions, Scalise's auditor Kenneth Ashley became the sole source of internal auditing. While it is unclear if Ashley was a willing accomplice in Scalise's schemes, he was clearly aware of the president's pilfering and did little to stop it. Without external checks, Scalise proceeded with his flagrant misuse of the union's finances.

Scalise's means for expropriating money were many and various. Using his unchecked position, Scalise hired numerous fake employees and pocketed their salaries. He even maintained a defunct local, Local 211, as a means of filing false expense claims. Ultimately the prosecutors only sought to convict Scalise for roughly \$60,000 of his embezzlement, but informal estimates made during the course of the investigation ranged from a million to 1.5 million dollars. While embezzlement and misappropriation of funds were common in the history of the BSEIU, the sheer scale of Scalise's crimes was unprecedented.

Only part of Scalise's take funded his lifestyle, with the rest going to support his network of criminal underlings and allies. Half of his take was funneled directly to Carfano and, presumably, to his alleged sponsors in the Genovese family. Beyond Carfano, Scalise used union money to build his own network of allies and enforcers. Various gangsters, including Al Capone's former bodyguard

Frank Diamond, received a regular salary from Scalise in return, presumably for their support and protection. Scalise also sponsored a series of organizing campaigns that exceeded the normal jurisdiction of the BSEIU including, with the help of local criminals, a campaign to organize New York's Chinese workers into a single local, regardless of their trade. Soo Hoo Sing, the head organizer of the union, testified that he was instructed to organize “everybody except the bosses” but the plan, while ambitious, failed. Had the effort been a success, Scalise would have drawn significant money from the local while, likely, providing few benefits to its members.¹¹³

At trial, Scalise's attorney Martin Littleton defended his client by suggesting that his action had been in service of the union. Questioning the prosecution's assertion that the mob was directly involved with the union, Littleton argued that the union's tremendous expansion under Scalise's tenure should be seen as a sign of his loyalty and efficacy. The defense argued Scalise's high wages, eventually totaling \$256,648 across his presidency, were voluntarily given to him by the union as just compensation for the president's success. Littleton proposed that Scalise's other earnings came from taking a 50% cut of New York membership dues. While this agreement was overly generous, the attorney argued that the commissions had been freely agreed to by Jerry Horan during Scalise's time as Eastern International Representative. The defense even produced an organizer named Dillard G. Bowles who claimed that Horan had established a similar agreement with him in Cleveland. The lack of official documentation of this agreement was simply a symptom of the informal way that the union handled its finances. In sum, Littleton argued that since the prosecution could not disprove this interpretation, there was a reasonable doubt of Scalise's guilt.

¹¹³ “Scalise depicted as tool of gang,” *The New York Times*, August 27, 1940, 1.

The defense's theory holds a degree of truth. Essentially Littleton argued that Scalise's action, while self-serving, was legitimate and even normative in the context of the BSEIU. Certainly it is clear that from its earliest days the BSEIU used various fee splits to incentivize organizers. Even its founder William Quesse became a wealthy man from shadowy money raised through union activities. The defense's theory collapses, however, when viewed in the greater context of the callous disregard that Scalise showed towards the union's members, and the violence that his associates were willing to use to enforce his will. Obviously the ethical lines inside the BSEIU were fuzzy, but Scalise crossed them by miles. Despite this, Littleton's argument should give us pause, even if Scalise violated the rules, norms, and expectations of the union, he was, somewhat shockingly, not operating completely at odds with the standard practices of the organization.

On September 14th the jury retired to its deliberations on charges focused primarily on Scalise's embezzlement and forgery of documents. As expected, none of these charges implicated business owners as having paid Scalise for labor peace. Judge Schurman's instructions to the jury turned on their interpretations of Scalise's motives, "If you find... that [Scalise] believed or had reason to believe that he was entitled to the money, you must acquit. You may find him guilty if you decide that there was no such agreement, or that such an agreement was made merely as a cover for the defendant to steal from the union.... did he take the money with intent to steal it[?]"¹¹⁴ After 15 hours of deliberations, the jury convicted Scalise on five of the ten counts, collectively covering less than \$10,000 of the money Scalise had embezzled from the union. Judge Schurman sentenced Scalise to 10 to 20 years; he would serve eleven.¹¹⁵

Though Scalise's conviction definitively ended his exploitation of the BSEIU, it did little to help

¹¹⁴ "Jury Out, Scalise Coolly Waits Fate," *The New York Times*, September 14, 1940, 1.

¹¹⁵ "Scalise Convicted; Jury Out 15 Hours," *The New York Times*, September 15, 1940, 1; "Scalise Sentenced to 10 to 20 Years," *The New York Times*, October 8, 1940, 1.

or repair the critically wounded BSEIU. Throughout its history, the BSEIU relied upon alliances with politicians and the solidarity of other craft unions. Now every major leader in the union had either been implicated in Scalise's activities, involved in covering them up, or forced to admit that they had been ignorant as their president bled the union nearly dry. Furthermore, despite his limited involvement in negotiations, all of the gains made during Scalise's regime now seemed tainted. McFetridge faced an uphill struggle to regain the credibility, legitimacy, and respect of their members, employers, and allies.

William McFetridge and the Limits of Reform

“I don't like to talk about the past.”

- William McFetridge, May 13, 1940

William McFetridge finally gained the presidency once denied him by the Chicago Outfit. While this was a tremendous victory for McFetridge and his supporters, the union he now controlled was beset by crisis and criticism. Scalise's conviction became a key piece of ammunition for the union's political opponents and an embarrassment to the entire American Federation of Labor. Seeking to capitalize on the BSEIU's weakness, some supporters of the CIO began their own organizing campaign in the service industry. Though the Chicago Outfit's hold on the union weakened, their proxy Thomas Burke remained a vice-president on the Executive Board, and many of the city's locals remained influenced by the corrupt leadership. In New York, McFetridge faced a group of leaders and informants, many of whom had been supporters of Scalise, whose loyalty he could not definitively trust. In addition, Dewey's prosecutors, while notionally supporting the union's efforts to purify itself, turned their sights on McFetridge's most powerful ally in the city, James Bambrick.

McFetridge appeared well positioned to reform the union. The articles in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, rarely a friend of the BSEIU, described McFetridge as an “honest union man” who ended the reign of “czar” Scalise.¹¹⁶ Between his personal base of influence in Chicago and his alliance with Bambrick and Hardy, McFetridge could count on a broad base of support throughout the union. However, reform was a complicated task. Even though Scalise, Schwartz, and Carfano had all been effectively removed from the picture, willing or not, many of their co-conspirators remained leaders in the union. Determining the guilt or innocence of the union's business agents and officials represented a significant challenge, as many of Scalise's schemes had not left a clear paper trail. The decentralized nature of the union also presented a problem, as McFetridge was unfamiliar with most of the union's officials in New York.

Public relations were critical to McFetridge's approach. He argued that restoring the credibility of the union outweighed all other considerations because the BSEIU “cannot effectively carry out our purposes unless we are [seen as] a responsible, law-abiding organization with self-respect and decency.”¹¹⁷ To try to regain respectability, McFetridge asked Mayor La Guardia to form an investigative committee composed of labor, management, and governmental representatives. The committee, chaired by the head of Central Trades and Labor Council, would independently investigate accusations of graft, intimidation, and corruption. By carrying out the investigation through a public body, McFetridge would “insure that the international union and each of its local unions gain and hold the respect and confidence of labor generally and the public.”¹¹⁸ La Guardia praised the move, calling it “a chance for labor to clean its own house.”¹¹⁹ On the committee's

116 “Free of Scalise Yoke, Union Head Looks to Future,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 13, p. 9; Lloyd Went, “How Labor is Hijacked,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 17, 1940, 23.

117 “Wide ‘Purge’ is on in Scalise Union,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 1940, 23.

118 “Wide ‘Purge’ is on in Scalise Union,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 1940, 23.

119 “Receiver’ Named for Scalise Union,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 1940, 9.

recommendation, McFetridge suspended the leaderships of several locals that played roles in Scalise's various schemes. By May of 1941, McFetridge removed sixteen international representatives appointed by Scalise and placed many of the New York locals under his direct supervision and control.¹²⁰

McFetridge's crusade against internal corruption was earnest, but it did not necessarily translate into a commitment to local democracy or autonomy. Indeed, many of his reforms were as focused on buttressing the relatively conservative leadership of the BSEIU against rank-and-file insurgency as they were on hunting the corrupt. Nowhere is this clearer than in the effort to reform Local 32A. A union of hotel janitors and employees, 32A had been used by Scalise to gain bribes from building owners.¹²¹ After Scalise's fall the members of 32A protested against their leaders and called for new elections. By September these dissidents formed a "rank and file committee" to replace both corrupt and non-corrupt leaders in the union.¹²² The rank and file committee also pushed for the local to split from the BSEIU and join the CIO.¹²³ In response, the local's executive board conducted an internal investigation that resulted in the removal of its president and secretary-treasurer. With the corrupt members of the local removed, the local's remaining leaders argued that they should continue in their positions. Though it is unclear how popular this decision was with the membership, the executives received support from influential figures in New York's labor movement including John K. Sheehan, chair of the Catholic Labor Defense League.¹²⁴

120 "McFetridge Maps Drive on 'Graft'," *The New York Times*, May 10, 1940, 14.

121 Witwer, "The Scandal of George Scalise," 926.

122 "Dewey Men invade Convention, Seize 4 Aides of Scalise," *The New York Times*, May 8, 1940, 1; "Union Insurgents Meet: 800 Hotel Workers Charge Dictatorship in Local," *The New York Times*, May 18, 1940, 13; "Hotel Workers Fail to End Union Snarl," *The New York Times*, September 20, 1940, 15.

123 "G.E.B. Meeting: meeting minutes of the General Executive Board, Dec, 1940," Box 1, Folder 10, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University Which isn't to say the CIO necessarily wanted them, relations between the BSEIU and the CIO were generally positive and mutually supportive.

124 "Receiver Named for Scalise Union," *The New York Times*, October 13, 1940, 9.

Acting with the La Guardia committee's support, McFetridge neither supported the rank-and-file committee nor the remaining executives. Instead, he suspended the local and gave control of it to Thomas Murray, head of the La Guardia's committee. In doing so, McFetridge curbed the rank-and-file committee while effectively replacing the leadership with people he trusted.¹²⁵ John Sheehan claimed that beyond cementing McFetridge's power over the local, the suspension was intended to benefit Bambrick because it weakened rank-and-file activists among the BSEIU locals.¹²⁶

At the same time as McFetridge consolidated his authority, Bambrick's position in 32B was rapidly becoming untenable. Even prior to Scalise's arrest, some members suspected Bambrick of corruption, going so far as to file a lawsuit against him. Scalise's downfall confirmed Bambrick's complicity in the eyes of many of his members. He would later recall, "The whole thing [working with Scalise] was revolting to me.... a cowardly "Munich Pact" for which I was deservedly condemned by the rank-and-file."¹²⁷ Internally Bambrick faced dissent both from a faction of the leadership including Sullivan, and from a group of members coordinated by Sheehan and the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists.¹²⁸

After Scalise's trial, prosecutors expanded their investigation to include other officials in the union. In February of 1941, Frank Gold, a former district chair in Local 32B, was convicted of accepting bribes from building owners along with several other officials. Continuing to pump Gold for information, prosecutors uncovered evidence of Bambrick's involvement in embezzling money for Scalise.¹²⁹ While Dewey pushed the prosecution he seemed ambivalent about prosecuting his

125 "G.E.B. Meeting: meeting minutes of the General Executive Board, Dec, 1940," Box 1, Folder 10, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

126 "Receiver Named for Scalise Union," *The New York Times*, October 13, 1940, 9.

127 Bambrick, *The Building Service Story*, 61.

128 "Receiver Named for Scalise Union," *The New York Times*, October 13, 1940, 9.

129 "Gold is Convicted in Labor Racket," *The New York Times* February 26, 1941, 23; "Bambrick is Indicted for Thefts of \$10,000 from Building Union," *The New York Times* March 22, 1941, 1; "Bambrick Admits Stealing Union Funds; Weeps as He Pleads Guilt to \$10,000 Theft," April 26, 1941, 1.

former ally, publicly stating that Bambrick “was not a gangster.”¹³⁰ During his trial, the embattled union leader tearfully admitted that he had stolen \$10,000 at Scalise's behest. Though no one disputed that \$7,500 of this was delivered to Scalise, Bambrick was ultimately sentenced to a year in jail for not returning the \$2,500 that had been his cut. Bambrick claimed he used this money on union activities but lacked concrete records, making his conviction inevitable. The conviction effectively ejected Bambrick from the labor movement and politics, destroying a man who once had been among the most promising labor leaders in New York.¹³¹

Bambrick's conviction threw 32B into disorder and chaos. On June 13, 1941, a newspaper writer described the process of electing a new leader as beset by “bench throwing, fist fighting and uninterrupted heckling.”¹³² Eventually, David Sullivan won the presidency. While Sullivan served many honorable years as president of local 32B and later of the SEIU itself, his election was ironic: prosecutors effectively removed a union official who fought against Scalise in favor of one of Scalise's allies.

Though he actively sought out corruption in New York, McFetridge tolerated it in Chicago so long as it did not challenge his authority. Tellingly, McFetridge did not actively oppose Thomas Burke despite his well-known ties to Scalise and the Outfit. McFetridge likely tolerated Burke due to the peculiar politics of Chicago. Even before Scalise's arrest, State's Attorney Thomas E.

Courtney conducted a high-profile investigation of Scalise's involvement in that takeover of the elevator operator's union.¹³³ In September of 1940, shortly before Scalise's conviction, Courtney's

130 “Bambrick is Indicted for Thefts of \$10,000 from Building Union,” *The New York Times* March 22, 1941.

131 “Bambrick Admits Stealing Union Funds; Weeps as He Pleads Guilt to \$10,000 Theft,” *The New York Times* April 26, 1941, 1, “Bambrick to Give Up Job,” *The New York Times*, April 27, 1941, 29; “Bambrick to Serve a Year For Thefts,” *The New York Times* May 24, 1941, 17; “Bambrick Enters Prison,” *The New York Times* June 7, 1941, 17; “J. J Bambrick Once Led Strike Series,” *The New York Times* August 1, 1951, 23.

132 “Fights Halt Meeting of Service Union Men: 3 Candidates named to Succeed Bambrick Amid Disorder,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 1941, 12.

133 James Doherty, “Probe Attempt to Steal Elevator Union,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 10, 1939, 1.

investigation attracted the attention of the perennial enemy of craft unionism in Chicago, the Chicago Crime Commission who demanded that McFetridge remove Burke from power.¹³⁴ With the Commission's backing, Courtney called Burke before a grand jury that attracted significant negative press to the BSEIU, including several front-page stories in the *Tribune*.¹³⁵ Despite the high profile, Courtney ultimately failed to indict Burke, who remained an active leader in the BSEIU until 1973.

Courtney's grand jury increasingly became mired in a political fight between the State's Attorney and the BSEIU's perennial ally Judge Oscar F. Nelson. Sometime prior to 1940, Nelson began to actively campaign for Courtney's job. With the backing of his old allies in the Republican Party, Nelson used his high personal profile to make vitriolic attacks against Courtney. Nelson attacked Courtney as soft on racketeering, arguing that "when I am elected state's attorney I will clean out every racketeer in the trade's union movement, and vigorously prosecute every professional criminal and the syndicate bosses who have held sway here during Courtney's administration." Courtney responded by reminding reporters that he had indicted Nelson in 1933, on charges related to racketeering in the cleaning industry.¹³⁶ Courtney also released evidence, which Nelson claimed the prosecutor had faked, that Nelson had been present at the meeting in which Scalise had been elected president of the union.¹³⁷

Incensed by the attacks, Nelson stepped up his public criticism. The judge ran a radio program entitled "Hypocrisy in Public Office" which he used to assault Courtney's competence and character. Particularly shocking was an accusation that Courtney's chief investigator Daniel Gilbert had been

134 "Drive Pressed to Rid Union of Gang Bosses," *Chicago Tribune*, September 9, 1940, 1.

135 "Grand Jury to Call Burke on 'Scalise Grab,'" *Chicago Tribune*, September 10, 1940, 1, James Doherty, "State Gets Tale of Romano Gang Link with Nitti Gang," *Chicago Tribune*, September 12, 1940, 17, James Doherty, "Seek Sweeping Theft Charges in Union Probe," *Chicago Tribune*, September 22, 1940, 19.

136 "Seek Sweeping Theft Charges in Union Probe," *Chicago Tribune*, September 22, 1940, 19.

137 "Nelson Recorded at Scalise Election," *Chicago Tribune*, September 21, 1940, 2.

seen consorting with wanted mob boss Frank Nitti at a luxurious spa. Driving the attack forward on Gilbert, Nelson recounted rumors that Gilbert had been the front man for a protection racket in the 1930s that involved one of Courtney's former law partners. With characteristic flourish, the judge accused Courtney of “seek[ing] to misdirect the attention of the good people of Cook county away from his trail of incompetence and worse” by attempting to falsely associate him with Scalise.¹³⁸ Courtney responded by calling Nelson before his grand jury to investigate his relationship with Scalise. Ultimately Courtney won re-election, prevailing over the bombastic judge. However, the spectacle undermined the credibility of both men.¹³⁹

As Courtney's investigation received support from the union's enemies and carried political liabilities for one of McFetridge's most powerful allies, it is understandable that the new president and his supporters did little to aid the State's Attorney. However, even if McFetridge could not come to terms with Courtney, it is less clear why he completely accepted the continued power of Burke. Though he avoided prosecution, Burke's role in Scalise's corrupt empire was unquestionable and widely discussed. Secretary-Treasurer Paul David, for example, freely admitted to a grand jury that Burke had served as Scalise's tribute collector in Chicago.¹⁴⁰ Instead of being disciplined for his role in Scalise's regime, Burke retained his position and, due to seniority, became First Vice-President. As reporter Lloyd Went ominously noted, “William McFetridge announced that when he was going to run for international president in 1940 he was warned it might not be good for his health. Should... anything happen to him, Burke would be next in line for the job.”¹⁴¹ Viewed this way, Burke seemed to be a threat not only to McFetridge's leadership but also to his life.

138 “Nelson Links Chief Courtney Sleuth to Nitti,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 26, 1940, 1.

139 “9 Cook County Offices are at Stake Tuesday,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 3, 1940, 7.

140 “Nelson Recorded at Scalise Election,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 21, 1940, 2.

141 Lloyd Wendt, “How Labor is Hijacked,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 17, 1941, 80.

It is entirely possible that McFetridge and Burke reached an understanding in which Burke's ambitions were blunted in return for tolerance of his place in the union. Such an understanding would explain Burke's amazing longevity in the BSEIU. Despite constant rumors of corruption, Burke managed to maintain the presidency of Local 25, the theatrical janitors, for twenty more years. In 1973 President of the SEIU George Hardy, Charles Hardy's son, finally purged an aging Burke from the union. Burke's removal held such symbolic value that the *Chicago Tribune's* labor editor James Strong described it as “an end to the last of Chicago's old-time labor bosses.”¹⁴² Interestingly, Burke's fall came a few years after McFetridge's death and shortly after the retirement of the last major leader from Scalise's era, David Sullivan.¹⁴³

Even looking beyond Burke, McFetridge's commitment to democratic reform in Chicago was limited. The fate of Local 66, the elevator operator's union which Scalise had gained control of through Burke, provides a clear sense of these limitations. Initially McFetridge played an active part in defending democracy in the local, even physically attending their election to ensure against shenanigans and violence. The leading candidate for the presidency, James O'Grady, was so concerned by the prospect of violence during the election that he kept the names of his running mates secret until the election night. With McFetridge's protection and blessing, O'Grady won the election, though several former supporters of Scalise retained their positions.¹⁴⁴

To the public and the media, it appeared that McFetridge had successfully cleaned up Local 66. On March 23, 1943, reporters Orville Dwyer and George Hartmann even praised McFetridge for the

¹⁴² James Strong, “Burke's Ouster Ends Labor Era,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 23, 1973, 2.

¹⁴³ There is, sadly, no conclusive evidence that Burke received McFetridge or Sullivan's secret protection. However, the timing is peculiar as is his continued survival in the union.

¹⁴⁴ James Doherty, “Honest Election is Pledged for Elevator Union” *Chicago Tribune*, January 21, 1941, 11; “Elevator Men Pick Candidates for Union Jobs,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 22, 1941; “Elevator Union Elects Enemy of Late Czar,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 3, 1941, 11.

“rugged honesty” that he had shown in fighting corruption among the elevator operators.¹⁴⁵ The next day, however, it was reported that James O'Grady had been suspended from leading the Local 66 over his inability to prove his U.S. citizenship. O'Grady responded by seeking an injunction against McFetridge who he claimed conspired to remove him after he refused to call off a strike “because certain friends of the defendant McFetridge—the state's attorney of Cook county and/or the captain of the state's attorney's police, Daniel Gilbert—are interested in said building.”¹⁴⁶ Gaining little legal leverage, O'Grady organized a committee to support his claims and organize protests. Finally in August of 1943, O'Grady surrendered and agreed to end his protest in return for reinstatement and a chance to later run for the presidency. Perhaps viewing him as suitably chastened, McFetridge agreed to his terms.¹⁴⁷ Later the presidency of Local 66 would fall to Martin J. Dwyer, a noted supporter and loyalist of McFetridge¹⁴⁸. Though Local 66 had gained freedom from Burke, they became beholden to the needs of McFetridge's larger network of patronage and deal-making.

Where corruption did not challenge McFetridge's authority or attract public attention, it appears to have been tolerated in Chicago. Speaking anonymously in the late 40s, many flat janitors revealed that business agents commonly asked for bribes in return for preferential treatment. Portions of these bribes were then reputedly sent “downtown” to the headquarters of the local and perhaps to the International. The structure of graft required even personally honest business agents, at times, to request bribes simply because they needed to kick some money back up to their

145 Orville Dwyer & George Hartmann, “How Murders Rode to Rule in Elevator Union,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 23, 1943, 2.

146 “Elevator Union Local Sues to Keep President,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 24, 1943, 2. What “interested” means in this context is unclear but circumstantial evidence suggests the building was under investigation by the police. In this context McFetridge's request, really order, to O'Grady was likely a favor to Gilbert. Such an agreement would not be surprising considering McFetridge's later involvement with the Police Commission.

147 “Elevator Union Faction Holds Protest Parley,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 25, 1943, 8; “O'Grady's Group Sues to Enjoin Fines by Union,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 9, 1943, 12; “O'Grady Offers Elevator Union Peace for Job,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 3, 1943, 13.

148 “Elevator Union Gets Offer,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 6, 1952, 1.

superiors. Flat janitors largely viewed this system as normative, suggesting that it was common and widely accepted throughout the union. Though widely accepted, however, such systems of graft still undermined the legitimacy of the union in the eyes of its members and terminally weakened institutions of union democracy.¹⁴⁹

The outbreak of World War II, and the union's new commitment to civil defense, effectively ended McFetridge's reform campaign. Despite good intentions, his efforts at reform were, at best, a mixed success. In New York, they succeeded at disrupting Scalise's corrupt networks. Perhaps more importantly, the aggressive actions against Scalise's cronies helped to restore a degree of public confidence in the union. At the same time, however, they fell short of their stated goals. While the anti-corruption effort removed many who had supported Scalise, it often did so at the expense of union democracy. Several locals would continue to struggle with corruption through the 1970s.¹⁵⁰

The Building Service Employee International Union Goes To War

“The men and women of this union are showing the way to win.”¹⁵¹

- Mayor Edward Kelly, BSEIU Special Convention, May 1942

Nine days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the janitors of Chicago convened a mass meeting at the Chicago Stadium. Around twenty thousand members of the BSEIU, most of their members in the city, assembled to hear speeches by Mayor Edward J. Kelly, union officials, and celebrities. During his speech, Kelly used his power as coordinator of Civilian Defense for the Chicago Metropolitan Area to deputize the assembled workers as assistant fire-watchers, marking them as integral to the civil defense effort. In the coming months, these janitors and elevator operators would be charged with watching for fires, protecting against air raids, diffusing defeatism, and even

¹⁴⁹ See Chapter Seven for more on flat janitors and business agents.

¹⁵⁰ Hutchinson, *The Imperfect Union*, 187.

¹⁵¹ *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 145.

investigating espionage. These orders came not just from the mayor, but also the BSEIU's president and head of the city's salvage campaign, William McFetridge. Lest the public doubt the importance and seriousness of their new public role, pins, signs, and identification cards were issued to the janitors. In New York the union's efforts to associate themselves with the wartime effort were somewhat more sedate, but served the same purpose. Local 32B spent their defense fund on war bonds and engaged in scrap efforts. As the war continued, the members donated enough money to the military that a bomber was built, called The Spirit of 32B, in their honor.¹⁵² While the Chicago and New York efforts were the most dramatic, throughout the country BSEIU locals offered their services to Civilian Defense.

Coming in the wake of Scalise's conviction, McFetridge and other leaders used wartime preparedness as a tool to finally transform the union from a pariah into a paragon of patriotism. Achieving this transformation required the help of prominent public figures like Kelly. To woo the mayor to their side, the BSEIU had a powerful incentive to offer. Widely distributed throughout the city, the janitors of the BSEIU were well suited to assisting in civil defense. Just as union leaders found ways of making their organization useful to the Thompsonian Republicans, the Chicago Board of Education, and sanitary officials, they were now useful to the national war effort. In return for this assistance the union became rehabilitated in the eyes of union leaders, politicians, the press, the public, and even their own membership.

During World War II, of course, many unions became actively involved in lavish patriotic displays and the BSEIU was not necessarily more committed than other unions. However, the context of the corruption of Scalise lent a special urgency and insistence to the union's assertions of

¹⁵² Daniel Levinson Wilk, "Felix Cuervo, Highrise Hero," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 62 (Fall, 2002), 84.

wartime value. Through regular mass meetings of tens of thousands of workers and a stream of pro-war policies, the union gained positive press attention. Mayors Kelly and La Guardia assisted in this, continually portraying the BSEIU as an organization with a quasi-military role. Particularly in Chicago, the support of the mayor helped the janitors become powerful symbols of Chicago's efforts to support soldiers directly by feeding recycled material into the ever-hungry maw of the weapons production.

The outbreak of the war effectively ended McFetridge's reform drive inside the union and diverted most of his attention towards positioning the BSEIU as patriotic. When he called a special convention in Minneapolis in May of 1942, the leader used this opportunity to erase the fiasco of the 1940 convention and to re-frame the image of the union. Though the convention had a practical purpose in coordinating the union's wartime activities, much of it was devoted to more ephemeral assertions of the union's patriotism and importance. Speaking before a crowd of reporters, numerous guests of the convention argued that the union was the critical partner in the emerging domestic war effort. The elder statesman of Illinois' labor movement, Victor Olander, described the convention as “no meeting of minor consequence, of unimportant and humble and poor citizens. This is a congregation of the blessed, doing the world's important work, and you... represent the foundation of society without which all of its ornaments would collapse.”¹⁵³ In his closing address, Mayor Kelly similarly described the BSEIU as “in the business of preventing people from forgetting what this American way of life is, all that it offers for the family... and the labor union—and [ask] where are the labor unions in the land that Hitler's Hell has struck?”¹⁵⁴ In the BSEIU, labor organizing became a form of patriotic Americanism and Hitler replaced Scalise as their primary enemy.

153 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 82.

154 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 147.

Through resolutions passed at the convention, every local was commanded to engage with the war effort in “an all-out effort of a successful prosecution of this war to halt aggression and to preserve the Four Freedoms without which no nation can remain a free people.”¹⁵⁵ Twelve concrete principles, essentially standing orders, were issued to facilitate an image of war involvement including a command to “use government agencies to prevent any stoppage of work” and for members to use “all available money... to buy an interest in the United States of America campaign for victory over aggression, cruelty and faithlessness.”¹⁵⁶ The union argued that its members were essential to salvage and civil defense due to “the skill and knowledge [they] have acquired in... every day work.” Every member of union was commanded to immediately “offer... service as air raid wardens, blackout wardens, fire watchers, demolition squads, and similar groups.”¹⁵⁷

Similarly, every local union was bound to take as large of a role as possible in their city's salvage operations.¹⁵⁸ Some speakers went beyond exhorting janitors to service in salvage, arguing that janitors were nothing less than the guardians of the home front. Mayor Kelly called the janitors “the sentinels of our buildings. You are the watchers by day and by night, who know it can happen here, and you stand prepared for any onslaught.” With so many soldiers abroad, janitors served as the defenders of the families who were left behind, what Kelly described as “the key job of the home front.”¹⁵⁹ The guardianship of janitors even included espionage. Jim Kelly, St. Paul's State Conciliator of Labor, related a story “of what one janitor did, that did more good than a division of soldiers in this present war. When the F.B.I. was hot on the trail of that spy ring they became somewhat panicky and dropped their papers down into the basement for the janitor to burn and

155 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 98.

156 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 98.

157 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 99. It is unclear what would happen if a member did not follow these principles and volunteer.

158 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 99.

159 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 146.

stood over him.”¹⁶⁰ While frightened, the wily janitor used the papers to partially smother the furnace, allowing the FBI to later recover the documents and “from the unburned portion of those papers they broke up the biggest spy ring in this country.”¹⁶¹ Counter-espionage had been added to the long list of exalted tasks which the union made part of janitorial work over the years.¹⁶²

Though it would be overly cynical to portray the patriotism of the BSEIU as solely self-serving, their overwhelming performance of patriotism was self-consciously a public relations position. Vice-President Tim Dwyer, for example, devoted much of his report to chastising newspapers for falsely portraying labor unions as slowing war preparations. To prevent this from damaging the union, Dwyer cautioned that “we have to constantly be on guard” against accusations.¹⁶³ Noted labor activist, Father J. L. Donahue, similarly cautioned that there are forces who “will do all in their power to revoke the laws, made in labor's favor [by] tell[ing] you that [unions] are detrimental to society.”¹⁶⁴ Indeed, some of the symbolic gestures of the convention, such as William McFetridge receiving a flag from the American Legion, were expressly intended to combat potential criticism.

The convention helped the union to re-establish symbolic ties with respectable politicians and labor unions. Reflecting on the debacle of the 1940 convention, McFetridge recalled, “Two years ago in Atlantic City... nobody would come near us—some of you remember the situation we were in; we could not get a speaker and nobody would say hello to us. It was as if we had smallpox.”¹⁶⁵ In compensation, the organizers of the 1942 convention self-consciously overloaded with major politicians and labor leaders, each of whom offered a formulaic endorsement of the union's new

160 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 31.

161 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 41.

162 See Chapter Four.

163 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 42.

164 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 51.

165 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 40.

leadership. Minnesota Governor Harold E. Stassen's remarks were typical, "I pay tribute to the tremendous contribution that has been made by organized labor... I particularly add a word of commendation to your International President Bill McFetridge, for the leadership that he has shown."¹⁶⁶ Longtime McFetridge ally, William A. Lee of the Teamsters, similarly praised the union for having "overcome some rather strong obstacles, and you are going along at a very fine even pace, and I am certain with that sort of conduct both by yourselves and by your officers, that the future holds nothing but the best for you."¹⁶⁷ Though it was never explicitly stated, the message was clear: the fall of Scalise and the subsequent anti-corruption campaign had redeemed and purified the BSEIU.

Central to the union's redemption narrative was the purity, honor, and intimidating capabilities of McFetridge. Mayor Kelly opened his speech, the last of the convention, by reminding the delegates that "Chicago is one of the best labor cities in America, and it is men like Bill McFetridge... who have helped to make it so. Bill McFetridge has won the respect of the people of Chicago because he represents the best and cleanest in labor."¹⁶⁸ William Cooper, the union's new Secretary-Treasurer, called him "the beacon light that has shown the way for all of us in every day."¹⁶⁹ Jim Kimbrough, the BSEIU's representative in D.C., put this in more concrete terms recalling, "The convention I attended in Atlantic City I was... scared. But I'm not scared today. You know why. (Applause) The reason is because we have a great leader. Mr. McFetridge has set an example for us to go by."¹⁷⁰ As insurance against the appearance of factional divisions, Charlie Hardy remarked that "we have a man who is fair and square... We ought to stick by him until Hell freezes over.... Ladies and

166 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 14.

167 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 38.

168 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 145.

169 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 48.

170 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 55.

Gentlemen, we have a President today [with] nothing to hide, nothing to get scared of and nothing to cover up... he has cleaned out [the BSEIU] from the top down.”¹⁷¹ Under the glow of such praise, the messy realities and half-measures of McFetridge's anti-corruption campaign disappeared from the conversation.

Hardy's offhand comment that the union had been cleaned “from the top down” is instructive. Delegates focused their praise and professions of loyalty on McFetridge. The bravery of the common workers who suffered under and resisted Scalise was absent from the emerging narrative of the union's rebirth. Though it is true that McFetridge played an important role in the union's limited anti-corruption campaign, the monolithic focus on his role reveals much about the perspective of the BSEIU's leaders. Despite having been chastened by the abuses of power under Scalise, focusing on the role of common members in union governance was not a priority, or even part of the conversation.

It is understandable that many of the delegates were willing to lionize McFetridge. As Jay Rubin, president of the New York Hotel Trades Council, reminded delegates, “Don't forget, right after your last convention in Atlantic City, you had a situation that the public was against you... The [New York labor movement] did not want to touch your International Union. They were afraid it would be included in this publicity [but] you did not only keep the membership of seventy thousand that you had at Atlantic City, but you have increased to ninety five thousand... your International Officers deserve congratulations.”¹⁷² Tom Sullivan, a labor official from Minnesota, similarly reminded delegates that “a couple of years ago... all the unfavorable publicity you were getting... you were injuring the entire labor movement [but] you came back with great energy... and you brought back...

¹⁷¹ *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 57.

¹⁷² *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 20.

the respect and admiration of the entire union movement.”¹⁷³ For whatever the weaknesses and faults of McFetridge's reforms, his leadership, combined with the war effort, brought the union back into good-standing among its peers.

The immediate agenda of the convention, to restore the public image of the union through war-related activities, was quite successful. Beginning in March, the media coverage of the union became very positive, focusing on the flat janitor's efforts to “bear the brunt of the salvage job... for apartment dwellers.” The union was praised for holding the largest scrap coordination meetings, over 11,000 people, in the city.¹⁷⁴ McFetridge commonly appeared in the newspaper to promote salvage operations by alternating between praise for the valiant efforts of Chicagoans, who produced more usable scrap per capita than New York, and calls for an even greater commitment from the city's residents.¹⁷⁵

Though falling behind in scrap, Local 32B in New York aggressively positioned itself as part of the war effort and civil defense. When a bomber crashed into the Empire State Building in 1945, the union received praise for the calm work that its members working in the building performed in rescuing and protecting office workers. The union received so much positive press for its work in defending their residents that Daniel Levinson Wilk describes the public shows of appreciation as a parallel to the outpouring of support for September 11, 2001 first responders.¹⁷⁶

The overall impact of these moves on the public perception of janitors cannot be fully quantified, but clearly the media narrative around the BSEIU became more positive. Notably, the coverage of the union's non-war related activities stopped including references to Scalise and coverage of

173 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 106.

174 India Moffett, “Women in War Work,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 31, 1942.

175 “Only One in 10 Salvaging Tin, Director Finds,” *Chicago Tribune* August 2, 1942, “First Roundup in Rubber Drive Totals 405 Tons.” *Chicago Tribune*, June 19, 13.

176 Wilk, 85.

various allegations of corruption in the union virtually disappeared.¹⁷⁷ Instead articles about the BSEIU inevitably focused on their salvage or bond buying campaigns and featured praise from figures ranging from movie stars to politicians like Kelly and La Guardia.¹⁷⁸ Even if the press still remembered Scalise's crimes, and the subsequent revelations of corruption inside the union, the press no longer defined the discussion of the BSEIU in Chicago, New York, or in the nation more broadly.

Conclusion

As Jennifer Luff perceptively notes, most labor historians approach corruption through “two contexts: a canard cynically spread by labor's enemies or as a description of frequently craven union leaders who betrayed militant members' interests.”¹⁷⁹ The main division in the literature revolves around this basic division of corruption as anti-union rhetoric and corruption as betrayal. Though recent historians approach corruption in more complex ways, the essential dichotomy between reformers as heroes or supposed reformers as concealed enemies of the labor movement, still structures the way corruption is discussed. David Witwer's *The Shadow of the Racketeer*, for example, while exploring the discursive use of anti-unionism as a political tool, reduces Dewey—whose prosecution ultimately broke Scalise's hold on the union—into a simple anti-union activist and craven politician.¹⁸⁰

It would be easy to use these two approaches to transform the stories of Scalise, McFetridge, and their fellows into a simple morality tale. In such a story Quesse, Nelson, Horan, and the other early

177 “Owner-Janitor Loses Appeal on Picket Ban” *Chicago Tribune*, April 9, 1942, 3.

178 “Janitors Won't Collect Refuse with Tin Cans,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 12, 1942, 3.

179 Luff, “Historical Contributors versus Sectoral Tendencies,” 79. Jennifer Luff's short response in *Labor* is simply superlative and provides a brilliantly succinct framework for understanding the historiography of labor corruption. Her thoughts greatly helped me to articulate my own perspective on the historiography and I am profoundly grateful for that.

180 Witwer, *The Shadow of the Racketeer*, 248.

leaders in Chicago built their union on a corrupt foundation. While their betrayals of union members may have been less grandiose than Scalise's, their lack of moral fiber and willingness to work with figures such as Mayor Thompson opened the door to Scalise, Schwartz, and Carfano. With Scalise's rise, the enemies of labor found a Machiavellian figure whose perfidy diminished the entire labor movement. Enemies of the labor movement seized on the evil of Scalise and used it to undermine the entire labor movement. When, after Scalise's exposure, McFetridge and his supporters did not immediately purify the union through aggressive democratization, they further betrayed the movement and revealed their own lack of conviction.

In *The Imperfect Union*, one of the earliest and best known works on labor corruption, John Hutchinson provides an account of the rise and fall of Scalise that follows this basic plan. Hutchinson argues that Scalise's success can be largely blamed upon the failures of the union's leadership. Hutchinson portrays McFetridge as a completely ineffectual reformer who caused damage to the union by not fully cooperating with Dewey's prosecutors—whose own motives are never questioned. Though, at times, Hutchinson is sympathetic to Bambrick, he describes him as, eventually, becoming a willing accomplice of Scalise. That Bambrick only obeyed Scalise after receiving a credible threat to his life, is insufficient evidence for Hutchinson to forgive the leader's minor embezzlement.¹⁸¹ The only heroic union figure in Hutchinson's account is Hardy, who he admires for having resisted Scalise.¹⁸²

Hutchinson's approach to the BSEIU is shaped by his belief that corruption is the result of a lack of moral commitment. He attributes the BSEIU's vulnerability to corruption to the emptiness of business unionism promoted by McFetridge, noting “Business unionism is not a mercenary creed,

¹⁸¹ Hutchinson, *The Imperfect Union*, 124-129.

¹⁸² Hutchinson, *The Imperfect Union*, 128.

but neither is it much of a discipline.... It is short on imperatives.... the narrowness of its vision leaves too much to the imagination of the acquisitive and the weak.”¹⁸³ Though Hutchinson does not believe that business unions are necessarily corrupt, he ultimately concludes that reformers like Hardy were capable of resisting corruption because they were “men of broader gauge” and sympathetic to emerging ideas about social unionism.¹⁸⁴ For Hutchinson, the moral and ideological weakness of the union's leaders thus becomes an explanation of their failure to prevent the rise of Scalise.

There is some truth to Hutchinson's argument, but his approach is unfair to Horan, McFetridge, Sullivan, Bambrick, and others.¹⁸⁵ Though the leaders of the BSEIU were far from ideal, they were, for the most part, honest advocates for the cause of labor. From the historian's perspective, it is easy to wish that these leaders had resisted corruption—even at the cost of their own lives—but such a judgment holds them to the standards of martyrs. Beyond Scalise, it is easy to understand how the union tolerated corruption. Remember that in the 20s, the BSEIU used corrupt politicians to both build the flat janitors union and to radically transform the working lives of school janitors. Though Scalise's flagrant profiteering exceeded the norms of the union, gaining financially from the union and building strong organizations had not been mutually exclusive in the BSEIU's history. After all, William Quesse became a wealthy man through his activism, but he also built the Flat Janitors Union into a strong organization that made very meaningful gains for its members. In such a context, deals with devils were not uncommon and did not, necessarily, result in losing one's soul or hurting one's members.

183 Hutchinson, *The Imperfect Union*, 371.

184 Hutchinson, *The Imperfect Union*, 372.

185 See Witwer, “The Scandal of George Scalise,” 928 for a similar criticism of Hutchinson.

Hutchinson's dismissal of McFetridge as a reformer stands on firmer ground. In hindsight, McFetridge squandered an opportunity to return control of the union to its membership. Time and again McFetridge sided with the central bureaucracy of the union over rank-and-file members. Clearly, the new president could have accomplished more. However, before we judge McFetridge too harshly we must consider the broader context. McFetridge's education in the labor movement was as the leader of the school janitors union, Local 46. Local 46 succeeded not through public protest but through backroom deals that favored strong central leadership. Beset by rapidly expanding police investigations, reporters who sought to portray the entire union as illegitimate, the continued pressure of the Chicago Outfit, and organizational disarray, it is not surprising that McFetridge fell back on his experience and tightened his grip. Even if this does not justify his errors, it suggests that historians should be careful to balance their critiques with an appreciation of his circumstances.

In *Corruption and Reform in the Teamster Union*, Witwer has an important insight into what drove McFetridge's approach to reform. He argues that, while many Teamsters objected to the petty graft of their leaders, reform campaigns were often prompted by events that publicly shamed the union. As he puts it, "Wagon drivers, who valued the respect and dignity won for them by their union, resented leaders whose indecent [corrupt] behavior cast disrepute on their union."¹⁸⁶ Viewed from this perspective, key to the purpose of a labor organization is its ability to provide union members with a sense of dignity. When an organization becomes corrupt it becomes undignified and therefore negatively impacts the sense of dignity of its members. In other words, reform in a labor

¹⁸⁶ David Scott Witwer, *Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 45. I owe a debt to Witwer for this insight which helped me to structure not only my understanding of McFetridge's priorities but also played a role in how I discuss the connection of labor militancy and professionalism in Chapter Fiver and helped me to define both the successes and failures of the union in Chapter Eight.

union is as much about reclaiming the legitimacy and dignity of the union as it is about freeing the organization from corruption. From start to finish McFetridge's efforts centered on regaining this basic sense of respect for the union, and for its members. Though his success was limited, McFetridge succeeded at this fundamental task. Through the 1940s and 50s the union continued to expand, gain political power in both Chicago and New York, and improve the wages and conditions of their members.¹⁸⁷ For all of their imperfections, McFetridge's efforts not only helped the union through a real crisis, they helped it to rejoin the political establishment of Chicago.

Despite this, there remain some troubling questions about corruption in the BSEIU. Even at its founding, the BSEIU was surrounded by an environment of corruption. Discussion of corruption often proceeded as if it were a virulent illness, suggesting that one form of corruption begets another. Certainly there is a temptation to view Scalise as simply the outcome of this disease. However, in the case of the BSEIU, it is unclear if the beneficial use of corrupt politicians, and various petty forms of embezzlement common in the early union, were necessarily responsible for Scalise's rise. Instead Scalise gained and maintained his power through the raw strength of his enforcers and by exploiting the loose, ineffective structure of communications and accounting in the BSEIU. While the lack of emphasis on good governance in the union may have made his rise simpler, it is unclear if a better organized, or more morally palatable, union could have protected Horan and others from the predations of people who were, after all, professional killers.

There is often a temptation for historians to define their subjects as heroes or villains, but that approach is misleading in practice. Perhaps nowhere is this truer than in the study of anti-corruption reformers, the notional heroes of this story. Though Thomas Dewey was not a simplistic anti-union

¹⁸⁷Annual Wage Increase Survey," Box 1, Folder 1-25, SEIU Research Department, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

thug, the actions of his office often had the same impact as if he were. Dewey saw personal, political advantage in investigating Scalise, and he pursued that advantage with little thought about the negative impact it had on the union. Indeed his usage of Scalise as an example of his law-and-order credentials, a theme he repeated for years, led Witwer to use him as the quintessential example of a politician who built his political career on the back of the labor movement. Arguably Dewey's use of his public position to pursue his own advantage represented a type of corruption. If anti-corruption reform can be a form of corruption itself, it suggests that scholars should hesitate before applying clear and moralistic frameworks to the study of the labor movement.

William McFetridge, whose anti-corruption reforms make him another notional hero in this story, is undoubtedly an ambiguous figure. Though it took the crisis of World War II to fully achieve, McFetridge set the BSEIU back on the pathway of respectability and restored the confidence of many of its allies. However, McFetridge squandered a golden opportunity to learn from disaster of Scalise and democratize the locals while purging corrupt elements. Instead, as the example of Local 66 shows, the leader used reform to tighten his own autocratic power over the Chicago locals.

There is something endlessly fascinating about peeling back layers of corruption, and the history of the BSEIU offers us many opportunities to do so. However, this fascination should not blind us to the real achievements of the BSEIU. Despite the presence of Scalise, the union achieved a tremendous victory for the building service workers of New York. Over only a handful of years, the janitors and elevator operators of New York became an economic force capable of shutting down the city and forcing the building owners to the bargaining table. Through Bambrick's maneuvering, the union also became a significant political player with extensive connections to the mayor's office. On a more practical level, by 1940 the monthly salary of 32B members ranged from \$112 to \$152, a

significant gain from the \$80 per month minimum that they achieved in 1934.¹⁸⁸ Though the approach had changed since the BSEIU first organized Chicago, the victory proved that building service workers beyond the union's home city could be forged into a powerful political and social force. For this reason, the victory in New York deserves to be remembered as an iconic moment in the history of the American labor movement—not simply as a part of the tragic tale of George Scalise.

The union's involvement with the state during World War II positioned McFetridge to begin a legendary political ascension. After the election of Mayor Daley in 1955, McFetridge would become a critical member of the administration and become linked, for better or worse, to the mayor's regime. Through this alliance, the BSEIU of Chicago gained significant influence and real improvements for its membership. Yet, for all of the union's successes, its members would become increasingly distant from its center of power. By the late 1950s, the BSEIU of Chicago became somewhat more akin to a government agency than a labor union.

¹⁸⁸ *Convention Proceedings of the Eighth General Convention of the Building Service Employees' International Union*, 63.

VII

THE MCFETRIDGE IDEA AND THE PROFESSIONAL JANITOR

Introduction

Writing in 1949, sociologist Raymond Gold was surprised to find that Chicago's Local 1 had “oriented [their members] toward higher occupational and social status.”¹ Over the course of interviews with thirty flat janitors from across the city, he found that they described their work in the terminology of professionalism and public service, not through more conventional terms of skill or craft. Much of this he attributed to their high wages and economic security. Indeed, by 1949, the flat janitors often were the wealthiest people in their apartment buildings. Flat janitors commonly owned better cars, lived in fancier apartments, took longer vacations, and enjoyed more disposable income than any of the tenants they served. Although Gold was skeptical of the grandiose claims they made about the value and importance of their jobs, he admitted that flat janitors often acted and thought more like quasi-professionals than stereotypical unskilled workers.²

The wages, conditions, autonomy, and sense of self-respect among the flat janitors of Chicago directly resulted from the power and influence of their union. Through the application of power, mostly political, the janitor's union transformed the building service labor market into one in which flat janitors were highly valued. Rising from the crisis of Scalise, the union succeeded in using the home-front mobilization during World War II as an opportunity for public redemption. After the war, the BSEIU used the political connections made during the conflict to begin a long period of

1 Raymond L. Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, unpublished M.A., Thesis (University of Chicago, 1950). To better reflect the voices of each, anonymous flat janitor I cite this material as Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor* when I am quoting or referring to Gold's words or thoughts and Janitor #, *The Chicago Flat Janitor* to refer to the words and ideas of a specific janitor interviewed.

2 Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 7.

both labor peace and improvements in the lives of its members. Although the political alliances that BSEIU leaders made to achieve this forced the organization into ethical compromises, the success of the union at redefining the self-conceptions, and material conditions, of their members deserves significant attention and praise.

The dynasty of political and economic power that McFetridge and his followers established in Chicago was the legacy and post-war evolution of Cohen's conception of craft governance. Beginning in the 1920s and culminating after World War II, the BSEIU came to regulate its labor market through increasing integration with the state. Where craft governance emphasized the importance of solidarity and the craft community, its later development in the post-war BSEIU emphasized the ability of the union to use its connections with successive Democratic administrations to shape the marketplace in ways congenial to their membership. Through this process, the lines between public and private labor became virtually non-existent. The tight interconnections between the BSEIU and the political institutions of Chicago resulted in what I call civic unionism—a model of organization based on the use of local political leverage to achieve labor market regulation.

In order to justify its gains, the BSEIU argued that all janitors, whether in the public or private sectors, were servants of the public interest. These claims were not new, but echoed the union's earlier efforts to portray janitors as professionals and the defenders of civilization. The union made this argument in a variety of ways. During World War II, janitors in Chicago were organized into an auxiliary force of civil defense workers who played a variety of roles in the war effort. After the war, politically savvy leaders used the press and public events to portray janitors as playing a significant role in promoting, and protecting, their city. In essence, they argued that while the high

pay of Chicago's janitors could not be justified through the brutal logic of the marketplace, it could be justified by the civic value of their labor. These appeals not only helped the union maintain a degree of public acceptance, but they helped individual janitors find meaning and self-respect in their labor.

Despite these successes, the approach of the BSEIU in Chicago suffered from significant weaknesses. At times, the demands of maintaining political harmony outweighed the interests of the union's members. As lobbying, back-room deals, and get-out-the-vote campaigns supplanted strikes and solidarity, the participatory elements of labor activity virtually disappeared. The lack of active, democratic participation in their organization led many union members to treat the BSEIU as akin to a quasi-state bureaucracy, and to view their leaders as tyrants, albeit benevolent ones. These conditions exacerbated preexistent tendencies in the union towards authoritarianism and corruption resulting in several leaders presiding over vast networks of power, patronage, and graft. In particular, McFetridge built himself an independent political machine that would provide foundational support to the problematic Daley dynasty. Given his involvement with Mayor Daley, and cozy relations with many business people, it is not surprising that some describe McFetridge of practicing business unionism.

Accusing the BSEIU of business unionism presents an interesting paradox as the union's modern successor, the SEIU, is commonly viewed as a major proponent of community or social movement unionism—models that, through their emphasis on unorthodox strategies and alliances, are treated as the antithesis of business unionism. If it is fair to describe McFetridge simply as a business unionist, it begs the question of how the union that he built eventually became something so different. However, initial appearances are deceiving in this case. Although McFetridge and the

locals he influenced did express some elements of business unionism, they also engaged in many tactics and activities that cannot fit under that description.

Defining business unionism is difficult because it is more commonly used as a pejorative, or comparative, than as a free-standing analytical concept. However, most historians and activists agree that business unionism is characterized by a narrowing of the legitimate activities of a labor union to only include economic interventions that do not challenge the status quo of capitalism. Kim Moody sums up this view in *An Injury to All*. Moody argues that business unionism is the sad result of the “individualism [which] has dominated official ideology and... informed the thinking of workers and trade unionists.” This ideology led to “business unionism—a unionism that sees members primarily as consumers and limits itself to negotiating the price of labor.”³ Such a limited approach places no value on the ideas, communities, or aspirations of a union's membership. Instead, “the idea of the union as a business led in turn to the conclusion that it should be run like one—from the top down.”⁴ To illustrate this, Moody quotes Teamster President Dave Beck as remarking, “Unions are big business. Why should truck drivers and bottle washers be allowed to make big decisions affecting union policy? Would any corporation allow it?”⁵ These attitudes turn union leaders into tyrants, just as capable of harming their members as the employers they were supposed to protect them from. Moody thus argues that business unionism is a warped, corrupted, and limited ideology which masquerades itself as labor activity.

I am not arguing that the BSEIU of McFetridge did not express some of these characteristics. The Chicago locals ignored the demands of internal democracy, ratified the legitimacy of the basic capitalist system, and often sacrificed the needs of the labor movement to the narrow interests of

3 Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (London: Verso, 1988), 14.

4 Moody, *An Injury to All*, 57.

5 Moody, *An Injury to All*, 57.

their own organization. However, the organization also did not pursue sharply circumscribed business unionism. Instead the BSEIU locals of Chicago formed community alliances, pursued complicated political agendas, considered the public good, and helped their members to find value and meaning in their labor. They largely eschewed trade union tactics, instead using political connections to achieve a high-degree of market regulation for their members. Far from being the antithesis of the modern community unionism of SEIU, the BSEIU of Chicago engaged in many of the same tactics that scholars argue the modern union developed.

That the BSEIU of Chicago cannot fit into the dichotomy of business unionism versus social movement or community unionism challenges the entire topology through which labor historians describe unions. The peculiar hybrid of approaches expressed by the union requires a different category—which I describe as civic unionism. The recognition of a form which bridges the worlds of business and community unionism provides a subtler, more useful gradient in language that can more accurately describe labor organizations. Despite its faults, civic unionism cannot be described as empty or lacking in value. Far from empty or weak, civic unionism was a claim not only to high wages, but also to respect and a nearly professional level of autonomy. Even if the janitors of Chicago ratified the basic terms of capitalism, they aggressively fought to maintain control over their jobs, and their city.

Just because civic unionism is not purely business unionism does not mean that it did not suffer from significant faults. The successful alliance between the union and the CREB resulted in continual incremental improvements in pay and respect. Though the difficulties inherent in the job remained, many flat janitors enjoyed successful, fulfilling, and lucrative careers with some even becoming building-owners themselves. Some flat janitors even fully internalized the rhetoric of

their union and came to view themselves as guardians of their buildings and society. However, the bureaucratic, frankly anti-democratic structure of their union also destroyed any sense of solidarity shared among them. Without a shared sense of struggle against employers, flat janitors became fellow competitors, not fellow workers. Despite this, the changes wrought by civic unionism proved impressive and deserve recognition, if not uncritical praise. Along with the authoritarianism, bureaucratization, and petty corruption that the BSEIU of Chicago is remembered for, in their successes something valuable can be seen—a brand of labor activism that partially defines the community unionism of the modern SEIU.

Janitors in Power

World War II, and the alliance it cemented with Mayor Edward Kelly, was the culmination of the union's larger engagement with Chicago politics that began under William Quesse. Beginning with Big Bill Thompson's campaign in 1927, union leaders viewed political allies as critical to the survival of the organization. During the Great Depression, McFetridge became a collaborator with Victor Olander and, when possible, fought to secure higher pay for janitors in the public sector. McFetridge's wartime alliance with Kelly ensured that the union, which greatly assisted in Thompson's comeback, now found a place in the Democratic Party.

The war effort provided McFetridge with the means to advance his own agenda, and gain political allies. During the war Mayor Kelly not only appointed McFetridge head of salvage for metropolitan Chicago, but made him his personal envoy to the city's labor movement.⁶ With Kelly's support, McFetridge effectively became the coordinator of the wartime activities of all the city's labor organizations, both in the AFL and the CIO. Indicating their close relationship, Kelly's

⁶ *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 7.

traveled to the union's 1942 convention explicitly to convey “respect for a great and good friend of Chicago's outstanding leaders, Bill McFetridge.”⁷ The mayor's emphatic support powerfully reinforced McFetridge's image as the union's unchallenged leader and helped to silence any potential critics.

Kelly supported McFetridge during the war because he needed the BSEIU. As he put it, McFetridge was the leader of an “army of labor... one of the best equipped and best co-ordinated of all our fighters on the home front.”⁸ In the city of Chicago alone, McFetridge commanded over twenty thousand potential civil defense workers. Through the union, Kelly thus gained not volunteers, but a body of labor that the preexisting union hierarchy could coordinate. The ability to centrally direct these workers led Kelly to often describe the BSEIU as if it were a military unit that “mann[ed] the home forts where people live and work [and] serv[ed] on the civilian front lines.” The mayor even claimed, “No man in military service whether he is flying a bomber... or driving a tank is in a more vital assignment than yours, even though your armaments [are] brooms and shovels.”⁹ During the war Kelly gave the janitors at his disposal a vast range of charges, including not only salvage and fire protection but also “detecting sabotage and educating our citizens in community responsibilities against false propaganda and against fanatics who would put politics before unity.”¹⁰ Janitors even played a role in wartime propaganda as they were to defend against the “many headlines in the press that will hurt the people's morale, unless men and women like you are standing steadfast at your posts, and watching for the faint hearted who will sound retreat.”¹¹

Though technically the janitors of the BSEIU were volunteers in the war effort, it is clear that Kelly

7 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 145.

8 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 145.

9 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 146.

10 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 145.

11 *Convention Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 147.

conceptualized them as a group whose labor was compelled and directed by their union. Indeed, at no point in the union's own internal discussions were these workers described as volunteers.

It is unclear if the janitors of Chicago ever discovered German spies or fought against defeatist propaganda, but they were unquestionably involved in mechanisms of the wartime government. Most prominently, the BSEIU became the public face, and enforcers of, the city's salvage activities. A regular feature in the *Chicago Tribune* entitled "Women in War Work," for example, regularly advised that "housewives should consult their janitors and make sure everything salvageable is reaching the proper destination." The article noted that paying attention to such experts was important because in Germany the "Gestapo rides with the collector of salvage."¹² At an October 1942 war bond rally, McFetridge gave formal weight to the enforcement efforts of his janitors. Using his combined powers as head of the union and salvage in Chicago, he ordered that janitors "stop collections of garbage from those who are not cooperating in the salvage program" as a means "to stop the waste in metal in tin cans... thrown away by housewives through the city."¹³ Far from being dependents of their employers and tenants, building service workers were acting as part of Kelly's wartime government and enforcing its orders.

Beyond promoting salvage, all flat janitors also served as air raid wardens. Responsible for preparing their neighborhoods for potential attacks, the city's flat janitors now held an extremely public role in civil defense, which bought the union positive press coverage. In August 1942, for example, the air raid preparedness efforts of Joe Hupp, a BSEIU janitor, were highlighted in the *Tribune*. Hupp's civil defense post was said to be "envied by other air raid wardens" as the janitor had retrofitted his building's basement with space for preparedness training, and first aid gear. Using

¹² Inida Moffett "Women in War Work," *Chicago Tribune* March 31, 1942, 14.

¹³ "Janitors Won't Collect Refuse with Tin Cans," *Chicago Tribune*, October 12, 1942, 3.

the post as a base, Hupp organized a network of subsidiary wardens and messengers charged with, in case of a raid, darkening the block and standing ready to “rush out with sand buckets, long handled shovels, hose, and rope.” Hupp even prepared a “scale map of the block, locating all gas and water outlets [so he could] protect... homes when residents were away.”¹⁴ Though the preparations of janitors like Hupp were ultimately unnecessary, the significant role they played in civil defense helped to transform the public narrative of the BSEIU.

Through participation in wartime efforts McFetridge—ironically a devoted Republican—gained significant influence in the Democratic Party, and a place in Kelly's inner circle. McFetridge used this influence to establish a network of patronage and political loyalty so extensive that, in the 1960s, internal union reports would describe it as a kind of parallel state structure. Even after losing control of the BSEIU, McFetridge continued to use this network to maintain influence over the worlds of both organized labor and the state. For better or worse, this would fundamentally align the interests of the BSEIU with those of Chicago's Democratic Party. Though this alliance would put the union in many questionable situations, it also established a broad government sanction for their organizing and negotiating activities.

The union's prominence in the Democratic Party was more than a political success, it was also another phase in the union's efforts to gain regulation of its members labor market. During the 1910s the union's approach to market regulation fit closely with Cohen's model of craft governance in that it heavily relied on cross-union solidarity and negotiation with large-scale employers' groups. Though these approaches remained in use by the BSEIU, from the late 1910s on, the union increasingly favored political leverage over more traditional tactics. The union's leverage took on

14 “Albany Parkers Proud of Model Warden's Post,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 16, 1942, 117.

different forms in different situations. In negotiations with private employers, the union used this leverage as both carrot and stick: simultaneously offering political support to employers while tacitly referencing their influence with the city and arbitrators. As the union moved into the public sector in the late 1920s, the use of this leverage became even more overt. Political favors and patronage were turned into dominance over public bodies who negotiated contracts, most notably the Chicago Board of Education.

These moves modified craft governance, but did not fully break away from it. Craft governance was an inherently political system. Perhaps Cohen's most fundamental insights into the world of Chicago labor is the idea that the city's craft workers did not recognize a clear separation between political and labor activism, or between the public and private spheres. Instead, craft workers viewed voting, political influence, labor activity, and cross-craft solidarity as simply different approaches to the same basic problem: regulating the political economy of their city. Facing changing laws and push-back against the power of craft unions in the 20s and 30s, the BSEIU civic unionism of the BSEIU simply represented a favoring of one side of this equation over the other.

Yet at the same time, the BSEIU evolved beyond its fellow craft unions through the use of politics. Increasingly capable of achieving their ends without the cooperation of other labor organizations—and in fact capable of compelling cooperation if necessary—leaders like McFetridge became just as concerned with their community and political alliances as they were with cross-craft solidarity. Far from a narrowly circumscribed economic organization, the BSEIU of Chicago increasingly fused politics and labor activity into a single agenda. When asked about his emphasis on political power, McFetridge responded, “Why are we in politics? The answer is simple. This is a

free society, and the political process is one way of getting the people's business accomplished.”¹⁵ To McFetridge, accomplishing the “people's business” meant arranging the political forces of Chicago in a way that was congenial to the interests of the BSEIU. Internally this approach became known as the “McFetridge Idea... Build the Community.”¹⁶ Though filtered through the corrupt lens of Chicago political life, the “McFetridge Idea” was more akin to the modern community unionism of the SEIU than traditional conceptions of business unionism.

Defining the exact scope and limits of the BSEIU's political power in the years between World War II and the rise of the Daley administration is difficult.¹⁷ McFetridge personally held a variety of positions, including a seat on the Parks Board. Importantly, the Parks Board employed many of the union's public janitors, ensuring that during wage negotiations janitors were represented on both sides of the bargaining tables. Through various surrogates the union also held significant influence, possibly to the point of control, over the Chicago Housing Authority, and was consulted on most public employment decisions. Unsurprisingly this resulted in superb, sometimes scandalous, conditions for public janitors. In 1953, reporter Bryce Engle found that in city hall, the board of health building, and the police garage, night janitors were allowed to count 6-hour nights as 8-hour days. Working 29 to 34 hours per week, these janitors continued to, with the apparent knowledge of city officials, draw full-time salaries. That same year all public janitors achieved a 40-hour work week and successfully defeated measures to reduce the number of janitors employed by the city.¹⁸

15 BSEIU, *25th Anniversary of the Presidency*, Box 1, Folder 11, SEIU Research Department Historical, Wayne State University, Walter Reuther Library. Hereafter *25th Anniversary of the Presidency*.

16 *25th Anniversary of the Presidency*.

17 It becomes easier to define after Daley's election due to the greater public attention he attracted in the late 50s and also due to confidential reports from David Sullivan's spy, and representative in Chicago, Eugene Moats.

18 Bryce Engle “\$72,834 Saving on City Janitor Work Possible”, *Chicago Tribune*, January 26, 1953, 13.

Political leverage became economic leverage in the private sector as well. For Local 1, negotiations with the CREB in 1949 and 1956 resulted in wage improvements.¹⁹ These successes were achieved without overt labor struggle partially due to a sense of shared political interest between the CREB and Local 1. In particular, from 1942 on, McFetridge used his considerable influence to fight against increased real estate taxes.²⁰ As the union encouraged employers to view them as both economic and political collaborators, labor peace and negotiation became the norm. To some commentators, this combination of improved conditions without open conflict represented the union's greatest success, what appeared to be a post-class-conflict utopia. In April 1946, for example, the *Chicago Sun-Times* praised Local 1 as “the union which hasn't had a strike in 43 years. That's the proud boast of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union... The janitor's formula for settling disputes... provides for working during negotiations and... submission of disputed points for settlement to the Permanent Board of Arbitration established by the union and the Chicago Real Estate Board 29 years ago.”²¹ Though in theory such a placid relationship would suggest the weakness of the union in negotiations, in practice Local 1 successfully achieved both labor peace and strength.

The impact of the union's civic power in other locals in Chicago is less clear because most other fields lacked highly formalized arbitration structures. However, it is notable that many locals continued to achieve major successes without labor activity beyond localized picketing. In 1950, for example, the office janitors, Local 25, and the elevator operators, Local 66, both gained wage increases. Local 25's contract went beyond a simple wage increase and established an employer-

19 “Janitors' Wage Hike Up To Real Estate Board,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 28, 1956, 92; “Annual Wage Increase Survey,” Box 1, Folder 1-25, SEIU Research Department, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

20 “G.E.B. Meeting: meeting minutest, January 1942,” Box 1, Folder 16, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board, Wayne State University, Walter Reuther Library.

21 *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 18, 1946, Quoted in *25th Anniversary of the Presidency*.

funded health system for its members, a program that would become a model for other unions.²²

Though these negotiations were not always carried out through the easily controlled arbitrations of the 1920s, the lack of employer resistance shows acquiescence to the public power of the janitors.

However, maintaining political support for the union sometimes came at the cost of militancy and local autonomy. In 1948, for example, Lord Inverchapel, British Ambassador to the United States, was scheduled to speak at the Union League Club in Chicago, that was being picketed by Local 66, the Elevator Operators. To avoid embarrassing the union, and Chicago, Victor Olander requested that McFetridge intervene and prevail on Local 66 president Martin J. Dwyer. Dwyer replaced the local's previous president, James O'Grady, after McFetridge forced him out for refusing a similar request. Perhaps mindful of his predecessor's fate, Dwyer agreed to play ball and pulled the pickets from the building.²³ In a somewhat more mundane case in 1958, Local 1 pulled pickets against a widow due to bad press.²⁴ Maintaining a positive public image, and doing favors for prominent political figures, became as important to the union as aggressive labor activity.

The political prominence of the BSEIU hit its peak with Richard J. Daley's defeat of Mayor Kennelly. Kennelly, a Democrat, initially received the support of the union and McFetridge. Indeed, the union flourished under his reign with public janitors making significant gains. By 1954, however, Daley gained control over the critical patronage structures of the Democratic Party, making him a far more useful ally for the union.²⁵ When Daley began his primary challenge against Kennelly, the BSEIU threw the full weight of their support behind his insurgency. In return for his

22 "Janitors Get 6c Pay Boost, Benefit Plan," *Chicago Tribune*, October 3, 1950, 4; "AFL Elevator Operators Win Severance Pay," *Chicago Tribune* October 2, 1954, James Strong, "Burke's ouster ends labor era," *Chicago Tribune*, July 23, 1973, 2. Though most wage disputes were solved without strikes, the elevator operators did engage in a short strike in 1952.

23 "Pickets Pass Peer at Union League Club," *Chicago Tribune*, April 9, 1948, 1

24 *Chicago Sun Times*, July 23, 1958, "Clippings," Box 1, Folder 2, SEIU Research Department Historical Files, Wayne State University, Walter Reuther Library.

25 "Dishonest Use of the Law," *Chicago Tribune* April 6, 1948, 14.

support, McFetridge became Daley's de facto envoy to the labor movement and the formal head of his labor outreach. Together with close allies, such as William A. Lee of the Teamsters, McFetridge coordinated a large-scale mobilization that included fund raising, printing materials, and organizing precinct workers.²⁶ As Adam Cohen and Elizabeth Taylor argue in *American Pharaoh*, McFetridge, and the labor leaders he commanded, were critical to Daley because they turned their members into the “enlisted men [of] the machine's election day army.”²⁷ The BSEIU definitively claimed a critical place in the city's political life.

McFetridge's electoral army not only propelled Daley through the primary and general election, they helped to establish an intimidating, and secure, electoral coalition that would continue to back Daley throughout his career. Writing in 1975, reporter Len O'Connor described how McFetridge and Daley used patronage and large-scale mobilization to subvert the core eleven wards of the Chicago's Democratic Party, turning them into an impregnable fortress of Daley supporters. Run by a network of ward officers, many of whom were backed by labor unions, Daley's “Automatic Eleven” could consistently deliver him over 100,000 votes.²⁸ Though McFetridge was only one of the leaders involved in the Automatic Eleven, Daley clearly owed him a significant debt.

After Daley's election, McFetridge became one of the most informally powerful, figures in the new administration. Importantly, McFetridge was not simply one of Daley's foot soldiers, but an active participant in the governing of Chicago. Behind the scenes, McFetridge obtained control over many public employment decisions and was regularly consulted on most major issues. As the mayor's envoy to the labor movement, McFetridge became the bridge through which information,

26 Adam Cohen & Elizabeth Taylor, *American Pharaoh: Mayor Richard J. Daley: His Battle for Chicago and the Nation* (Boston Little Brown, 2000), 127-128,

27 Taylor & Cohen, *American Pharaoh*, 127.

28 Len O'Connor, “Daley Cracks Election Whip with 100,000 Sure Votes,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 10, 1975, 10.

patronage, and influence flowed between city hall and the labor movement.²⁹ Political corruption became the medium through which the BSEIU's power could be exercised.

McFetridge used this power to further expand his own networks of patronage and loyalty throughout the city. As Eugene Moats, an agent of David Sullivan sent to weaken McFetridge in the mid-1960s, reported, through this the union president had “gained the loyalty of workers, whose jobs he protected, politicians, who he funded, and business leaders, who he directed city contracts to.”³⁰ Though he clearly enjoyed being at the center of political power—the normally humble president commonly bragged about the scope of his influence in Chicago—McFetridge turned this network of influence to the task of securing the union's regulation of the building service labor market.

McFetridge was not the first labor leader to achieve this kind of power, but his success is particularly interesting when viewed as a phase in the larger history of the SEIU. Scholars such as Kim Voss and Rachel Sherman argue that the modern SEIU is important to the revitalization of the American labor movement largely because of its association with social movement or community unionism—approaches that focus on breaking down the community/union dichotomy that Scipes argues is the classic fault of business unionism.³¹ Janice Fine notes that these arrangements have become popular in the decline of the American labor movement because workers can often have more influence as citizens than they do as workers.³² Though the BSEIU viewed corrupt leaders and

29 Taylor & Cohen, *American Pharaoh*, 127.

30 Eugene Moats, letter to David Sullivan, circa 1964, Box 64, Folder 13, SEIU International Executive Board, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University, .

31 Kim Scipes, *AFL-CIO's Secret War against Developing Country Workers: Solidarity or Sabotage?* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010).

32 Fine, “Community Unions and the Revival of the American Labor Movement,” 153.

business associations, not social movements or community groups, as their natural allies, they pursued the “McFetridge Idea” for the same reason. Building service workers in Chicago gained intimidating political power, that allowed them to achieve regulation of their labor market through the operation of their communities. Surprisingly, the seemingly petty bureaucratic machinations of McFetridge and his ilk suggest a bridge, or at least similarity, between the worlds of Chicago's craft governance, the evolution of a civic unionism, and the very modern considerations of the SEIU's Justice for Janitors campaign.

Although the civic unionism of the “McFetridge Idea” cannot be fairly described as business unionism, it did suffer from many of its pathologies. Unlike modern community unions, the BSEIU of Chicago connected to political and community institutions through bureaucratic interconnections or personal alliances between leaders. Without a clear place for member-initiated activism, an increasingly wide gulf came to separate the members of the union from their lofty leadership. Such faults were significant, but should not obscure the union's very real success. Through the Daley administration, McFetridge achieved the promise of craft governance, and now stood capable of substantially enforcing the will of his union on labor, capital, and the state.

Guardians of Chicago

Although success, peace, and prosperity brought significant gains to the members of the BSEIU in Chicago, the union's leaders unquestionably accrued the greatest benefits. The impact of civic unionism on the membership of the union was considerably more ambiguous. Despite having gained respectability, the BSEIU in Chicago remained troubled. Even if its leaders seemed to favor political power over excessive graft, corruption remained common at the local level. In particular, business agents operated what amounted to personal empires and were commonly accused of extracting

bribes, kickbacks, and favors in return for lucrative jobs. Known associates of the Outfit, such as Thomas Burke, remained prominent leaders, suggesting that gangsters retained a degree of their old influence in the union. Negotiations with employers were commonly structured around political alliances or arbitration committees. While these approaches were successful, they required little direct participation of members. Even though the union relied on the political labor of their members during elections, and their physical labor during World War II, paid union operatives performed most traditional labor activities, such as picketing. The union apparently put no value on the solidarity building benefits that come from such direct labor activities. Internal democracy in many locals was questionable at best. Given all of these faults, it is reasonable to wonder if the successes of the BSEIU did more to enhance the power of its leaders than to improve the lives of its members.

The interviews that Raymond Gold conducted among the flat janitors in 1949 provide a partial answer to this question. Through these interviews a fascinating portrait of the material and emotional lives of janitors emerges, along with an ambiguous evaluation of their union. Gold's work, first part of his master's thesis and later published in the anthology *The Human Shape of Work*, consists of over thirty extensive interviews with flat janitors.³³ Although there are limitations to his study, they provide a unique insight into the world of the flat janitor. Though focusing only on flat janitors, who at the time were exclusively men, many of the complaints and victories of these janitors were likely mirrored throughout the union.

33 Raymond L. Gold, "In the Basement—The Apartment-Building Janitor," in *The Human Shape of Work: Studies in the Sociology of Occupations* Peter L. Berger ed. (New York: Macmillan Co, 1964). I tend to pull more material from Gold's master's thesis because, with greater length, he included very long quotes from janitors and often gave it the form of an edited set of interview manuscripts. Otherwise the two pieces are broadly similar and are based on the same source material, though the anthology version adds a bit of useful context, removes some Chicago-specific terminology (i.e. Apartment-Building Janitor as opposed to Flat Janitor), and pays little attention to the role of the union. The anthology version is also, for lack of a better term, more polite and does not include several of the more striking exchanges between tenants and janitors.

What Gold found among the flat janitors of Chicago was both inspirational and disturbing. He proposed that the life of the flat janitor was defined by a central contradiction: the flat janitor was highly paid and saw his labor as valuable, yet he received little respect from the people whom he served. Gold proposed that this superposition between the twin identities of the flat janitors forced them to constantly defend themselves against implied slights against their work. These slights generated among janitors both a pathological self-defensiveness and a strikingly professional, middle-class self-conception.³⁴ However, when Gold's work is contextualized into the larger history of the union, a more complex narrative emerges. While many of the janitors he interviewed joined the union well after its ascension in the early 1920s, they recognized that they were part of a labor organization that had achieved an impressive degree of regulation of their labor market. Through this regulation janitors gained not only improved wages but also empowerment in their jobs. Though far from perfect or easy, the job of flat janitor became a career—something that would have seemed absurd prior to the work of Quesse's generation of janitors. Unionization redefined more than material conditions among janitors, it helped to define their emotional relationship to their work. Using terminology and rhetoric quite similar to that used by their union, in these interviews flat janitors argued that their labor was not only valuable, but that they were critical servants of the public. From this perspective, the cognitive dissonance that flat janitors felt between their self conceptions and the opinions of their tenants resulted from the approach of their union.

Common in all of the accounts of the flat janitors is a reflection on the profound impact of the higher wages and better conditions that they obtained in Chicago. After gaining a significant wage increase in 1949, the wage of the average flat janitor increased to \$385 a month. In many cases these wages were high enough that flat janitors were the wealthiest people living in their buildings,

³⁴ See Chapter Five for more details on janitors and rhetorics of professionalism etc.

sometimes by a significant margin.³⁵ The disparity between the janitors and their tenants was often so great that flat janitors would attempt to downplay or even conceal their wealth. As Janitor 18 noted, “Confidentially, a lot of us janitors could buy out most tenants.”³⁶ In many cases, however, concealing the janitors' wealth proved impossible. Some janitors seemed embarrassed by this visible wealth, noting that having a nicer car than a tenant could result in awkwardness and even hostility.

Improvements in the relationship between janitors and their employers went hand-in-hand with these wage increases. Prior to unionization, the employment relationship was inevitably discussed in terms of exploitation. Janitors lived in cramped, dark rooms that were given to them by the largess of their employer, and they could be summarily fired and made homeless. While, as in all industries, there were a few respectful and kind employers, the general relationship between employer and employee was unpleasant at best and horrific at worst.³⁷ The institution of the union contract, and particularly the transfer of all employment disputes to the Permanent Arbitration Board, encouraged a respectful relationship between employers and employees.

Flat janitors, generally, felt more of a kinship with their employers than with their tenants. Since janitors were rarely dependent on a single employer, sometimes working for as many as ten different building owners, they enjoyed a degree of independence in choosing whom they worked for. For highly-proficient janitors this often meant that employers treated them as useful assets worthy of protection, not as replaceable laborers. Janitor 10 illustrates this through a situation where he felt valued by his employer over tenants. During the course of his work, he attracted the ire of one of his tenants who actively started to campaign for his removal. Instead of fearing the reaction of his employer to these complaints, he simply passed them along to the building owner. Eventually, he

³⁵ Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 53.

³⁶ Janitor 18, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 72.

³⁷ See Chapter Two for more on the pre-union state of janitors.

relates, “It got so bad that one day the owner comes here and told her that if she wasn't satisfied she'd better move, because it's a lot easier to get good tenants than to get a good janitor. She shut up fast after that.”³⁸ Janitor 10 trusted that his relationship with his employer, and his union, would protect him from the tenant's grudge.

Flat janitors commonly described their relationships with building owners as congenial, even collegial. After having been persistently degraded by a tenant, Janitor 29 took solace in the fact that “I work for the owners. They have a lot of money. They invite me in for a drink when they see me, offer me the use of their car [his own was stolen] if I want to go someplace. If they are that way, the tenants shouldn't try to push you around.... I always feel equal to anybody... I feel that if I get dressed up I'm as good as the boss or anybody.”³⁹ Where once workers feared arbitrary discipline and discharge by their employers, now employers appeared to be allies in the struggle against petulant tenants.

The flat janitor's contract shaped the relationship between employer and employee. A beneficiary of the tight political alliance between the BSEIU and the Chicago Real Estate Board (CREB), Local 1 negotiated high wages, workplace autonomy, and a union-regulated hiring and firing system for its members. The union handled most labor disputes through a permanent arbitration structure that discouraged direct confrontations between workers and employers. By linking a janitor's wages to the amount of rent collected from a building, the contract encouraged a sense of solidarity between building owners and janitors. As the contract effectively tied their prosperity to that of their employer, many flat janitors viewed their self-interest as the same as their employer and fought against rent changes and other measures that would hurt their collective bottom line. Under these

38 Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 54. See also Janitor 4, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 82.

39 Janitor 29, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 75.

conditions, strikes or other overt forms of labor struggle were nearly unthinkable since disputes were adjudicated through inter-organizational negotiations.⁴⁰ Though union contracts commonly make employment relationships more just, the Local 1's contract also helped to make the relationship more amicable. Obviously this discouraged a combative, confrontational labor relationship—which could encourage militancy—or even a recognition of a difference of interests between worker and employer.

Contractually, individual flat janitor became a self-directed, autonomous worker who the employer trusted with performing his job according to his own procedures. Though theoretically the union contract enumerated a janitor's basic duties, the prescriptions were general, such as instructions to “use all reasonable means in renting flats or stores, and [take] care of the property.”⁴¹ In practice, flat janitors set their own schedules and work routines. For many janitors, this autonomy was the key value of their job. As Janitor 24, a second generation janitor, put it, “I was a shipping clerk, a truck driver, worked in a foundry. Nothing really paid [as well as being a janitor]. Now I'm in one way my own boss and I can work when it suits myself.”⁴² Though janitorial work was rarely a dream job for workers, many chose to become flat janitors after having grown tired of the enforced patterns and conformity of factory work.⁴³

The personal autonomy of each flat janitor stands in stark contrast to their pre-union conditions. As their job required no formal education, pre-union flat janitors were exposed to the cruelest dynamics of capitalism and could be fired or disciplined arbitrarily. Indeed, flat janitors were arguably more vulnerable to exploitation than other unskilled workers because their employers not

40 *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 18, 1946. There were obvious downsides to this approach that made highly contentious or contested negotiations awkward at best, and impossible at worst.

41 *Public Safety*, February 1930.

42 Janitor 24, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 90.

43 Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 107.

only controlled their livelihoods, they controlled their homes and would immediately evict a fired worker. Under such conditions it is not surprising that flat janitors were forced to enlist their entire family in their labors, and even submitted to having their wives evaluated to see if they were up to physical labor. Though conditions varied from building to building, all flat janitors existed in a situation of complete and total dependence. Given such an exploitative structure, prior to unionization few flat janitors developed relationships based on mutual respect with their employers or found personal satisfaction in their work.⁴⁴

After unionization, the independence of action and amicable relationships that they shared with employers encouraged janitors to think of themselves as partners in the real estate market. In many cases, janitors would use their positions to develop business connections and interests. By saving a large portion of their wages, some flat janitors, often assisted by a loan from an employer, were able to buy their own buildings or become actual partners with their employers.⁴⁵ In this way, flat janitors began to achieve the fluidity between employer and employee once enjoyed by other craft workers such as carpenters.⁴⁶ However, unlike a carpenter who could achieve this transition by obtaining their own tools and clientèle, janitors achieved this through a sense of kinship with their employers, and the investment capital that their union wages helped them to accumulate.⁴⁷

It is here where the “middle-class” identity that Gold continually places on his subjects gains some credence. As Robert Johnston argues in *The Radical Middle Class*, it is difficult, and perhaps misguided, to define class without integrating historical and local context. Echoing E. P.

Thompson's famous call for the study of class identity as a contextual and social process—not as a

⁴⁴ See Chapter Three for more details on the pre-union conditions of flat janitors.

⁴⁵ Gold, “In the Basement—The Apartment-Building Janitor,” 46.

⁴⁶ Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 37-41.

⁴⁷ See Chapter Eight for an important, if problematic success story in that a janitor successfully became an incredibly wealthy, if rather sleazy and exploitative, landlord.

mechanically defined group—Johnston proposes that the class lines between workers and small employers can be porous. He suggests that instead of positing a clean, bright line between the working and middle classes, that we should recognize that the *petit bourgeois*—the lower-middle class or middling sort—and the working class commonly identified and allied with each other.⁴⁸ As Cohen observes, these lines were particularly blurry in Chicago's craft economy, suggesting that the flat janitor's sense of social solidarity with their employers may have a basis in fact.⁴⁹

Indeed, there is a very real resonance between the flat janitors and other historian's analysis of the lower middle class. Sean Wilentz's portrayal of nineteenth-century artisans in *Chants Democratic*, for example, vividly describes a broad class of workers and small proprietors who embraced an anti-capitalist, republican vision that emphasized the moral regulation of the economy. Neither capitalists nor socialists, they sought to use the power of their communities—what we might call a kind of politics—to establish a harmonious, just economic system. As Wilentz puts it, these artisans believed that their “energies [were] devoted not to personal ambition or profit alone, but to the commonwealth.”⁵⁰ Like the janitors of Chicago, these workers viewed themselves as not just economic actors, but as servants of the public. As masters who employed workers often shared this vision, and many artisan workers could reasonably aspire to one day be employers, there was a high degree of identification between employers and employees. In this schema neither employers nor employees sought unlimited profit, as a capitalist might, but instead wished only for fair compensation for worthy labor.⁵¹ Other studies of craft workers have made similar points, noting that, for all of their entrepreneurial spirit, many small employers and skilled workers shared a

48 Johnston, *The Radical Middle Class*, 12-16.

49 Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress*, 37-41.

50 Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 102.

51 Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 94, 102.

common identity that was rooted in pre-capitalist, republican ideology.⁵²

For numerous reasons, the flat janitors of Chicago both confirm and complicate these portrayals of craft and class. Unlike most of the workers discussed by Johnston and Wilentz, flat janitors were considered unskilled and did not share an organic social connection with their employers. It is easy to understand, for example, how a carpenter whose employer once worked in the exact same job might imagine themselves one day being an employer themselves. Indeed, it is intuitive to suggest that for many craft workers lines between employers and employees were contingent and subject to change. It seems far less intuitive that a flat janitor whose employer likely never worked as a janitor could view themselves as potentially being employers themselves. Yet the success of the BSEIU in Chicago allowed this fluidity and social identification to become a reality. Not only did flat janitors feel a social connection to their employers, which a skeptical eye could view as a kind of false consciousness, their strong contract forced employers to give their flat janitors respect and provided them with the material basis for, occasionally, becoming employers themselves. It is not too grandiose to see in these janitors an echo of Wilentz's nineteenth-century republican artisans or as akin to modern professionals, both of whom view themselves not simply as employees, but as collaborators with their employers in providing a service to their community.⁵³

However, the day-to-day realities of the flat janitor's work often conflicted with this oft-idealized understanding of their place in society. Though flat janitors gained material success, respect from their employers, and control over their own labor, they failed to gain the respect of their tenants. As Janitor 12 put it, "I'd say about fifty per cent think you are nothing, the lowest of the low... To them you are nothing. Sensible people know better. They think you are worth something to [the] owner,

⁵² Bruce Laurie and Eric Foner, *Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989).

⁵³ Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 90.

[the] public, and to humanity.”⁵⁴ Another janitor complained that few of his tenants call him by name, preferring to refer to him as “janitor.” When asked why he thought this happens, the janitor responded, “[I]t's either out of stupidity or to make you think you are a slave to them—an underdog. Janitors get the same shit all over the city, I know.”⁵⁵ These conditions were made worse because a janitor has “‘fifty bosses,’ [and a] lot of them think you are a personal servant instead of working for an owner.”⁵⁶ Though Gold did not interview any tenants, he created an impressionistic quote that he felt captured their feelings: “It is not right for the janitor to live in a middle-class apartment. He is dirty, whereas middle-class people are clean. He ought to live in the dirty basement where he belongs.”⁵⁷ Here Gold defines “middle class” as a synonym for respectability, something that janitors gained from their employers but not from their tenants.

Flat janitors often believed that this lack of respect stemmed from pre-union legacies. As Janitor 15 argues, “The great trouble with tenants is that they got used to a different class of janitor, the kind that there was a lot of twenty or thirty years ago. So when they talk about us they say, 'Oh well, he is only a janitor.' You see, they got no respect for us. They figure if you are a janitor you are no good.”⁵⁸ Putting this into a sociological terms, Gold describes Local 1 as inculcating a sense of social and economic advancement among union members, “Thus 'own boss,' 'responsible guardian,' and 'good mechanic' are self-conceptions which function to disown the janitor's occupational (and corresponding social) heritage, to justify his high income, and to establish his claim to [sic] middle class status.”⁵⁹ Gold is likely partially correct, flat janitors surely felt a strong need to justify their increasing economic position, but he is too willing to dismiss the assertions of his subjects as purely

54 Janitor 10, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 49.

55 Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 56.

56 Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 25.

57 Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 55.

58 Janitor 15, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 49.

59 Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 18.

tactical. Though none of his subjects ever clearly expressed themselves as “middle class,” they nearly universally described themselves as providing a critical service to their society. In this way they declared themselves to be public servants, invoking an identity with political, professional, and artisanal elements—all of which were of course supported, and even created by, the BSEIU's use of the rhetoric of civic unionism.

However, few tenants viewed their janitors in these terms, often associating them solely with filth and grime.⁶⁰ To a certain extent, this connection was unavoidable given that the tasks of janitors, such as dealing with trash often meant that he, at least temporarily, was dirty. However, in the minds of tenants this association between janitors and filth appeared to take on larger, almost moral, proportions and implications. Fighting these perceptions was so important to Janitor 22 that he viewed Gold visiting his apartment as a test, “How do you like the way the place looks? I didn't tell my wife you [were] coming so it would look like usual. See a janitor's apartment can be nice looking and clean[sic], too.”⁶¹ Avoiding an appearance of griminess was an obsession among some flat janitors, many of whom structured their schedules around removing garbage at a time when most tenants were not awake.⁶² Other janitors fought the perception through scrupulously maintaining their personal appearance.⁶³ However, these efforts often did little to change the opinions of tenants who, in the words of Janitor 35, thought “a janitor should be in working clothes all the time.”⁶⁴

Flat janitors remained frustrated that their efforts to break these associations continually failed. Some even believed that tenants, either through design or disregard, forced them to be dirty. As

⁶⁰ Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 77.

⁶¹ Janitor 22, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 51.

⁶² Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 80.

⁶³ Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 111.

⁶⁴ Janitor 33, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 53.

Janitor 4 notes with frustration, “The garbage... that's a bitch when people throw gravy and noodles loose in the garbage. In the summer that stuff stinks like hell. And when you reach in for it, it gets all over your hands and your clothes, and you get about mad enough to cry. God damn it, it's not only against the law to put shit in the garbage without wrapping it carefully, but it's against the rules of common decency!”⁶⁵ Though any janitor might have a similar complaint, such disregard had a uniquely personal impact on flat janitors because their tenants were also their neighbors. The contradiction between the flat janitor's status as a neighbor and as a worker encouraged a sense of alienation. Sadly, despite their sense of status, flat janitors could not truly feel at home in their own apartments.⁶⁶

Further intensifying this sense of anger and alienation was a pervasive fear that the tenants view of them as dirty implied their moral corruption. As Janitor 28 put it, “A lot of little kids like to follow me around, especially little girls between six and eight. I don't like it, because of all you read about little girls getting raped and killed. If they know those kids follow you around, right away they put the blame on you if something happens to them.” He argued that in a recent case where a janitor had been accused of murder likely, the janitor “used to play with the kids, and when one of them got killed, the cops put the finger on him and just about tortured him into confessing.”⁶⁷ While Janitor 28's fears were extreme, many janitors feared that tenants viewed them as lazy or drunks.⁶⁸ Another janitor noted that he always refused a tenant's offer of a drink lest he develop a reputation as an alcoholic.⁶⁹

65 Janitor 4, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 82.

66 Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 57.

67 Janitor 28, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 47.

68 Janitor 20, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 50.

69 Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 39.

The accounts of these janitors illustrate a key limitation of the BSEIU in Chicago. Though they achieved political power and organizational respectability, they could not transform the opinions of many common Chicagoans. To most tenants, janitors were supposed to remain subservient and submissive. All of the political power, public relations, and economic security that the flat janitors achieved could not overcome the basic assumptions of their tenants or merit respectful treatment. Given this, there is little wonder that janitors found more solidarity with their employers than with the tenants who, in most cases, were actually closer to them in economic condition.

If anything, the material improvements gained by Local 1 made tenants jealous of their janitors, inflaming already problematic relationships. Janitor 35 neatly encapsulates this: “There is a certain amount of jealousy when janitors try to better themselves. A whole lot [of tenants] are jealous because the janitor makes more than they do.” For a janitor, the mere possession of a car could inspire negative comments. Janitor 35 continues, “Just because a janitor likes to go out in an auto and they don't have [a car], there is that feeling [of envy] between the janitor and the tenant, that's for sure.”⁷⁰ Janitor 12 similarly relates, as his wealth became more apparent, tenants began to harass his family “[m]ostly by making nasty remarks.” With frustration Janitor 12 concludes that “they just don't like to see us have a nice apartment and a new car.”⁷¹ Janitor 36, an older janitor who was a part of the union through much of its rise, framed this in broader terms, telling Gold, “Some people are jealous, you know. Janitors are getting on their feet now and that bothers some people.”⁷² Janitors were faced with an unsolvable conundrum: if they failed to maintain a clean, prosperous appearance, they opened themselves up to charges of moral corruption, but if they allowed their prosperity to be too visible, they faced criticism and harassment.

⁷⁰ Janitor 33, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 53.

⁷¹ Janitor 12, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 55.

⁷² Janitor 36, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 59.

Tenants were quick to criticize the living accommodations of janitors. Janitor 35 relates that one tenant went so far as to say that “we shouldn't live in such a nice apartment on the first floor, that we should live in a hole... like other janitors.”⁷³ Janitor 12 echoes this noting that his tenants would “rather see us live like rats” than see a janitor in a nice apartment.⁷⁴ The language of janitors living in “holes” or like “rats” was particularly resonant among the flat janitors of the BSEIU because their union officials described their material progress as moving “into the light” or giving janitors their “place in the sun.”⁷⁵ Indeed, one of the most important early successes of the union had been to move flat janitors from the cramped, basement “coal holes” in which they had once lived into real apartments.⁷⁶ By doing so the contract brought janitors, who once lived in explicitly dirty, degraded housing, into social equality, and proximity, with their tenants, violating the tenants' own sense of social superiority.

Between their equivalent housing and higher incomes, janitors very suddenly became materially equivalent, or superior, to their tenants. As Janitor 36 put it, “Some janitors are making four hundred a month and free rent. That's pretty good [relative to most tenants].”⁷⁷ In many cases this move so offended the fragile egos of their tenants that they lashed out at their new neighbors. At times this lashing out could become both professionally problematic, and personally hurtful, for a janitor. Janitor 10 relates a poignant case: “I'll give you a case of how jealous tenants make trouble. In the steel strike before last, the one about two or three years ago, one of my tenants was laid off.” When Janitor 10 heard that his tenant was unemployed, he helped him to find a job with [the] Railway Express, solving the man's problems. However a short-time later “[the tenant] asks me about getting

⁷³ Janitor 33, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 53.

⁷⁴ Janitor 12, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 55.

⁷⁵ *Proceedings of the Seventh Convention of the Building Service Employees International Union*, 4.

⁷⁶ *Instructions to the members of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union*, 14.

⁷⁷ Janitor 36, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 59.

into the janitor racket—wanted to know what we make. Well, I gave him an idea of what I was getting, but I told him that it takes time to work yourself up so good.” By telling the man how much he was making, Janitor 10 opened himself up for criticism: “Well, when his wife found out I was making so much she started complaining about everything. Even after the strike [they] never stopped complaining.”⁷⁸ Though Janitor 10 acted with compassion and embodied the best ideals of service to his clients, his tenant's offense at the new prosperity of janitors was so great that it outweighed any gratitude he felt.

The contradiction between the respect accorded to janitors and their economic positions became particularly stark during the Great Depression. Janitor 28 recalled, “You say something [to a tenant] and they say, 'Hell you're nothing but a janitor.' Or... you're talking to even a working man and you tell him you're a janitor. You get that feeling that they're looking down on you, because you're working for them. I know I feel that way sometimes. During the Depression I was making better than most, so what the hell. It's good, earned money.”⁷⁹ Though janitorial wages declined with rents, few flat janitors lost their jobs during the course of the Depression, ensuring that they were in far better economic conditions than many of their tenants. Despite this, or perhaps partially because of it, tenants continued to treat their janitors as servants.

Many flat janitors associated their treatment with the economic status of their tenants. Low- and middle-income tenants, whose incomes were either equivalent or somewhat less than their flat janitor, were often seen as the most abusive. As Janitor 14 puts it, “The bad ones squawk as long as they live. No matter what you do, they squawk. They're the ones that don't call you by your name. They're a lower class of people, but they try to make you feel lower than them.”⁸⁰ Perhaps because

78 Janitor 10, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 54.

79 Janitor 28, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 73.

80 Janitor 14, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 56.

of the clearer class lines between them, wealthy tenants were widely described as treating their janitors with respect. When asked about the jealous tenant, Janitor 26, who worked for higher-rent buildings, replied “that class of people don't live here, of course. The class of people you're talking about are making two hundred a month, don't have a car, and are lucky they're living.... People here aren't jealous if you got a new car.”⁸¹ Poor tenants also tended to treat their janitors with respect because they felt thankful for, not entitled to, having clean accommodations in decent repair.⁸² In a cruel irony, those tenants who the flat janitor might have felt the most natural social connection to proved the most likely to specifically seek to degrade him.

Gold argues that flat janitors coped with the contradiction between their material status and their treatment by their neighbors by simultaneously degrading their tenants and enhancing their own sense of self-importance, both in terms of skill and social value. Gold argued that this could be clearly seen in the way that janitors felt a “great responsibility which... can be explained in terms of the janitor's conception of himself as the guardian of the building and its occupants.”⁸³ He continues by noting that janitors “certainly do not consider themselves to be professionals [but] there is ample evidence that some of their behavior is ethically comparable to the behavior exhibited by members of 'big front,' or the highest status, occupations” such as doctors or lawyers.⁸⁴ Gold illustrates this through the voice of Janitor 35 who notes, “A lot think they're better than the janitor because he has to take down their trash. Still the janitor makes more money. I'd still rather be doing janitor work than some of the jobs they're doing—packing house work and stuff, that's for sure. I believe the janitor should be making a lot more money than white collar workers. After all, a janitor has a whole

81 Janitor 26, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 57.

82 Janitor 17, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 56.

83 Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 17.

84 Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 64.

lot of responsibility and long hours.”⁸⁵ The responsibility inherent in being the guardian of their buildings and their tenants placed flat janitors in an ethical and occupational class not only above blue-collar workers but also above less critical white-collar workers. Mirroring the rhetoric of their union, flat janitors asserted that they—like professionals—pursued their work for reasons above the petty concerns of the marketplace.

Though flat janitors, like all workers, discovered meaning in their labor through an intensely personal and individual process, the specific terms that they used were clearly shaped by the union's rhetorical approach. In nearly every piece of internal communications, the BSEIU told janitors that they were guardians of their clients, and their city, and deserved treatment as such. In the 1929 inaugural issue of *Public Safety*, for example, President Horan described janitors as nothing less than the “guardian of public safety.” During the 1930s McFetridge described janitors in even more grandiose terms, as nothing less than the fountainhead of public health and functionally equivalent to doctors.⁸⁶ Though it would be easy to dismiss McFetridge's claims as empty rhetoric, the membership internalized these claims. Janitor 19, for example, echoed McFetridge when he asked Gold, “Did you ever stop to think that we have a lot in common with doctors? I used to meet them in the halls at all hours of the night. We'd kid each other about making emergency calls at all hours and never getting through with work.”⁸⁷ In the eyes of Janitor 19, and many of his peers, their job took on some of the elements of the prototypical professional.

As guardians of their tenants, janitors found themselves under tremendous pressure to perform.⁸⁸ Janitor 33 described this weight as ever present, even during a vacation, “You still take the chance

⁸⁵ Janitor 35, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 76.

⁸⁶ See Chapter Four for more on William McFetridge and the rhetoric of public service and health.

⁸⁷ Janitor 19, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 71.

⁸⁸ Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 64.

of getting away even though you leave dangerous equipment behind that's a big responsibility. You're always in tension when you go out.... If something happened it would lay on your conscience for the rest of your life."⁸⁹ He underlined this point with an example of his own diligence and heroism: "There's a fire upstairs!' I ran out there and there was smoke all over the place. A guy had left a cigarette on a studio couch... Before the firemen came I protected the rest of the tenants with a fire-extinguisher. I pumped water all around the apartment so the fire couldn't get outside."⁹⁰ Should he have failed to remain diligent even on Christmas, Janitor 33 would have abrogated a responsibility to his tenants—his clients effectively—that he could never have forgiven himself. Janitor 33 and his peers felt this tremendous sense of responsibility, at least partially, as a way of viewing themselves as the stalwart defenders of public safety.

Throughout his work Gold struggled to categorize flat janitors, ultimately describing them as aspirational professionals. He finds the closest analogy between janitor and professional in their treatment of tenant's personal information. Personally aware of the comings and goings of tenants, and the contents of their apartments and trash, a flat janitor could easily uncover many tenants' secrets. Janitor 32 described the burden that having this privileged knowledge placed on him when he commented, "You have to be careful what you say... You hear and see a lot of things in your time. There are even times when you are requested to keep quiet. And there are times when you have to answer—for F. B. I. and insurance inspectors. You can't tell them everything, either, you know. See and not see, hear and not hear—that's the best policy."⁹¹ Like a psychologist reluctant to break the trust of a client, janitors felt a profound sense of responsibility for the confidences that they held.

Although janitors most clearly associated themselves with professionals, they also expressed

⁸⁹ Janitor 33, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 15.

⁹⁰ Janitor 33, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 16.

⁹¹ Janitor 32, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 66.

views that would have seemed familiar to Wilentz's artisans. Many of the janitors sought to ensure that Gold understood that their higher wages were legitimate and fair, not simply the result of the power of their union. Janitor 28 related that while people look down on janitors, they make “good, earned money” from their hard labor.⁹² Janitor 20 took pains to explain that though “the majority of tenants don't think you have much work to do. They don't know... You start four hours before them and finish four hours after them.”⁹³ In this the janitors expressed the artisan's ideal of economic rewards being governed by morality and ethics, not purely by market logic. Echoing another artisanal, republican legacy, flat janitors were suspicious of gifts and other kinds of unearned benefits. As Janitor 18 notes, “A lot of janitors would rather not have a tip, because it sets up an obligation.”⁹⁴ Such obligations could result in, effectively, the janitor's corruption because they would become dependent upon that tenant's generosity, potentially forcing them to abrogate their larger duties or ethics.

The responsibility, guardianship, and public mindedness of flat janitors illustrates how the civic unionism of the BSEIU both echoed craft governance and transformed it. Craft governance justified itself to the public through the power of the craft community, as well as the skill of the workers involved. Civic unionism instead justified its regulation of the market place through the civic value of union members. Writing in the 1920s, one of Local 1's founders, Gus Van Heck, summarized this in his description of the prototypical flat janitor as a “good janitor, fully earning his pay [who is] entitled to the respect and gratitude of building owners, tenants, and the public generally for his good citizenship.”⁹⁵ In the group of flat janitors that Gold interviewed all of these themes—civic

92 Janitor 28, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 73.

93 Janitor 20, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 50.

94 Janitor 18, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 66.

95 Van Heck, “Schedule of Daily Work for Flat Janitors” *Public Safety*, 5.

unionism, professionalism, citizenship, artisan republican ethics—all helped workers to define their place in their society.

The janitor's commitment to his clients sometimes went beyond simply guarding their homes and securing their confidences. Janitor 11, for example, relates that “[s]ome of the repair work the tenant is responsible for and I'm supposed to charge for it. Well, if I replace some glass that costs me three and a half dollars, I may charge the tenant a half dollar or two dollars more for my labor, depending on how much she can afford. If it's a little thing and the tenant isn't well off, I won't charge her anything for it if she's supposed to pay.”⁹⁶ Though unwilling to describe his subjects as professionals, Gold described this practice of a sliding fee scale as “a high standard of service—quite in the tradition of the medical profession.”⁹⁷ During the Depression, Janitor 40 similarly relates that “back in '32, most of the tenants were on relief. Of course, most of them were way behind on their rent, and, since the gas was supplied with the rent, the owner started turning off the gas when they looked like hopeless cases. Well, he kept turning the gas off and when he'd leave I'd turn the gas back on. This went on for months. One day he asked me if I was the one turning the gas back on and I said I wasn't. Finally he said, 'Let's quit kidding about the gas. I get the bills anyway.' So he left the gas on after that.”⁹⁸ In both of these cases the janitor placed the sense of duty he felt to the tenant, his client, over the concerns of the marketplace. Flat janitors could feel this way because of the independence from the whims of their employers that they gained through the union contract. Like doctors or lawyers, the protection that flat janitors enjoyed from the marketplace allowed them to place their ethics over the raw logic of profit.⁹⁹

96 Janitor 11, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 68.

97 Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 68.

98 Janitor 40, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 137.

99 See Chapter Four for more on the connections between doctors, janitors and public health.

The willingness of flat janitors to view their work in non-economic terms extended to their definitions of success. As Janitor 4 put it, “Look, money ain't everything... If you have good tenants, that's what's really important in being a success.”¹⁰⁰ By “good” tenants, Janitor 4 meant tenants who respected you and appreciated your work. Janitor 18 similarly argues that a successful janitor is “a guy diplomatic enough to get along with boss and tenants.”¹⁰¹ With their financial prosperity relatively secure, flat janitors saw respect and self-control as the true signs of respect. Janitor 16, who notably considered himself a great success, notes, “The most important thing about this work is that you have to know how to deal with people.... When people in other buildings ask my tenants about [me] they always say I am the best janitor they ever had.”¹⁰² Like academics who prefer the respect of their colleagues and their community over raw economic success, flat janitors defined a metric of personal value with little connection to the marketplace.¹⁰³

Flat janitors also expressed the less appealing elements of professional identity: a condescending attitude towards their clients—their tenants. Many janitors viewed their tenants as essentially children who were incapable of engaging with the urban world in a safe, hygienic fashion. Embarrassing stories about the incompetence of tenants prominently featured in many janitors' accounts. Tenants who failed to properly accept the lessons of janitors became labeled as “untrainable,” a condition that janitors described as something akin to a mental illness. As Janitor 31 puts it, “But it goes in the family, the way you are raised at home—that's the way you act. The daughter acts just as filthy as the mother. It's no use making yourself extra trouble hollering at them. You just can't teach them.”¹⁰⁴ Such tenants could only be mollified, usually through various forms of

100 Janitor 4, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 94.

101 Janitor 18, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 93.

102 Janitor 16, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 93.

103 There is a bit of an exception to this: those janitors who wished to make the leap to becoming business owners seem to have been far more concerned with money than they were with respect. See Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 95.

104 Janitor 31, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 42.

deception, or ignored. By pathologizing problematic tenants as unteachable, flat janitors neatly nullified the tenants' persistent disregard of his own social value.

The janitors' zest for educating their tenants represented a clear attempt to position themselves as experts and thus enhance the contrast between their own abilities and those of their tenants. Janitors commonly told degrading stories about “untrainable” women, suggesting their incompetence and unpleasantness. Of these, Janitor 26's is perhaps the most telling and degrading, “When somebody has a toilet stopped up and they say there can't possibly be anything thrown in there or fallen in there, you know damn well they're lying, because toilets don't get stopped up with normal use. So, you work a spring through the toilet and pull out a toothbrush or Kotex. That's right, they throw Kotex in the toilet. The king-size Kotex don't always go through. When I pull out Kotex from the toilet I call them in and hold it up right in front of their face and say, 'Here, this is what stopped up your toilet—some old Kotex.' That embarrasses them—makes them sorry they lied to me.”¹⁰⁵ Gold described this class of janitor's stories through the infantilizing term of “toilet-training.”¹⁰⁶ Such terminology suggested a problematic and frankly unappealing connection between the history of flat janitors and the development of the medical profession. Undermining women's confidence in their ability to regulate their own homes and bodies was a key part of the professional projects of doctors, domestic engineers, and the sanitary sciences.¹⁰⁷ In this way, the imposition of sanitary norms upon female tenants helped flat janitors to view themselves as “experts” who possessed a legitimate claim to authority.

Beyond these claims to expert dominance over the households and bodies of women, flat janitors commonly focused on the sexuality of their female tenants. Janitor 12, for example, speaks of his

¹⁰⁵ Janitor 26, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 38.

¹⁰⁶ Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 38.

¹⁰⁷ See Chapter Four for more on gender and professionalism.

tenants as a source of constant temptation: “Another thing about [being a] janitor—lots of women try to get you up in [their] apartment just 'to talk' or for a phony excuse. When you walk in they are on [the] couch, ask you to sit down, and that means only one thing.” Since he felt an ethical responsibility, much like a doctor, to his tenants, Janitor 12 would steadfastly refuse such advances by acting “dumb. I excuse myself and say I forgot about water running... It's hard to do, but it's best.”¹⁰⁸ Janitor 16 similarly recounts the story of a wife of a traveling salesman who made advances on him while her husband was away. He cautions that “you have to be careful of such women. They're too dangerous because they know you.” However, because she was one of his tenants he rebuffed her. After she expressed surprise at his self control, Janitor 16 responded that “I am as good as others but I could control myself.”¹⁰⁹ The flat janitors' stories about women sought to both minimize them—therefore decreasing the janitor's sense of discomfort in their subservience to them—while transforming the flat janitor's resistance to their advances into a symbol of professional dignity and discipline.

All of these attempts to maintain a dignified, masculine, or professional image were at least partially the result of the particular relationship that flat janitors had with the women they served. While their penultimate employers may have been male, the majority of their day-to-day contact was with women, often described as housewives. Given that the union's founders viewed organization partially as a way to return masculinity to flat janitors by removing their wives from compulsory labor, it is not surprising that many flat janitors bristled at the fact that they were notionally subservient to female tenants.

¹⁰⁸ Janitor 12, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 69.

¹⁰⁹ Janitor 16, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 69.

Maintaining appearances, however, often went beyond gendered posturing. Many janitors spoke in strong terms about the necessity of maintaining a high standard of personal grooming. As Janitor 18 puts it, “Whenever you got to meet the public, you kinda gotta put a shell on you, you know. It’s like when you have a position of trust.”¹¹⁰ Janitors who failed to put on this “shell” and comport themselves properly were judged unworthy by their peers. Janitor 20 speaks with disgust about “[s]ome guys never even dress to go to a [union] meeting. They come there dirty, without a shave, looking like bums... I don’t know, they ain’t got no sense.”¹¹¹ Similarly, janitors who failed to uphold their duties to their tenants were treated as unworthy of being flat janitors. As Janitor 19 notes, “There are some janitors who are just plain hard to get along with or get in trouble and it makes it bad for other janitors.... Those fellows make it bad for janitors who try to do right for tenants.”¹¹² Fearful of having their work done by an inferior janitor, many flat janitors refused to use the union’s replacement janitor system to provide them with days off, preferring instead to privately work out an arrangement with a fellow janitor whose skills and ethics they felt could be trusted.¹¹³

The Real Janitors of Local 1

There is little question that unionization positively reshaped the lives of Chicago’s flat janitors. Since the 1910s, flat janitors achieved a level of prosperity and security that would have seemed impossible prior to unionization. Perhaps as importantly, unionization helped flat janitors to find a sense of self-respect and meaning in their labor. Many flat janitors internalized elements of their union’s rhetoric and began to see themselves as important members of their community with a

¹¹⁰ Janitor 18, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 25.

¹¹¹ Janitor 20, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 111.

¹¹² Janitor 19, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 111.

¹¹³ Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 114.

critical role to play. For flat janitors, at least, the BSEIU in Chicago achieved real, meaningful progress.

Despite this, flat janitors did not describe their union in positive terms. As Gold notes, “The most difficult [task during interviews] was... getting janitors to talk about the union. At various times, when we asked janitors questions about the union, we were suspected of being a stool-pigeon, a [sic] *Chicago Tribune* reporter, and even an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The fact of the matter is that many janitors are afraid to talk about the union unless they are talking to someone they can trust.”¹¹⁴ Flat janitors clearly feared undermining their union, not to mention personal retribution should their criticisms be printed. However, as Gold gained the trust of his interviewees, and scrupulously guaranteed their anonymity, the flat janitors began to open up, describing a union out of their control. Janitor 15, for example, described “union positions [as] lifetime jobs. And it's getting like the way the kings in Europe were. They had their positions and their sons got their positions when they grew up.... But what can you do? You still need them.”¹¹⁵ Flat janitors viewed Local 1 as, at best, an unaccountable bureaucracy and, at worst, as a tyranny. Without a commitment to ensuring internal democracy in the locals, McFetridge and the International leadership of the BSEIU failed to maintain even a semblance of internal democracy in the union's founding local.

Unchecked by union democracy and unhindered by McFetridge's anti-corruption campaign, the business agents of Local 1 enjoyed private empires of graft. Most commonly, business agents demanded a payment for recommending a janitor to a building owner. These recommendations were valuable because building owners, while not required to take the business agent's advice, commonly used business agents as their main method of recruitment. Paying for building assignments was

¹¹⁴ Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 134.

¹¹⁵ Janitor 15, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 135.

particularly tempting to flat janitors because assignment to higher rent buildings meant higher wages. Though none of the interviewees admitted to ever having paid money to a business agent for an assignment, Gold notes that “when a number of janitors tell the interviewer that they know other janitors who have paid off the business agent for buildings, it can be safely assumed that some of these informants, themselves, have had personal experience with pay-offs.”¹¹⁶ Flat janitors believed that these business agents were part of a broader network of graft. When asked if all agents take payoffs Janitor 14 responded, “Sure they all do.... At least [some] talk... to you in a nice way... Some agents wave their arms and holler like dictators. Sure, a guy don't become a business agent if he's honest. It's like in politics. The business agent don't keep all the money he gets. It goes right up the string.”¹¹⁷ Though it is unclear exactly how much information Janitor 14 could provide about the exact course money took through the union and outside, graft clearly was part of his daily life.

Graft undermined the sense that flat janitors had of themselves as valuable, highly respected, workers. When flat janitors resisted graft, they commonly did so to re-assert their self-worth. Janitor 20 reveals this process by recounting that sometimes business agents “try to push around us guys who went to school like they got accustomed to pushing around those dirty-looking guys who never went to school and let themselves get pushed around. Never let the business agent push you around that way.” However, as a self-respecting janitor, he could always resist them by saying, “I know what's in the book [the union's constitution and bylaws], too. Let's go downtown [to the union headquarters] and see about this.”¹¹⁸ Janitor 10 similarly relates that he once overpowered a crooked business agent through his sterling reputation for good work: “When that son-of-a-bitch was business agent in this district I had a rough time getting buildings. He kept trying to get buildings

¹¹⁶ Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 122.

¹¹⁷ Janitor 14, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 132.

¹¹⁸ Janitor 20, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 112.

for the guy with the fastest buck. That four story building across the street he wanted the owner to hire some other janitor, but the owner wanted to hire me. I wasn't about to pay him off and this other janitor musta offered him plenty. Well, the union can't tell the owner who to hire. The only thing that counts is just so the man is a union man. So, I got the building in spite of the business agent.”¹¹⁹

Despite their willingness to push back against individual corrupt leaders, internal democracy became so weak in the union that none of the interviewees believed they could deal with corruption in a more systematic way.¹²⁰

Though the janitors complained about their union, none of them doubted its importance. They knew the union was responsible for their increased wages and improved conditions. Many of the interviewees praised the services that the union provided them, and recognized the ways that the organization's influence benefited them. For example, Janitor 23 related a somewhat bizarre example of the advantages of union membership. When he and his sons were arrested after an altercation at a bar—they had, somewhat improbably, locked the bartender in a closet after he had short-changed them and proceeded to serve free drinks to the other patrons—he called for the union's help. After showing the police his union card, a BSEIU lawyer was promptly called and Janitor 23 and his sons were speedily released. He summed up the situation by noting that “[u]sually the janitor's union card is good enough for bail. Every police station knows that the card is good for one hundred dollars bail, but we needed more that night.” Despite the questionable circumstances, the union did not hesitate to oblige and put up “a thousand dollar peace bond on a couple of the boys and that ended it.”¹²¹ Perhaps mindful of Janitor 23's connections, the bartender did not press

119 Janitor 10, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 134.

120 Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 134.

121 Janitor 23, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 140.

charges and the matter disappeared. In this case the BSEIU served as an intercessor between the state and the janitor, ensuring that he received fair, or even preferential treatment.

Instead of doubting the value of their union, most flat janitors felt a grudging acceptance of its value. Janitor 17 summed this up when, in response to being asked why janitors don't like to talk about the union, he replied, "It wouldn't do any good to talk about the union. Whether you like them or not, you need them. You'd get peanuts without them."¹²² To the members of Local 1, their union became a successful and useful, but also corrupt, impersonal, and unaccountable regulatory agency. Unable to concretely change its course or policies but broadly sympathetic with its aims and activities, members had, in their own way, been reduced to clients of a union that they should have been participants in.

Passive, not enthusiastic, support for a union is often described by labor scholars as among the core negative impacts of business unionism. Kim Scipes argues that, as the leaders of such a union actively discourage participation to protect their own power, this disengagement is the inevitable result of a business union.¹²³ The occurrence of such a pattern in the BSEIU reveals that, while it tactically used a far wider strategic palette than its peers, its lack of internal democracy ensured that the union suffered from many of the pathologies of a business union. All of this is particularly interesting in the context of the modern SEIU that critics, such as Steve Early, describe as blending some of the positive elements of community or social movement unionism with the top-down approach of a traditional business union.¹²⁴

As disturbing as this characterization may be, the lack of collective identity and solidarity shown

¹²² Janitor 17, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 135.

¹²³ Scipes, *AFL-CIO's Secret War Against Developing Country Workers*, 5.

¹²⁴ Early, *The Civil War in US Labor*, 281-284.

among flat janitors represented an even larger problem. Gold described janitors as “too isolated from one another and too concerned with individual problems to develop... group solidarity.”¹²⁵ He attributed this failure to the individualistic nature of flat janitor's work and labor market. There is no indication in any interview of a sense of shared struggle or recognition of a collective class position among the flat janitors. For all of its successes, Local 1 failed to build a sense of solidarity, mutual dependence, or collective identity among its members.

Nowhere was the lack of solidarity more shocking between the flat janitors than in cases of competitive misconduct, that the flat janitors called “cut-throating.” The more ruthless, or perhaps unscrupulous, among the flat janitors would actively attempt to steal buildings from other janitors by convincing owners of their superior skills. Janitor 10 described a painful case of this, saying, “Listen, I don't have nothing to do with any janitors.... they'll cut your throat first chance they get.” He continued relating an experience where peers found “out how much you make and [got] jealous.” In response his friends tried “like hell to take your buildings away from [me]... Four guys, four different guys I got into the union, mind you, turned around and took buildings away from me.”¹²⁶ Other times janitors would betray each other by reporting on their fellow janitors' transgressions of union rules. As Janitor 31 relates, “Some janitors here used to watch my wife when she went across the street [because] they wanted to catch her doing my work. She used to turn on the lights there for me or throw a little coal on the fire. She used to look out and see if any janitors were looking... Then I got called before the board because a janitor saw my wife go in the boiler room there and he guessed she fired up the furnace. It happened that Joe [another flat janitor] fired up the furnace for me that time, so I was clear.”¹²⁷ In other cases, business agents, in return for a

¹²⁵ Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 71. See also Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 109.

¹²⁶ Janitor 10, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 123.

¹²⁷ Janitor 31, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 125.

substantial bribe, would take part in cut-throating by putting pressure on building owners and claiming that a janitor violated union rules.¹²⁸

Local 1's successes fostered a competitive marketplace inside the union. From the 1917 contract on, the union tied the earnings of individual flat janitors to the rents collected by the building owner. To a certain extent, this model proved a resounding success in increasing the average wage of janitors, protecting their gains through the Great Depression, and establishing a positive relationship with building owners. However, it also encouraged janitors to view each other as fellow competitors, not fellow workers. There is a sad irony here: what the union achieved through labor activism in 1917 became an impediment to solidarity in later years.

Even if flat janitors shared larger goals, and were willing to unite around the political and economic agenda of their leaders, they worked, lived, and felt separate from each other. Janitor 28 somewhat shockingly relates, "I [have] never been in another janitor's house, except for a beer.... [Flat janitors] never do it [socialize].... We're more or less for ourselves."¹²⁹ Janitor 18 portrayed janitors as somewhat less isolated but noted that "I'd say that janitors clan together [only] if they are the same nationality. American-born janitors hardly neighbor with each other at all." He concludes that janitorial friendships, when they occur are "not because they do the same work—probably in spite of it."¹³⁰ Given this sense of distrust and lack of common identity, it is not surprising that Gold found janitors to often be rather lonely individuals, noting that, "each janitor is, in a sense, a professional without colleagues [and] an entrepreneur without associates."¹³¹ Such a highly divided workforce with little collective identity is, in many ways, the opposite of the ideal solidarity that a

¹²⁸ Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 124.

¹²⁹ Janitor 28, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 122.

¹³⁰ Janitor 18, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 122.

¹³¹ Gold, *The Chicago Flat Janitor*, 71.

union strives for.

The logic of civic unionism and its deviations from craft governance partially drove the decline of solidarity and member participation in Local 1. Solidarity in a union often derives from a shared sense of economic interest or social identity. The union's contracts, while innovative and serving the interests of their members, created what amounted to an internal marketplace. Even if flat janitors shared a collective interest in the power of the union, they individually had an incentive to undermine one another in the quest for better buildings. Another potential source of solidarity in the union might be the experience of participating in the collective activities of the union. However, with their dominance backed more by political power than by militancy, the BSEIU in Chicago stopped cultivating or even encouraging shop-floor activism. In fact, such activism represented a challenge to the leadership of the union who required the loyalty of members to back their political influence and their obedience to the arbitration regimes. Even if the post-Scalise BSEIU avoided the type of large-scale corruption that had once nearly destroyed it, the anti-democratic logic of civic unionism permitted and even encouraged petty graft. Though this was clearest in Local 1, it affected all of the locals in Chicago. From this perspective, the BSEIU made a real mistake, a mistake that was, ironically, partially the result of its success.

Conclusion

Even though the BSEIU of Chicago reached the apex of its political power after World War II, scholars have shown little interest in the post-war history of Local 1 and its fellows. Most of the attention given to the BSEIU, and the SEIU, has instead focused on the coasts, largely ignoring the Midwest. To a certain extent this is understandable. After World War II, New York became the numeric center of the union, naturally attracting attention. In the 80s and 90s the West Coast became

renowned for numerous successes by progressive locals inspired by the legacy of George Hardy. Indeed, William McFetridge, when he is mentioned at all by historians, is more commonly remembered as a shadowy fixture in the Daley administration than he is as a labor leader. A rare exception to this is Nathan Godfried's, *WCFL: Chicago's Voice of Labor*. Godfried treats McFetridge as a labor leader but only so he can condemn him as a “[q]uintessential business unionist” who fought against radicalism in Chicago and favored conciliation with employers over class conflict. As he notes, “[O]ne Chicago-area union organizer found it impossible to distinguish between these labor leaders [like McFetridge] and a business executive.”¹³² For having made many accommodations and connections to the political and business elites of the city, Godfried judges McFetridge as essentially a traitor to the labor movement. The memory of the post-war flat janitors becomes reduced to simply a cautionary example of business unionism.

Historians define business unionism variously. Melvyn Dubofsky defined it as the historical response to the decline of the Knights of Labor characterized by an “acceptance of industrial capitalism,” the “rejection of partisan politics and... [a] preference for purely economic actions,” and the rejection of “the advice and leadership of intellectuals and middle-class reformers.”¹³³ Robert Wiebe defined it as a “binding set of business values—the inviolability of contracts, the inevitability of industrialization, the practical sovereignty of management in the making of general industrial policy” which arose from a “passionate urge toward respectability.”¹³⁴ John Budd argues that business unionism is defined by its focus on the immediate confines of the workplace—what he prefers to call “job control unionism.” He contrasts this to the European model of labor activity

132 Nathan Godfried, *WCFL, Chicago's Voice of Labor, 1926-78* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 240.

133 Melvyn Dubofsky, *Industrialism and the American Worker, 1865-1920* (New York: Crowell, 1975), 64-65.

134 Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1965), 125.

which is structured around political connections and broader social issues.¹³⁵ Kim Scipes argues that a “business union’s approach is to organize workers to fight for their own limited interests—separate from working people in general and opposed to their larger interests.”¹³⁶ Under such conditions internal democracy has generally become a sham, with most unions being dominated by their own petty elites.¹³⁷ Though there are important differences between these definitions, they all share a sense that business unionism is a form of organization that confines labor unions to a very limited set of goals and tactics.

The charge of business unionism is damning because modern activists and scholars define these limitations as having significantly degraded the progress and power of the American labor movement. In *Reorganizing the Rust Belt*, Steve Lopez argues that the failures of business unionism, particularly the tolerance of a dictatorial or corrupt leadership, have marred the broader labor movement to such an extent that they are a significant barrier to organization.¹³⁸ Others are troubled first and foremost by the impact that business unionism has on the sense of solidarity that union members feel for each other—and to the broader working class. As Scipes notes, members of business unions have “no real ties to the community” and are thus incapable of forming inclusive alliances beyond their immediate workplaces.¹³⁹

Certainly the BSEIU of Chicago suffered from some of these faults. Through its use of market incentives and the blending of the interests of flat janitors with those of employers, the BSEIU not only failed to challenge the basis of capitalism, it actively embraced much of the modern economic

135 John W. Budd, *Employment with a Human Face: Balancing Efficiency, Equity, and Voice* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2006), 139-156.

136 Scipes, *AFL-CIO’s Secret War Against Developing Country Workers*, 3.

137 Scipes, *AFL-CIO’s Secret War Against Developing Country Workers*, 4.

138 Lopez, *Reorganizing the Rust Belt*.

139 Scipes, *AFL-CIO’s Secret War Against Developing Country Workers*, 4.

order. Despite their comparatively mild means, many flat janitors found more identification and connection with their employers than with their tenants or fellow workers. Politically, the union supported a corrupt, pro-capitalist regime. The BSEIU defended the political and economic status quo because its leaders (and, arguably, members) benefited from it. However, even if the BSEIU did not seek revolution, neither did they endorse the raw logic of the marketplace. Like Wilentz's artisans, Wender Cohen's craft workers, and numerous groups of professionals, the building service workers of Chicago sought to regulate their labor market to produce a more just capitalism—arguably the type of “moral capitalism” that Lizbeth Cohen argues animated Chicago's CIO workers during the 1930s.¹⁴⁰ That leaders like McFetridge defended the status quo should not be described as a sign of the union's weakness, but as evidence of its success.

The BSEIU of Chicago cannot be defined as a business union because it served its members more through tactics that went far beyond trade unionism. As building service workers lacked many of the traditional sources of economic leverage, such as technical skills or professional certifications, they instead relied on political influence to help them to regulate their labor market. Notably this kind of tactical move was the opposite of the narrow trade unionism usually attributed to business unions. Godfried's characterization holds more validity for the organizational structure of the BSEIU. Both corruption and outright authoritarianism were not only tolerated, they were the norm. Under such circumstances there is little wonder that the union did little to encourage a sense of organic solidarity among its members.

Yet this should not overshadow the very real accomplishments of the union, especially among the flat janitors. For all of its faults, Local 1's approach to unionism resulted in both material and

¹⁴⁰ Lizbeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 209.

psychological gains for its members. By encouraging its members to adopt a mindset that blended elements of professionalism and artisanal pride, Local 1 influenced its workers to view their labor as valuable to society. Flat janitors took on a view of themselves as not only necessary workers, but as guardians of the public good who could demand respect. Though some workers might have arrived at such an understanding individually, without union intervention, Local 1's contractual power provided them with the material prosperity and personal autonomy necessary to back up their claims.

All of this illustrates the critical role that unions can play in both constructing labor markets and worker identity. Prior to unionization flat janitors inevitably described themselves in terms of poverty and even slavery. After successful unionization, the BSEIU effectively transformed relations between employers and employees from one of exploitation to one of collaboration. Even if this blunted any possible revolutionary potential among the city's janitors, it effectively ameliorated the worst abuses that the city's building service workers faced. Through the 20s and 30s the union encouraged its members to view this success as not simply an exercise of labor power, but as a recognition of their legitimate value to society. By the 1940s, the flat janitors of Chicago developed a sense of dignity and an aspirational claim to professionalism. I describe this arrangement as civic unionism, an approach which focuses on political power and the public good, but draws more from ideas of artisan republicanism and professionalism than overt anti-capitalism.

Arguably the civic unionism of the BSEIU in Chicago shared many of the qualities that later defined the SEIU. Ruth Milkman argues in *L.A. Story* that unions like the SEIU developed a unique strategic repertoire due to their roots in craft unionism. In contrast to the failing industrial tactics of CIO-inspired unions, she argues, “[the] traditional AFL repertoire is highly adaptable to

contemporary economic conditions.”¹⁴¹ Indeed, the union's famed Justice for Janitors campaign, which achieved significant successes in the 80s and 90s, took most of its cues from craft traditions—including civic unionism—not from the industrial approach of the CIO. Though this approach resulted from numerous different influences and considerations, it is hard not to see some of the fingerprints of BSEIU civic unionism in the union's flagship organizational program Justice for Janitors—an organizational campaign that heavily relies on the ability to make community, and particularly political, alliances that help to provide a degree of market regulation to building service workers.¹⁴²

That the civic unionism of the BSEIU bears such a striking resemblance to later forms of community unionism should not be surprising. As Janice Fine notes, community unionism is a sensible tactic primarily because “workers in America today have greater political than economic power.”¹⁴³ The dynamics of power in the modern marketplace for many service workers is thus very similar to that of the building service workers of Chicago. Fundamentally both community and civic unionism are efforts to deal with this sort of an environment by transforming political or community leverage into marketplace regulation. While the intellectual history of community unionism is beyond the scope of this chapter, the similarities between the approach of the BSEIU in Chicago and the SEIU in L.A. suggests a direct connection between the two.

The failure of the BSEIU in Chicago to develop a vigorous and participatory internal culture provides a similar, if somewhat less optimistic parallel with the modern BSEIU. As Steve Early argues in *The Civil War in U.S. Labor*, the modern SEIU embodies both the most progressive and least progressive legacies of the American labor movement. In his work the ambitions, and

¹⁴¹ Milkman, *L.A. Story*, 5.

¹⁴² Milkman, *L.A. Story*, 155-162.

¹⁴³ Fine, “Community Unions and the Revival of the American Labor Movement,” 153.

sometimes great successes, of the modern union are offset by their lack of internal democracy, the heavy-handed authoritarianism of union leaders, and its willingness to make concessions of principle to employers in return for greater union density.¹⁴⁴ In particular Early directs his ire at SEIU president Andy Stern who, while often seeming to promote the cause of progressive, democratic labor organizing, proved to be an autocratic and divisive figure.¹⁴⁵ Though, obviously, the pathologies of McFetridge's BSEIU and Stern's SEIU are not identical, but the striking similarities suggests that they are related to the legacy of the early BSEIU.

Whether or not civic unionism directly influenced the modern SEIU obviously did not concern the mid-century flat janitors of Chicago. What mattered to them were the practical successes and failures of their organization. For all of its faults, Local 1 provided flat janitors with not only material benefits but also with a language through which they could assert their labor as part of the public good. Like doctors, teachers, and even history professors, flat janitors claimed motivations that went beyond the confines of the marketplace. From a Marxist perspective this could easily be described as false consciousness as it discouraged militancy, but to completely dismiss it would do an injustice to the experience of flat janitors by suggesting that they were simply dupes. Instead, the idea of the janitor as a guardian of the public seems to have provided a real existential benefit to many of the union's members.

All workers personally search for, and hopefully find, a degree of meaning in their labor—certainly this process does not require the intervention of a union. However, the distinct experience of the flat janitors illustrates how the interplay of changing economic status, empowering rhetoric, and pre-capitalist legacies can combine to shape how an individual worker views the place of their

¹⁴⁴ Steve Early, *The Civil War in U.S. Labor: Birth of a New Workers' Movement or Death Throes of the Old* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011), 14-17.

¹⁴⁵ Early, *The Civil War in US Labor*, 281-284.

work in society. Since the power, politics, and civic unionist philosophy of the BSEIU shaped all of these factors, it suggests that, for whatever its faults, there was something truly impressive about what the union accomplished. Flat janitors not only achieved the traditional goods of trade unionism—wages, protections, empowerment—they powerfully imagined, and partially enforced, a place for themselves in respectable society.

As it is more the domain of philosophy or psychology than history, the existential value of labor activity is rarely directly discussed. Yet in the case of the flat janitors, it is difficult not to see that the union's success was as much philosophical and psychological as it was material. Such an assertion is not entirely unprecedented. Though she uses different language, in her agenda-setting work *Dishing it Out*, Dorthy Sue Cobble describes the benefit of unionization among waitresses in terms that are as much psychological—the gaining of respect equivalent to other forms of labor—as they are material.¹⁴⁶ Given the amount of time and energy that a worker invests in their labor, it is not unreasonable to see some truth in Albert Camus' dictum, “Without work, all life goes rotten, but when work is soulless, life stifles and dies.”¹⁴⁷ The BSEIU helped janitors to inject soul into their work by providing them with the material, rhetorical, and existential resources to discover new meaning in their labor. Modern service-sector unions might do well to take note of how valuable such an intervention can be to a union's membership.

At this point in the argument a skeptic could, and perhaps should, construct a counter-factual about the lost potential of the BSEIU. Perhaps a more radical, less business-friendly union could have done more for its members and the labor movement. Maybe by pursuing an aggressively anti-capitalist line the union could have encouraged more equitable conditions between flat janitors and

¹⁴⁶ Cobble, *Dishing it Out*, 5.

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in Mario Kamentzky, *The Invisible Player: Consciousness as the Soul of Economic, Social, and Political Life* (Bethel: Park Street Press, 1999), 141.

helped to build the kind of solidarity that their local so clearly lacked. Through this sense of solidarity the union might have successfully organized broader group of workers and truly challenging the structure of capitalist exploitation. At the very least with leaders truly committed to union democracy and clean governance, the BSEIU might have broken the petty and corrosive empires of business agents and ended the frank exploitation of their membership. Unburdened from these faults, the union might have accomplished far greater things for its members, for Chicago, and for the labor movement in general.

Perhaps. Certainly it is an appealing thought. But the fact that the BSEIU and McFetridge did not achieve something so grandiose or important does not mean that the real and positive influence they achieved should be ignored. Nor should their approach be entirely dismissed. While remaining cognizant of the very real flaws of the union, it should be apparent that there were real strengths in the organization's usage of non-traditional tactics and willingness to work collaboratively with political and business leaders. Perhaps there are elements of McFetridge's legacy that activists today may find useful, if problematic. Even to an idealist, there should be hope in the imperfect, but still meaningful, victories of Chicago's BSEIU.

That there is something for progressives to admire about this cluster of locals that have been ignored, or dismissed as empty business unions, should give us pause. Following Dorothy Sue Cobble, historians have begun to re-evaluate the value of classic AFL unions. However, there remains a stigma around organizations like the BSEIU in Chicago that suffered from extensive internal corruption and certainly did not embody the best values of the labor movement. Though some scholars, such as Andrew Wender Cohen, do not follow this stigma, there remain many successful, if not entirely seemly, unions that are worthy of greater study. Given the uniqueness of

civic unionism and its connection to modern community unionism, such studies of less than ideal unions reframe American labor history by rendering the clean lines between progressive, forward-thinking unions and corrupt unions fuzzier.

McFetridge's regime in Chicago would not fall due to corruption, nor to the frustrated democratic ambitions of his members. Instead an internal, factional conflict with an ally turned enemy, David Sullivan, would finally shatter Chicago's hold on the institutional structure of the union. However, prior to this fall, the BSEIU of McFetridge would embark on one last and truly grandiose project—replacing the building owners that employed them with the union itself.

VIII

THE MACHIAVELLI OF MARINA CITY

Introduction

John F. Kennedy described Marina City as “a living monument to our country's determination to keep our cities alive as centers of culture, commerce, education and industry.”¹ Conceived as a standard-breaking mixed residential/commercial complex, Marina City was an ambitious project to build rather posh apartments on the north bank of the Chicago River. Designed by Bertrand Goldberg, one of Mies van der Rohe's disciples, Marina City was the first major post-war, urban high-rise. Everything about the design of the complex spoke to the grandeur and optimism of modernity—circa 1960. Centered on two 65-story towers styled as trees of concrete and steel, the complex featured thoroughly modern touches such as an electric heating system, open-floor plans, five floors of commercial stores, fourteen floors of parking, and its own two-story theater and auditorium. The building could house over 900 families within its walls. However, Marina City was more than just an ambitious construction project. To its supporters, it was an effort to revitalize Chicago by bringing back the high-income families who would fuel the downtown's growth and prosperity.²

Though Marina City was a monument to modernity, its design featured one somewhat archaic touch: manually operated elevators. While automatic elevators had, by the early 1960s, become increasingly common, one of the building's primary funders, the BSEIU, demanded that the architects add manual elevators. Their reasoning for this was obvious: some of their members were

¹ *25th Anniversary of the Presidency*, 16.

² Igor Marjanović & Katerina Rüedi, *Marina City: Bertrand Goldberg's Urban Vision* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010)

elevator operators, so clearly they should be able to find jobs in the building their union partially owned. In another concession, the union demanded that the radio mast on top of one of the towers, transmit WCFL, the station of the Chicago Federation of Labor. Ironically, Marina City was not simply a beacon to the upper class; it was a symbol of the power of labor in Chicago.³

If there is something peculiar about a building services union owning one of the largest, most exclusive, and iconic buildings in their city, it was lost on William McFetridge, who viewed Marina City as the embodiment of the union's efforts to serve not only its members, but Chicago as a whole. Blending together the roles of union president, political fixer, and civic leader, McFetridge believed that the interests of Chicago and the BSEIU were fundamentally one and the same. In particular, he viewed the increasing flight of high-income families from Chicago's flats as an existential threat to the prosperity and power of the flat janitors that could only be dealt with through using the power of the union to revitalize the downtown. Where the BSEIU had become known for its ability to reshape the labor market of building service workers in Chicago, now McFetridge sought to use its power to reshape the entire housing market. Such a grandiose vision was not entirely unreasonable. In the years following Scalise's fall, McFetridge had restored the legitimacy and power of the BSEIU in Chicago by cultivating a deep alliance with Chicago's Democratic machine. First under Edward Kelly, and then under McFetridge's protégé, Richard Daley, the BSEIU became more than an ally of Chicago's mayors; it became an integral part of how those dominant politicians governed their city.

3 James M. Gavin, "Marina City's Twin Towers Design Told," *Chicago Tribune*, March 1, 1960; Thomas Buck, "The Secret of Marina City Tree Houses," *Chicago Tribune*, September 10, 1961, 16: "McFetridge to Sullivan," August 8, 1963, Box 4, Folder 14, SEIU Historical Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University. It is unclear if the elevators installed in Marina City were manual elevators or automatic elevators operated by attendants. It is also unclear how quickly they were replaced with unattended elevators.

Such collaborations of labor, capital, and the state have a mixed reputation amongst historians. Some, such as Andrew Wender Cohen, see this kind of alliance as the essence of the distinct craft governance tradition—a tradition that empowered generations of craft workers. Scholars including Robert Johnston, Elizabeth Sanders, and others have similarly lauded specific alliances of politicians, progressive businesses, and labor unions as an effective and valuable tool of progressive reform. These historians essentially argue that labor, small-scale capital, and the state can work together for mutual benefit that does not betray the fundamental interests of the working class. Such a view turns on the collective political power of a coalition of the middle and working classes, which can achieve significant market regulation and economic justice without the construction of a simplistic dichotomy between labor and capital.

However, in the eyes of many, such a blending of interests and powers is an empty, liberal fantasy. Gabriel Kolko provides a classic view from this perspective in his *Triumph of Conservatism*. Kolko argues that efforts to regulate the marketplace through political power during the Progressive Era inevitably resulted in “business control over politics... rather than political regulation of the economy.”⁴ Kolko calls this “political capitalism” though the more common—an perhaps more dismissive term—is “corporate liberalism.” Under such a system, market regulation occurred, but not in the interests of workers. Though businesses and labor unions appeared to work together to regulate the marketplace, the needs of capital, always outweighed the interests of labor represented solely by “a lackadaisical A.F. of L.”⁵ Notably all of the institutions developed together, such as the National Civic Federation, were, in Kolko's opinion, purely representative of a “pro-

4 Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism; a Re-interpretation of American History, 1900-1916* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), 3.

5 Kolko, *Triumph of Conservatism*, 164.

conservative union, pro-big business” agenda.⁶ Through the seeming collaboration of labor and capital the “radical potential of mass grievances and aspirations—of genuine progressivism” was “redirected” into the support of the stability and anti-competitive demands of an emerging class of corporate leaders.⁷

In his monumental *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism*, Martin Sklar challenges Kolko's jaundiced view of Progressive Era reform and argues that both labor and capital played a role in defining a new, regulated phase in American capitalism—which he describes through the terminology of corporate liberalism. The regulated marketplace was thus the product of a “cross-class ideology expressing the interrelations of corporate capitalists, political leaders, intellectuals, proprietary capitalists, professionals and reformers, workers and trade-union leaders, populists, and socialists.”⁸ Though labor unions did not emerge as the most powerful figures in this debate the resulting system “prepared for the reconstruction of capital-labor relations by giving what was at first limited sanction to trade-union organizations, and by adapting... some socialist values to positive government measures suited to regulating the corporate-capitalist order.”⁹ While Sklar does not suggest that this was a tremendous victory for labor, he fundamentally challenges Kolko's contention that attempts to regulate the American economy through the joint actions of workers and employers represented a complete betrayal of progressive values.

Although Sklar's interpretation, and works influenced by him, have provided a subtler understanding of market regulation during the Progressive Era than the Kolko's Manicheanism historians continue to portray market regulation after World War II in terms familiar to Kolko. Alan

6 Kolko, *Triumph of Conservatism*, 66.

7 Kolko, *Triumph of Conservatism*, 84.

8 Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: The Market, the Law, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 35.

9 Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism*, 436.

Brinkley argues in *End of Reform* that the post-war consensus was did less to challenge capitalism than the New Deal liberalism that it grew out of. Instead of critiquing capitalism, these reforms simply sought to reduce its flaws. Without an alternative to corporate capitalism, progressive and reformist energies were directed primarily toward managing the economy for the benefit of capital. Though unions had won a degree of legitimacy and regulation over labor markets, the expansion of a state-mediated labor-management system under the Wagner Act effectively defanged the more militant ambitions of the labor movement. The acceptance of such a deal ratified the basic terms of corporate capitalism and rendered any efforts by labor to overcome capital fundamentally contained and harmless.¹⁰

The BSEIU in Chicago provides an interesting perspective on this development. Through their political alliances the union became institutionalized. Such institutionalization both granted it a place of power, as McFetridge sat at the right hand of Mayor Daley, and committed it to the status quo. Indeed, it is hard not to see the spectacle of a union financing a luxury apartment building as a sign of an organization whose purpose—empowering its membership—has been overshadowed by its success. However, when viewed from the perspective of civic unionism, the construction of Marina City appears as a significant accomplishment: combining the power of labor, capital, and the state to benefit the building service workers of Chicago. Though Marina City may have been the opposite of the antipathy to capitalism that many wish characterized the post-war labor movement, such an effort displayed an ambitious, and exalted, understanding of the place of labor organizations in society.

10 Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995)

Despite this ambition, the BSEIU would sell its stake in Marina City prior to its completion. During the 1960s, contradictions between the craft-oriented civic unionism of Local 1 and its kin, and the industrial-oriented community solidarity unionism of Local 32-B, would come into direct conflict, setting up a multi-tiered power struggle between McFetridge and Sullivan. As McFetridge slowly became more of a political elder and less of a labor leader, he lost his grip on the organization. Ultimately the greater numbers, and updated perspective, of the union's New York faction would overwhelm the civic unionists of Chicago and relegate the city's locals into a secondary position in the national organization.

Though the factional fight between McFetridge and Sullivan had more to do with power politics and score settling than ideology, the fight revealed some of the weaknesses of civic unionism. The alliance between city hall and the union bore significant fruit for its members but did not encourage an aggressively expansionist or dynamic approach to organization. Acting more like a regulatory agency with a particular purview than a labor union, the locals loyal to McFetridge failed to adapt to the changing economy around them. Used to regulating labor on a city level, the national, post-war labor-management system was a poor fit for civic unionism and made Local 1 look like a relic from an earlier time. Sullivan used this perception, not entirely unreasonably, to render McFetridge and his followers as regressives and to justify his heavy-handed approach to breaking and replacing the old locals of Chicago.

The fight also revealed a subtle flaw in McFetridge's approach. Though allying with a succession of machine politicians and real estate owners had provided the union with the basis of its success since the late 1910s, in the changing environment of the 1960s it meant that the union was committed to the Daley regime. The association of the BSEIU and Daley, while practically

beneficial to the union, critically undermined the moral authority of the union's leaders. By the mid-1960s Local 1, once considered among the most racially progressive unions in the city, would be associated with slum-lords and housing segregation. Though internally staying true to racial equality, when defending civil rights conflicted with protecting political power, the union leaders rarely decided to carry through their principles.

Faust in Chicago

When, in 1920, the *Chicago Tribune* claimed that “[the President of the BSEIU] has more power and influence with the mayor... than anyone here no matter how much property he owns” it was an exaggeration, but by 1955 it had become the truth.¹¹ The election of Daley elevated McFetridge, and the BSEIU, into the upper reaches of Chicago politics. Indeed, historians have focused exclusively on McFetridge's position at Daley's right-hand. Adam Cohen and Elizabeth Taylor, for example, call McFetridge the “greatest beneficiary of Daley's appointment practices.”¹² As his personal power grew, McFetridge became known for commonly bragging, “I'm on more committees than anyone else in Chicago.” Through Daley, McFetridge gained direct, or indirect, representatives on boards ranging from the Chicago Board of Education to the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) to the Police Commission. These positions granted him the ability to direct money, jobs, and influence to his allies. By 1964, McFetridge had become so embedded in Chicago politics that an agent of Sullivan complained he individually possessed more political power in the Midwest than the rest of the union's leaders combined.¹³ Summarizing McFetridge's relationship with Daley, Len O'Connor writes, “Every prince, in short, needs his Machiavelli—and McFetridge was Daley's.”¹⁴ Though

11 “Flat Owners Join to Fight Rent Curb,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 27, 1920, 1.

12 Cohen & Taylor, *American Pharaoh*, 170.

13 “Moats to Sullivan,” circa 1964, Box 64, Folder 13, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records Collection, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

14 O'Connor, *Clout—Mayor Daley and His City*, 133.

McFetridge's influence over a committee or wing of city government was not always apparent, O'Connor continues, "the ubiquitous McFetridge was always in control, navigating these groups into the channels that Daley wanted them to travel."¹⁵ It was difficult to turn around quickly in the hallways of power in Chicago without stepping on the toes of William McFetridge.

Maintaining this power structure often came at the cost of ethics and social justice. Here the case of the CHA and racial integration is instructive. With control over the building service jobs of all the public housing developments in Chicago, maintaining influence over the CHA was a critical priority to the BSEIU. Even prior to Daley's election, the union maintained representation on the board through its chairman, Local 1 secretary-treasurer Ed Kruse. During his tenure, Kruse engaged in an extended feud with the Authority's famed integrationist head Elizabeth Wood. Wood envisioned the CHA as a tool of racial integration that would help to blur the sharply defined racial geography of Chicago. There is no evidence that Kruse opposed this element of her administration, but he virulently opposed her efforts to end the use of the CHA as a source of patronage jobs and dollars. When elements of the Democratic machine, possibly with Kruse's help, ousted Wood, it effectively ended the CHA's commitment to using its power to promote racially diverse neighborhoods.¹⁶

When it did not oppose their political interest, the BSEIU of Chicago strongly supported civil rights. As one of only four integrated unions in Chicago in 1920, the union had a tradition of racial egalitarianism.¹⁷ In 1940, shortly after his election to the presidency, McFetridge required an anti-discrimination pledge from every member of the union.¹⁸ During McFetridge's presidency he enforced integration throughout the union and helped to develop black leaders in the union. As he

¹⁵ O'Connor, *Clout—Mayor Daley and His City*, 134.

¹⁶ "Kruse Resigns as Chairman of CHA Board," *Chicago Tribune*, January 7, 1954, pg 54. American Pharaoh, 108-113.

¹⁷ *Federation News*, September 3, 1962.

¹⁸ *25th Anniversary of the Presidency*, 18.

proudly editorialized in 1962, “No discrimination shall be directed against any person because of creed, color, and nationality.’ That has been creed of the Chicago Flat Janitors Union Local 1 since it was founded 60 years ago. It is our policy and conviction that this is a sacred oath, taken seriously by every member and officer of the union.”¹⁹ Beyond formal integration, Local 1 had many black vice-presidents and other officials.²⁰ During the 1960s, the union expanded its efforts beyond the labor movement and became involved in the broader efforts of the civil rights movement. In 1964, for example, the BSEIU funded a committee of black doctors who were protesting segregation in the Cook County Hospitals.²¹ Their efforts were successful and the doctors thanked them for their assistance.²² In 1965, Local 1 expanded on this success by sponsoring a seminar with community leaders to promote integration on the south side.²³

As a prominent organization with a degree of openness to black leaders, the BSEIU became an avenue for the political aspirations of some African-Americans, most prominently James E. Kemp. Described by the *Chicago American* as a “protégé” of William McFetridge, Kemp was president of BSEIU Local 189, which held jurisdiction over “drugstore porters, furniture store janitors, and dock laborers.”²⁴ From his position in Local 189, Kemp became a prominent internal critic of the civil rights record of the CFL, exposing the failures of the Chicago labor movement to adequately punish locals for racial discrimination.²⁵ Through the political connections gained by his association with

19 *Federation News*, September 3, 1962.

20 Donald Stillman & Margie Snider, *Stronger Together: The Story of the SEIU*, (Washington, DC: SEIU, 2010).

21 *Chicago Sun Times*, November 14, 1962, *Chicago News*, November 14, 1962, *Federation News*, November 17, 1962.

22 *Federation News*, February 9, 1964.

23 *Chicago-American*, November 6th, 1965.

24 Karen Heise, “J. Kemp, labor leader, national head of NAACP,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 7, 1983, 46; *Chicago American*, August 22, 1963.

25 “2 Locals Quit CFL Over Loss of Position,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 20, 1963, 42.

the BSEIU, Kemp later served on the Fair Employment Practices Commission, and Regional Transportation Authority eventually becoming president of the NAACP.²⁶

However, political convenience always trumped concerns of social justice. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of Charles Swibel. From the outside Charles Swibel appeared to be a superb success story for the union. Swibel's family fled the Nazi invasion of Poland and arrived in the United States in 1937, when Charles was 10 years old. As an adult, Swibel found work as a flat janitor, in the employment of the notorious Chicago slumlord Mark Isaac. Isaac recognized the young Swibel's talents and helped him through school, eventually giving him a job in real estate development with his company, Marks and Co. In 1959, after Isaac Marks passed away, Swibel became president of the company.²⁷ For better or worse, Swibel had achieved the dream of many other flat janitors. Indeed, his rise to success in the real-estate market was so dramatic that the Free Enterprise Awards association named him an “American Success Story.”²⁸ Though Swibel proved successful in business, his buildings were horrible. Indeed, Swibel's buildings were so undesirable that he was widely referred to as “Flophouse Charlie.” Not only that, Swibel was notorious for refusing to rent apartments in several of his buildings to black tenants.²⁹

Under most circumstances “Flophouse Charlie” might have been regarded as nothing more than a crooked slumlord. However, Swibel seemed to possess a natural knack for politics—even his enemies described him as charming and superb at gaining influence—and his loyalty to McFetridge and the BSEIU was unquestioned. Together these qualities made him valuable to McFetridge and

26 Karen Heise, “J. Kemp, labor leader, national head of NAACP,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 7, 1983, 46.

27 William Mullen, “Portrait of a Power Broker,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 11, 1982, 17; Marjanović & Rüedi, *Marina City*, 46.

28 “Charles R. Swibel Named for Free Enterprise Award,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 24, 1961, 67.

29 Mullen, “Portrait of a Power Broker,” pg. 17; James L. Merriner, *Mr Chairman: Power in Dan Rostenkowski's America* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 133.

Daley. In 1954, when Swibel was only 29 years old, Daley appointed him to the CHA as one of McFetridge's representatives. After his appointment Swibel became a talented political fixer known as, in the words of Chicago political consultant Don Rose, a “‘Do-fer’ – as in ‘What can I ‘do-fer’ you.’” Over the next few years Swibel would continue to worm his way into the inner circle of Daley and McFetridge, securing a political career that would continue through the 1980s.³⁰

McFetridge's trust in Swibel was, in a way, not misplaced. The talented young man proved to be a continual defender of the interests of the Chicago labor movement. Through his arrangements with various unions, he ensured that the CHA continued to pay top dollar to union workers and to respect work rules. He was appointed chairman of the Chicago Housing Authority in 1956 and would continue to hold the position, and maintain the CHA as a union stronghold, for the next 26 years.³¹

Though Swibel aggressively defended the BSEIU, his chairmanship of the CHA was questionable at best. Reformers in the CHA often took aim at the patronage system, and with good reason as the labor and maintenance costs incurred by the CHA were astronomical. However, this always put reformers, many of whom also pushed for racial integration, in direct opposition to the interests of the BSEIU's representatives. Unfortunately, this meant that Elizabeth Wood would not be the only idealistic leader in the CHA to face the union's wrath.

The removal of William Kean, who Mayor Kennelly had appointed to replace Wood, perfectly illustrates this pattern. An admirer of Wood, Kean tried to make integration and efficiency priorities in his administration. Though Kean was willing, ultimately, to bend on integration, he remained vociferously opposed to the use of the CHA to deliver patronage. Beginning in 1956, and reaching

³⁰ Mullen, “Portrait of a Power Broker,” 17.

³¹ Vernon Jarrett, “A look at Charles Swibel's power,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 21, 1982, “Charles R. Swibel, 63, former CHA chairman, dies” *Chicago Tribune*, January 20, 1990, 21.

its peak in 1957, Swibel and his allies began to pressure Kean out of office by undermining his authority. Finally Kean resigned, opening the way for Daley to take firmer control over the CHA. By effectively giving aldermen the right to control the demographics of housing in their areas, Daley used the CHA to secure his power base. However, the political deal effectively began what Cohen and Taylor describe as “a new segregationist era” in Chicago's public housing. Instead of promoting the racially harmonious communities envisioned by Elizabeth Wood, the CHA of Daley and Swibel would become little more than a patronage factory run to extract as much federal political money, and as many political favors, as possible.³² Sometimes the interests of the BSEIU simply did not align with the interests of Chicago—or with the cause of social justice.

Swibel and Kemp were not the only union leaders who gained significant positions through their association with McFetridge and Daley. Longtime member and leader in Local 1 Gus Van Heck, for example, held a variety of positions including representing the union's interests on a rent control committee and serving as Vice-President of the Illinois Federation of Labor.³³ His son Ray, another union member, was an influential figure in Chicago's Belgian-American community, even becoming, in 1959, the King of Belgium's official representative to the city.³⁴ Charles J. Burg, a business agent in Local 1, similarly represented the interests of the union on the Medical Center Commission charged with building the west-side medical campus.³⁵ Though notoriously corrupt, Thomas Burke gained significant praise for his efforts in founding Union Health Services, a union-owned HMO. Founded in 1955, UHS provided labor controlled medical insurance and built the

32 Taylor & Cohen, *American Pharaoh*, 197-201; Richard M. Bernard, *Snowbelt Cities: Metropolitan Politics in the Northeast and Midwest since World War II* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 78; Ross Miller, *Here's the Deal" the Buying and Selling of a Great American City* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1996), 159.

33 “Janitors Get 6c Pay Boost, Benefit Plan,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 3, 1950, 4.

34 *Chicago Daily News*, May 13, 1959.

35 *Federation News*, December 18, 1954.

Olivia Bautsch Medical Center—a large medical clinic which the *Tribune* called “a showcase in the use of union funds for medical care.”³⁶

For the union's members, the BSEIU continued to make improvements to wages and conditions. Though picket lines against individual employers were not unheard of, strikes remained uncommon. However, this placidity did not mean that some of the union's members stopped making gains. Even if they engaged in far less militant labor actions, on average the janitors of Chicago remained better paid than their New York counterparts. The union achieved raises in 1952, 1959 and 1960.³⁷ These gains were partially made through the acquiescence of employers. The Chicago Real Estate Board even publicly defended increases to flat janitor salaries, claiming that a spate of rent increases in 1960 were the result of high taxes, not high labor costs.³⁸

To justify this success the union argued that its members provided crucial services to the city that allowed Chicago to prosper. In May 1950, for example, Mayor Kennelly held a parade to honor efforts to make Chicago a cleaner city. The Flat Janitors Union provided one of the largest contingents, two hundred and fifty janitors, carrying banners that read “We Help Keep Chicago Nifty in 1950” and “We'll Be There to Do Our Share.”³⁹ In 1955, McFetridge used his powers as head of the BSEIU to command all 60,000 members in the city to participate in city beautification projects. He argued that this was part of the natural civic duty of the union because “[o]ur members [are] in a most favorable position to serve and to carry out a program of cleanliness, safety and

36 James Strong, Burke's ouster ends labor era,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 23, 1973, 2. See also “Rites to Start Work on Union Health Center,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 29, 1959, 21; George Bliss, “Union to Spend 1.5 Million for Structure,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 12, 1962, 61; “U. I. Professor Heads Bautsch Medical Unit,” *Chicago Tribune*, 16; “A Directory of Local HMO Programs,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 25, 1976, 240.

37 “Annual Wage Increase Survey,” Box 1, Folder 1-25, SEIU Research Department, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

38 *Real Estate News*, December 9, 1960, *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 6th, 1960.

39 Rita Fitzpatrick, “Kennelly Mops Away to Keep Clean-Up Vow,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 6, 1950, 6.

beautification by their daily services in public and private buildings.”⁴⁰ The union received credit for Chicago winning national awards for cleanest town in 1959, 1961, and 1962.⁴¹

As the stewards of the city's boilers and furnaces, the union commonly portrayed itself as the defenders of the city's air. Prior to the war, the union sponsored smoke abatement classes for its members during which they studied the work of University of Chicago professor Ernest Price on air pollution.⁴² After the war the union continued its efforts portraying its members as, in the words of Local 1's Ed Kruse, “Front line troops in the continuing war against air pollution.”⁴³ The union fought this “war” through “talking to our members, distributing literature, making movies, lecturing and holding school on the best methods of eliminating air pollution that results from furnace operations.”⁴⁴ To support the efforts of individual members the union publicly supported efforts to enforce and tighten air pollution laws.⁴⁵

Behind all of this McFetridge continued to successfully angle for more political power and prominence. People seeking appointments, as minor as a clerkship in the Cook County Superior Court, offered their loyalty to him in return for an endorsement.⁴⁶ By helping people into state jobs, he constructed a dense network of government officials who were personally loyal to him. In many ways the person of William McFetridge came to overshadow the BSEIU itself. A 1960 BSEIU study noted that “during the past 15 or 20 years Building Service has also evoked the image of one man, William L. McFetridge, in the minds of many labor leaders, and a large number of members of Building Service local unions.”⁴⁷ In Chicago, and perhaps across much of the country, the BSEIU

40 *Federation News*, June 4, 1955.

41 *Chicago Sun-Times*, May 5, 1963.

42 “Janitors Study How to Lessen Smoke Nuisance,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 7, 1949.

43 *Chicago-American*, March 30, 1965.

44 *Chicago-American*, March 30, 1965.

45 *Chicago News*, March 12, 1963.

46 *Federation News*, October 29, 1960.

47 *Planning BSEIU's Future*, Box 5, Folder 2, SEIU Research Department, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State

and McFetridge had become synonymous.

In 1960 President McFetridge formally retired from the International Union. Despite this, he maintained much of his power both inside and outside of the union. In 1962, for example, the *Chicago American* still described him as being “considered by many to be the most powerful labor leader in the country.”⁴⁸ Though he passed the presidency to 32-B leader David Sullivan, McFetridge continued to hold his position as Vice-President of the AFL-CIO, the critical presidency of Local 1, and effective control over the locals of Chicago. Initially Sullivan tolerated this arrangement, but became increasingly uncomfortable with the Chicagoan's influence out-pacing his own. The stage had been set for a conflict that had been brewing since 1940.

The Towers that Janitors Built

A rakish, young slumlord, a modernist architect with something to prove, and a labor leader sitting at the right hand of a mayor: Charles Swibel, Bertrand Goldberg, and William McFetridge were unlikely people to hold power and even more unlikely partners. In a broad sense, their collaboration began in the late 1950s when Swibel and McFetridge began to discuss investing a significant chunk of union funds in downtown Chicago. Swibel's goal in this discussion was largely financial, as the funds accumulated by the BSEIU could provide him with far more capital than he could gather on his own. McFetridge, on the other hand, viewed a major union building project as a physical monument to his union, its members and, somewhat less altruistically, himself. For his part Goldberg, who became involved in June of 1959, sought a project that would give him a chance to

University. Hereafter *Planning BSEIU's Future*.
 48 *Chicago-American*, June 15, 1962.

put his ideas about integrated urbanism into effect—while hopefully finally moving himself out of the shadow of his mentor, the great Mies van der Rohe.⁴⁹

Unlike Swibel, who viewed Marina City primarily as a financial coup, Goldberg and McFetridge shared a vision of the future of Chicago. Goldberg strongly believed that a “city center is basic to society,” effectively arguing that culture, creativity, and a sense urban community were all premised on a vibrant center.⁵⁰ McFetridge agreed with Goldberg but viewed the problem in more concrete terms. As the December 1960 issue of *Local 1 News*, the newsletter of the Flat Janitors Union, argued, “Our downtown areas... provide the bulk of our employment [but] have failed to grow in population.”⁵¹ The flat janitors were fundamentally urban workers, they relied on a vibrant downtown to maintain and expand their employment. Through the politics of the city they had achieved a high-degree of regulation over their labor market, but it was difficult to imagine how a similar model could be implemented in the suburbs.

As suburbanization was arguably the greatest threat to the union's continued power, and his lasting legacy, McFetridge aggressively advocated for Mayor Daley's vision of Chicago as an internationally prominent urban center. Daley had become captivated by Daniel Burnham's 1909 plan and sought to revitalize the city's urban core. McFetridge and Daley worked together on a variety of re-development plans including finding a site for the Chicago campus of the University of Illinois, centralizing the railroad yards, and building a new airport. Though each project stood on its own, they were also part of the broad project of bringing people, specifically people with significant amounts of money, back into downtown Chicago.⁵²

49 Marjanović & Rüedi, *Marina City*, 43-48.

50 Quoted in Marjanović & Rüedi, *Marina City*, 47.

51 *Local 1 News*, December 1960, Box 1, Folder 11, Research Department Historical, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Hereafter *Local 1 News*.

52 Cohen & Taylor, *American Pharaoh*, 170, 216-244.

McFetridge intended Marina City as a part of this program. *Local 1 News* optimistically announced that once completed the two twisting towers would arrest suburbanization, saying, “For the first time in 50 years the exodus of Chicago's central population toward the suburbs will be reversed and some 900 families, over 2,500 people, will come to live in Marina City, within 2 blocks of the loop.”⁵³ Somewhat more ambitiously, the newsletter suggested that the project “may well set an example for other cities, to protect the future of downtown centers” and therefore ensure the continued employment of urban janitors throughout the country.⁵⁴ All of this would prevent what another union publication described as “decay, flight, and the flight to the suburbs.”⁵⁵ Never lacking in ambition, Local 1 sought to re-arrange residential patterns to better suit their membership.

However, Marina City represented something more than simply an effort to fight the flight of money to the suburbs: its twin towers of steel and glass were the physical representation of the “McFetridge Idea” or civic unionism. Since the 1920s union leaders in Chicago had argued that the members of the BSEIU were effectively public servants who owed allegiance to something greater than the marketplace. Whether explained in terms of citizenship, craft, or professionalism, the basic message of the union had always orbited around the ideal of public service. Facilitating urban revitalization through the creation of nothing less than a unique landmark represented one of the most concrete ways that the union could express this ideal. As McFetridge described it, in Marina City, “We combine idealism, and practical self interest. Marina City reflects our confidence in the future of Chicago.”⁵⁶ Marina City made physical the promises of decades of union leaders.

Marina City also represented a potentially lucrative investment for the BSEIU. Over his term in

⁵³ *Local 1 News*, December 1960,

⁵⁴ *Local 1 News*, December 1960.

⁵⁵ *25th Anniversary of the Presidency*, 16.

⁵⁶ *25th Anniversary of the Presidency*, 17-19.

office the BSEIU had amassed a pension fund large enough that it could consider investing in larger projects like Marina City. Ultimately, the BSEIU initially invested into the project a total of \$3.1 million, which slowly rose to around \$12 million. Though this was a minority share of the total budget, which was eventually over \$36 million, the janitors' money provided the crucial initial investment. In a way, McFetridge was exercising good financial stewardship of the BSEIU as he was always supremely confident that their investment would have a significant return.⁵⁷ Part of this confidence came from McFetridge's knowledge that he could pressure various state agencies and business people into renting facilities in the project's commercial areas. For example, in 1965 the Illinois highway department moved its facilities to Marina City, a move that the *Chicago Tribune* responded to with a “lack of surprise... because the owners of Marina City include two influential Democrats [McFetridge and Swibel].”⁵⁸ In a peculiar way, Marina City was a superb opportunity for funneling government money into union hands—as well as McFetridge's own.

Marina City also represented a direct opportunity to provide one hundred jobs for BSEIU members. These jobs represented the ultimate in union security as they were literally controlled by the union. In the public sector the BSEIU had long used its political power to shape negotiations in their own favor. By owning shares in the very buildings that its members worked in, the union could bring this beneficial relationship into the private sector. The peculiarity of this arrangement was not lost on the union's critics. An anonymous 1961 pamphlet entitled *The Union and Marina City*, for example, noted that the “union by its entry into the management area, [sic] will find that it will have to operate in a way contradictory to its original purpose. Can the union now fairly represent labor as labor's employer?” The pamphlet noted that such a situation would result in numerous peculiar

⁵⁷ Marjanović & Rüedi, *Marina City*, 99.

⁵⁸ “This Deal Smells,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 11, 1965, 20.

ironies such as the fact that the union's pension fund, which had been funded by building owners, would now be used “to directly compete with and possible destroy [those same] property owners.”⁵⁹ For good or for ill, the BSEIU had achieved a fusion of labor and capital.

But perhaps most important, at least to the members of the BSEIU in Chicago, the “house the janitors built” as Marina City was sometimes known, provided a physical symbol of how far the building service workers of Chicago had come. BSEIU President David Sullivan, though privately skeptical about the project, described Marina City as a great test of, and potential testament to, the labor movement, noting “the eyes of the whole world are watching the progress of Marina City to see if unions can accomplish such great progress.”⁶⁰ E. G. Anderson, an 80-year-old flat janitor who served as a director of the Marina City Building Corporation, similarly noted, “Just think, 52 years ago when I came to Chicago... janitors were meeting in basements and behind saloons to organize a union. Now, Local No. 1 is world famous because of Marina City and what Bill McFetridge has done for labor and in civic life.”⁶¹ Anderson had a valid point. Despite all flaws of the Local 1, its involvement in Marina City would have been unthinkable without the success of the organization. He continued, “[Marina City] makes me very proud... I was able to watch Chicago grow into greatness.... I've helped a little along the way. That's enough for any man.”⁶² That a flat janitor could credibly make this claim was a testament to the very real improvement of their place in Chicago. No wonder Local 1 paid for a float with a model of Marina City on it to appear in the city's parades.⁶³

59 “The Union and Marina City,” Box 4, Folder 14, SEIU Historical Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

60 “G.E.B Meeting: minutes,” October 1961, Box 1, Folder 71, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

61 *Federation News*, December 22, 1962.

62 *Federation News*, December 22, 1962.

63 *Lincoln-Belmont Booster*, May 8, 1963.

The financing of Marina City represented the “largest financial partnership between federal, union, banking, and business interests ever seen in a housing complex on the American continent.”⁶⁴ Just buying the land necessary for the complex represented the largest private land transaction in the city's history. Transforming it from a mere sketch into a reality required a complicated interplay of economic and political influence. For the project to be financially feasible it required a cheap line of credit. However, such a line was difficult to obtain because of the many unknown risks in its innovative design. Loan costs were also inflated by Federal Housing Administration (FHA) policies that refused to guarantee loans on buildings intended for single people or families without children. Ultimately McFetridge prevailed on Daley to use his influence in Washington, D.C. to push the FHA to define single people and childless couples as families. The re-definition secured the union's loans to the newly founded, and McFetridge-dominated, Marina City Building Corporation—effectively providing the union with a guarantee on its investment. Union connections similarly resolved zoning issues.⁶⁵

The buildings themselves were to be pillars to modernity, progress, and optimism—just the themes that Daley wanted to infuse downtown Chicago with. The twin cylindrical towers were, for a time, the tallest purely residential structures in the world. Inside the apartments were, and indeed remain, iconic symbols of 1960s modernism, complete with lush organic curves, exposed internal beams, and balconies that resembled petals or the leaves of a great tree of structural concrete. Even the process of construction was a tremendous spectacle of engineering with the foundation drilled down to 110 feet and a crane that was hydraulically lifted with the construction of each new floor. As the buildings were essentially built out of poured, reinforced concrete, Chicagoans could literally

64 Marjanović & Rüedi, *Marina City*, 93.

65 Marjanović & Rüedi, *Marina City*, 93-99.

watch the buildings grow over time—a process that occurred at the astounding pace of a floor a day.⁶⁶

For the union, the image of Marina City proved to be a publicity goldmine. A 1960 study of the union's image suggested that projecting an image of modernity would be key in disassociating the union from its past as a janitor's organization. Sullivan and his supporters viewed the BSEIU as a general service worker union and sought to expand aggressively into the public and medical sectors, so projecting a modern progressive image was deemed critical by the consultants who suggested that “through action and public statements related to real estate and urban development, BSEIU can exhibit an image of interest to building owners, managers, and builder.”⁶⁷ To promote this “image of interest” leaders could focus on the “announcement of the Marina City project [as real-estate] is certainly a field in which... almost no other union has done very much.”⁶⁸ Put another way, the modernity of Marina City was to suggest the modern relevance of the entire BSEIU. Favorable press in the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and even *Reader's Digest* all helped to develop the image of the union as a modern community organization with broad interests in urban issues.⁶⁹

Upon its completion Marina City became an iconic symbol of downtown Chicago, and of Daley's efforts at building a prosperous urban core. In his work on changing urban patterns, journalist Alan Ehrenhalt describes the towers as a “turning point” that proved the viability of large, opulent residential enclaves resulting in major developments such as Lake Point Tower in 1968. He argues that such towers led to what was for “city government and the developers, a truly virtuous circle”

66 “Start Marina City, World's Tallest Flats,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 23, 1960, 5; “New Landmark,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 3, 1962, 20; Marjanović & Rüedi, *Marina City*, 51-54, 75-76, 96.

67 *Planning BSEIU's Future*.

68 *Planning BSEIU's Future*.

69 “The House the Janitors Built,” *Reader's Digest*, February 1963, Box 4, Folder 15, SEIU Historical Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

that “brought in enough year-round urban dwellers to support a raft of new businesses... restaurants, nightclubs, boutiques, and more than one multistory shopping mall.”⁷⁰ Despite the seeming hyperbole of McFetridge's claims, Marina City did, in fact play a role in encouraging the residential transformation of the city's core.

Racially the impact of Marina City was ambiguous. Goldberg, likely with McFetridge's support, demanded that the building not be segregated. Consequently four of the initial tenants of the building were black.⁷¹ Though four out of nearly 900 is obviously a small percentage, the presence of a few black tenants in Marina City was sufficiently striking that *Ebony* ran a multi-page article about them in November 1964. Indeed, many found the integration of Marina City to be shocking. One of the tower's black residents, Albert Gaskin, described regularly being greeted with disbelief when he told people that he lived there. Gaskin, however, noted that his neighbors were friendly and welcoming to him. His only complaint about living in Marina City was having “friends who want to drop in with out-of-town guests to show them the latest in apartment living.... I guess I ought to charge an admission fee.” Notably, Gaskin found his way to Marina City after being rejected by several similar apartment buildings in Evanston.⁷² However, in their superb *Marina City: Bertrand Goldberg's Urban Vision* Igor Marjanović and Katerina Rüedi argue that, despite Goldberg's intentions, there is little photographic evidence of black residents in the late 1960s and beyond.⁷³

The glitz of Daley's new downtown concealed dark truths. Though the downtown area, and several of the mayor's favored wards, received extensive and successful makeovers in the 60s and 70s, other areas received little attention, and less money. As his political network became more an

70 Alan Ehrenhalt, *The Great Inversion: And the Future of the American City* (New York: Knopf, 2012), 47-48.

71 Marjanović & Rüedi, *Marina City*, 158.

72 “Chicago's marina city is a radical departure from conventional apartment living,” *Ebony*, November 1964, 107.

73 Marjanović & Rüedi, *Marina City*, 158.

exercise in the chess game of patronage and influence peddling than an electoral machine, Daley turned his back on the very voters who had been key to his victory over Kennelly. Working-class and black neighborhoods that lacked powerful advocates in the city government were rarely included in redevelopment plans and the needs of their residents were treated as low priorities. The contrast between successful residential projects, like Marina City and CHA housing projects brings the flaws of the Daley administration into sharp focus. Where Marina City rose to the sky with few impediments, and little inefficiency, Swibel's CHA became an enduring source of shame and embarrassment. Indeed, critics claimed that the bad administration in the city's public housing resulted in worse conditions, and greater racial segregation, than the slums they were intended to replace. Conditions were so bad, and the budget of the CHA so burdened by graft, that in 1982, the Federal Housing and Urban Development Agency collaborated with Swibel's enemies to finally secure the downfall of "Flophouse Charlie."⁷⁴

The great beneficiaries of the union's power, Marina City, and other developments like it, became palaces of the powerful and monuments to the inequalities of the city. As David K. Fremont lyrically describes the north river neighborhood that Marina City anchored, "The media work here.... [the] high and mighty work here.... The high and mighty play here.... The high and mighty live here."⁷⁵ While many of Chicago's neighborhoods suffered from neglect, McFetridge and his machine built a playground for the wealthy.

The case of McFetridge, the BSEIU and Marina City partially fits the pessimistic narrative of Kolko and Brinkley. The collaboration of labor, the state, and capital ultimately resulted not in the empowerment of the working class but in the rise of a new monument to opulence of Chicago's

74 Bernard, *Snowbelt Cities*, 76-79; Cohen & Taylor, *American Pharaoh*, 170.

75 David K. Fremont, *Chicago Politics, Ward by Ward* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 272.

monied elite. In Chicago the BSEIU did not make alliances with small proprietors, as the unions described by Wender Cohen, or Johnston did, they became associated with real-estate and financial titans. These alliances aligned their interests, and to a lesser extent the interests of the union's members, with the wealthy and powerful of Chicago. Arguably such an outcome represented a fundamental betrayal of the purposes and ideals of the labor movement as a whole. In a very different way than Scalise, McFetridge became corrupted by his own success.

Things Falling Apart

When William McFetridge retired from the presidency of the International Union, he effectively handed the position to the president of Local 32B, David Sullivan. Publicly, McFetridge praised Sullivan noting he was the “best qualified man” for the job.⁷⁶ Although they appeared in accord, in reality discord and distrust festered between them. Although he failed to prove it, McFetridge believed that Sullivan played a willing role in Scalise's corrupt regime. In 1945, for example, he claimed that Sullivan was “the last malignant influence of George Scalise” and accused him of numerous improprieties including giving payoffs to criminals.⁷⁷ Behind the scenes, McFetridge supported, and perhaps even sponsored, efforts to unseat Sullivan. In 1944, for example, five members of Local 32B accused Sullivan of embezzling \$300,000 and requested that McFetridge investigate. Sullivan refused to allow an international-level investigation, even taking the union to court to block it. When the courts sided with Sullivan—effectively banning the executive board from continuing anti-corruption investigations against local presidents—McFetridge attempted to suspend him only to be blocked again by a New York judge. McFetridge eventually managed to temporarily remove Sullivan, but eventually allowed him to retake his position. After this, the men

⁷⁶ George Bliss, “Feud Between Janitor Union Leaders Aired,” *The Chicago Tribune*, April 1, 1961, 2.

⁷⁷ *Chicago Herald-American*, March 2, 1945.

reconciled and appeared to develop a productive working relationship. However, Sullivan never forgot McFetridge's opposition and McFetridge never seemed fully convinced that Sullivan was not corrupt.⁷⁸

Another point of tension between the two men revolved around Sullivan's actions during World War II. Though Local 32B earned praise for their salvage activities and support of the war effort, the union continued to engage in aggressive labor activity through the war. During a particularly acrimonious conflict in May 1942, Mayor La Guardia even angrily claimed that Sullivan broke a personal agreement to delay labor activity during arbitrations and handed the matter over the War Labor Board which ordered an end to the strike. Despite La Guardia's annoyance, arbitrators decided in favor of Local 32B resulting in pay increases and shorter work weeks. Similarly in 1945 Sullivan led a strike that violated the orders of the War Labor Board but successfully put pressure on negotiators. Ultimately Governor Dewey intervened enforcing a 10-year peace between employers and janitors in return for granting Sullivan's demands—including a \$2.64 weekly wage increase and a reduction in working hours. Though the strikes both resulted in gains for the union—and were prompted by employer intransigence and bad faith—they stood in stark contrast to the image of labor peace that McFetridge attempted to maintain through the war.

Sullivan's conduct during the war illustrates a larger difference between the two leaders. While McFetridge's civic unionism certainly did not reject traditional labor activism as a tool to gain leverage, it held it as a last resort and promoted the use of insider political power wherever possible. Much of Sullivan's increased militancy came from the aggressiveness of New York's employers.

78 "Accounting Asked of Union's Funds," *The New York Times*, April 14, 1944, 21; "Sullivan Loses Move to Halt Union Inquiry," *The New York Times*, September 9, 1944, 15; "Court Bars Trial of Union Official," *The New York Times*, September 20, 1944, 38; "Fights Suspension Move," *The New York Times*, March 9, 1945, 32; "Sullivan Ouster Blocked," *The New York Times*, April 20, 1945, 21.

Even Dewey's 10-year peace and arbitration plan failed to prevent conflicts. By January 1949, employers canceled their contract with the union and began to prepare for a strike.⁷⁹ Notably, employers canceled the contract because rents remained lower than expected. Sullivan responded by arguing that, "Our stand has no relation to rent increases."⁸⁰ Unlike McFetridge—who actively worked to improve the real estate markets in Chicago as a means of increasing the wages of flat janitors—Sullivan cared little for the bottom line of employers.⁸¹ Sullivan's efforts eventually resulted in wage increases in New York—though average wages remained significantly lower than those in Chicago.⁸²

McFetridge and Sullivan simply understood the labor movement in different terms. McFetridge viewed unions as powerful, possibly even decisive, participants in the organic generation of a political-economic order that favored the workers he represented. McFetridge's perspective thus remained tethered first and foremost to local conditions and relationships. As indicated through Marina City, he believed that the interests of employers and unions—the continued prosperity of a real-estate industry that paid fair wages—remained fundamentally aligned. Sullivan, on the other hand, viewed labor organizing as part of the broader New Deal, and post-war, agenda of regulating and rationalizing capitalism. Though occasionally setting a conciliatory tone, in practice Sullivan treated employers as opponents and put his faith in the emerging, federal system of labor relations.

79 "32,227 Wardens on Duty," *The New York Times*, December 11, 1941, 22; "Union Pact Signed for 435 Buildings," *The New York Times*, February 19, 1942, 13; "U.S. Ends Strike in Buildings Here After 13 Hours," *The New York Times*, May 2, 1942, 1; "Service Union here Get Pay Increase," *The New York Times*, August 4, 1942, 1; "Building Staffs Win Pay Rise," *The New York Times* September, 3, 1942, 16; "Labor Groups Aid Scrap Collection," *The New York Times*, October 4, 1942, 42; "Sanctions by WLB on Strikers Urged," *The New York Times*, September 26, 1945, 3; "Dewey Intervene in Service Strike," *The New York Times*, September 29, 1945, 1; "Building Strikers' Demands Met," *The New York Times*, October 12, 1945, 1; "Governor Praises Building Pact Here," *The New York Times*, December 5, 1945, 19; "Apartment Strike in Spring Forecast," *The New York Times*, January 30, 1949, 1.

80 "Apartment Strike in Spring Forecast," *The New York Times*, January 30, 1949, 1.

81 In this way McFetridge exemplified the approach of Andy Stern in the modern SEIU which often included a heavy emphasis on showing employers the potential political and fiscal values in having a unionized workforce.

82 "Annual Wage Increase Survey," Box 1, Folder 1-25, SEIU Research Department, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

At the beginning of the 1949 struggle, for example, Sullivan argued that local negotiations could not resolve the dispute and that “the agency created by the Government is best qualified to pass on that question [of wages].”⁸³ In very meaningful ways, the two men simply understood the labor movement in different terms.

Despite these differences, relations between Local 1 and Local 32B remained amicable and even supportive. In 1955, even after the 61-year old McFetridge publicly announced that he wanted to retire, Sullivan renominated him as president of the BSEIU, a position the long-time president somewhat reluctantly accepted.⁸⁴ Later McFetridge did not meaningfully resist Sullivan's rise in 1960. Partially his willingness to allow Sullivan to take charge of the union came from the raw power that the New York leader could muster. By 1956 Sullivan led 34,824 workers in Local 32B and likely could rely on the support of another 13,000 workers in its sisterlocals (32E and 32J). Local 1 and 46, the two locals that McFetridge maintained the closest relationships with only represented 17,410 workers. These numbers became even more striking by 1965 where the 32 locals represented over 63,000 workers while locals 1 and 46 represented fewer than 20,000 workers. For all intents and purposes, the BSEIU became a union centered on New York, leaving McFetridge little ability to block the national ascension of the best known leader from the city.⁸⁵

Tension between McFetridge and Sullivan began to build almost immediately after the presidential election. The BSEIU research department issued a report entitled *Planning the BSEIU's Future* which identified McFetridge and what he represented as an impediment to the union's progress. The report argues that “in many new organizations, when a new administration takes over,

83 “Apartment Strike in Spring Forecast,” *The New York Times*, January 30, 1949, 1.

84 “Union Head Re-Elected,” *The New York Times*, April 29, 1955, 20.

85 “Local Union Membership,” Box 5, Folder 79, SEIU Research Department Collection, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University; “Local Union Membership,” Box 5, Folder 80, SEIU Research Department Collection, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

one of its first actions is to plan and announce a new program.” The report issued a series of progressive recommendations for the union to “play an ever greater role in the future of nations” and “broaden its objectives” to include a wider scope of social justice issues. In the future, the report argued, the BSEIU could evolve into a general service workers union covering a larger, more diverse set of workers and industries. In particular, the report called for expansion in health care and the public sector—both of which offered largely untapped opportunities for organization. However, “for many union members, both within and outside of the BSEIU, Building Service has traditionally been a janitors' union. During the past 15 or 20 years Building Service has also evoked the image of one man, William L. McFetridge, in the minds of man labor leaders, and a large number of members of Building Service local unions.” In order to achieve its potential the BSEIU must avoid “any one occupational connotation except possibly to carry an association with service work.” In addition, extensive new organization required increased centralization of power in the hands of the international and a focus on “broader issues of labor policy.” Indeed, the report argued, that the union's “building service roots should be underplayed.” Though it is careful not to openly say it, the report represented a fundamental challenge to William McFetrdige and his civic unionism. Despite the report's praise for Marina City, the union that he built over his long presidency is portrayed as the creature of an earlier time and the leader himself as a kind of atavism. Indeed, by downplaying the significance of the union's roots in the janitors of Chicago, it sought to re-write the union's origins and de-emphasize its successes in changing the lives of janitors throughout the country—effectively challenging McFetridge's legacy.⁸⁶

86 *Planning BSEIU's Future*, September 26, 1960, SEIU Research Department, Box 5, Folder 2, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

The report exemplified Sullivan's image of the new BSEIU as a general service workers union with a heavy emphasis on aggressive expansion based on organizing entire workplaces into single units. Just as McFetridge's ideas about the BSEIU came from his experiences with locals 1 and 46, Sullivan's derived from the development of Local 32B. Unlike the Chicago unions, that organized janitors and elevator operators, Local 32B prided itself on covering entire buildings of workers. Such an organization—which we could describe as industrial, it is better described as the single-unit model—stood in stark contrast to the organizational principles of unions in Chicago. Indeed, in Chicago locals 1 (flat janitors), 25 (office janitors), and 66 (elevator operators) shared the same jurisdiction as Local 32B alone.⁸⁷

The division between Local 32B and its Chicago equivalents extended beyond organizational structure to identity. Though Local 32B sold itself as a union of workers who benefited the public, it never used the same highly-professional rhetoric developed by McFetridge in locals 1 and 46. As Gold's interviews with flat janitors make clear, the identity of these workers revolved not around their membership in unions but through the inherent value of their labor as guardians of their buildings and tenants.⁸⁸ Collapsing them into workplaces represented a fundamental challenge to this identity.

However, the post-war labor relations regime made the craft model espoused by McFetridge increasingly untenable. The National Labor Relations Board favored the single-unit model of organization in which entire workplaces could be organized under a single unit—a fact that Sullivan recognized and remained deeply concerned with. In a report from April 1961, Sullivan expressed concern that the NLRB's decisions increasingly prevented the union from protecting its membership

⁸⁷ "Correspondence of Moats to Sullivan," Box 64, Folder 17, SEIU Executive Office: David Sullivan Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁸⁸ See Chapter Four for more on this attitude.

against raids by other organizations. Noting that the Board refused to recognize the split units in department stores, Sullivan remarked that “the only remaining possibility has been for [the] BSEIU to compete in efforts to organize the entire store on an overall-basis.” He continues that the “NLRB has given no consideration to establishing separate units of janitors and janitresses and has shown clearly that it is not interested in the jurisdiction which belongs to the BSEIU.” Though the BSEIU devoted a significant amount of their resources to fighting this, Sullivan notes with frustration that “We learn from sources in Washington that on the basis of the present holdings of the NLRB... the Board will find in favor of the over-all unit and will not consider establishing a unit of janitors.” The NLRB even refused to recognize jurisdictional arrangements established between unions, effectively nullifying a series of delicate treaties worked out between the BSEIU and the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union—creating an endless possibility for jurisdictional fights.⁸⁹ Over the coming years, the NLRB's unwillingness to recognize the BSEIU's jurisdiction not only transformed and undermined the delicate networks of inter-union alliances that characterized the civic unionism of McFetridge, they forced the union to become an unwieldy octopus of service workers with different outlooks and needs.⁹⁰

The single-unit fixation of the NLRB troubled Sullivan on a deeper level. Through his experience with Local 32B, the leader commonly relied on the War Labor Board, the NLRB, or New York State's equivalent institutions. He disliked the kind of insider politics—which he associated with Tammany Hall in New York—that the civic unionism of McFetridge thrived on. Yet at the same

89 “G.E.B. Meeting,” April 1961, Box 1, Folder 69, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Though Sullivan delivered the report under his own name, internal documents reveal that they were largely written by his aide Lester Asher who seems to have been charged with dealing with the NLRB.

90 Though it is outside the scope of this dissertation, I would argue that the roots of many of the SEIU's modern conflicts, ably describe by Steve Early in *The Civil War in US Labor*, can be found in this moment when the NLRB essentially forced the BSEIU to turn its back on all semblance of jurisdictional considerations in favor of a law-of-the-jungle type war against all other unions with claims that even faintly abutted janitors and maintenance personnel.

time, the national structure of labor relations often proved ill-equipped for dealing with the distinctive needs of his members. In testimony to the House Subcommittee on Unemployment and the Impact of Automation, Sullivan lamented that “there has long been a tendency to think of our working people as primarily engaged in manufacturing... The service industries [have been] completely forgotten when beneficial legislation was considered.”⁹¹ Recognizing that the emerging regime bypassed many of the workers that the BSEIU sought to organize, Sullivan focused far more on lobbying at a federal level than he did on local politics. The federalization of the union's political agenda represented another fundamental challenge to civic unionism in that it shifted the political focus of the union away from the community-orientation of the Chicago locals.

At the same time as the NLRB compelled Sullivan to favor single-unit or industrial models of organization, technological change pushed him to expand local 32B in new directions. Though Local 32B organized diverse workers, its heart always remained in the elevator operators. By 1960 increase automation in elevators began to undermine the basis of the local. Local 32B fought this change in diverse ways from strikes to a public relations campaign to persistent lobbying efforts, but they largely failed to hold back change. As Grace Palladino argues in a superb article entitled “When Militancy Isn't Enough,” though Local 32B engaged in a superb campaign against automation they simply could not challenge its reality. She concludes that “despite the local's successful efforts to organize seemingly unorganizable workers and despite successful struggles to win a living wage and benefits for unskilled, marginal workers, this union had no leverage when industry automated elevator service.” Such an outcome “disarmed the elevator operators' union, and left Local 32B no choice but to accept the change and move on to greener organizing fields.”⁹²

91 “G.E.B: Meeting: minutes,” April 1961, Box 1, Folder 69, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

92 Palladino, “When Militancy Isn't Enough: The Impact of Automation on New York City Building Service Workers,

By 1961 this had become painfully clear to Sullivan. Internally he pushed for an aggressive, wide-spread campaign of organization as a means to offset what he believed to be inevitable losses to automation. Combined with the unenforceability of jurisdictional lines, such considerations drove Sullivan and his supporters to aggressively expand the union into hospitals, department stores, hotels, and nursing homes.⁹³ Though McFetridge certainly never declared himself as opposed to such expansion, he did not push such aggressive expansions in Chicago and maintained a high-degree of respect for existing jurisdictional agreements. Even as residential patterns changed and some buildings began to eschew unionized flat janitors, McFetridge and Local 1 did little to adapt or seek out new groups of workers to organize. Instead the union pursued what might be described as a macro-level approach in which they sought to make interventions—such as Marina City—to transform the economic realities to better suit their existing membership and jurisdiction.

George Fairchild, president of Local 4, became the Chicago face of Sullivan's new organizational agenda. Fairchild first entered into the public consciousness in May of 1959 when his local—whose jurisdiction covered hotels and nursing homes—succeeded at organizing the residential hotels represented by the Chicago Residential Hotel Association. The contract expanded the BSEIU's activities into the realm of hotels.⁹⁴ Committed to both aggressive organization and the single-unit, Fairchild represented the exact kind of leader that Sullivan wanted to encourage. Believing that Local 4 represented the future of the BSEIU in Chicago, Sullivan actively subsidized their activities. McFetridge, however, viewed Fairchild as a threat on several levels. Although no solid record of it exists—unsurprising for an agreement that was likely secured with a handshake—Sullivan strongly

1934-1970,” 220.

93 “G.E.B Meeting: minutes,” April 1961, Box 1, Folder 69, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

94 “4,000 Workers in Hotels Get Pay Increases,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 2, 1959, 40.

believed that McFetridge secretly granted HERE jurisdiction over all of Chicago's hotels. Such a move deeply weakened the position of Local 4 by carving out half of their jurisdiction.⁹⁵ Though the press considered Fairchild a protégé of McFetridge, his connections to Sullivan clearly divided Fairchild's loyalties, making him suspect.

However, McFetridge's deeper objection to Fairchild came from his politics. Although McFetridge personally spoke in favor of the goals of the Civil Rights Movement, his support of Mayor Daley often put him at odds with activists—particularly on issues of open housing. Sullivan, on the other hand, actively embraced the movement, providing money and personal support to Martin Luther King, Jr.⁹⁶ Fairchild shared Sullivan's passion and actively worked against the Daley machine. He formed an alliance with Leon Depres—the famously independent lawyer, activist, and anti-Daley alderman—and actively worked against the political status quo. Reporter George Tagge noted in April 1961 that “Fairchild has been working quietly with suburban Democratic leaders to give them greater independence from Chicago's City Hall.”⁹⁷ Such a political move may have been morally justified, but it could not be viewed by McFetridge as anything except for a direct threat against the structure of civic unionism. Indeed, if he could no longer effectively deliver the support of the BSEIU to Daley it called into question the basis of his entire position in Chicago.

It is unclear if Sullivan intended Fairchild as a challenge to McFetridge. There is little evidence in Sullivan's notes from the time that he viewed himself as McFetridge's enemy. Instead Sullivan viewed leaders like Fairchild as simply representing a new generation of leaders better adapted to

95 “G.E.B. Meeting: minutes,” April 1964, Box 2, Folder 2, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

96 “G.E.B. Meeting: Sullivan's Notes,” October 1963, Box 1, Folder 90, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University; Box 1, Folder 22, SEIU Research Department Historical, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

97 George Tagge, “Political Lookout” *Chicago Tribune*, April 15, 1961, 11.

the changing social, legal, and institutional environment. However, from McFetridge's perspective Fairchild's actions represented a declaration of war. For the remainder of his life, the leader plunged the locals of Chicago into an internecine conflict that damaged the reputations and positions of nearly everyone involved—critically diminishing the legacy of a man who otherwise might be remembered as the most significant post-war Chicago labor leader.

Picketing Squared

On November 2, 1961, the residents of the Fullerton Convalescent Home witnessed a peculiar sight, a union picketing itself. As the *Chicago Tribune* put it, “Soon after pickets of local 1... began picking... pickets from local 4... began picketing the pickets.”⁹⁸ The story of how such an absurd spectacle emerged began with a memorandum of understanding between Fairchild and McFetridge in which Fairchild promised to limit Local 4's jurisdiction to solely include women. The two leaders concluded the agreement earlier that year in an effort to head off the emerging conflict between them. The agreement—which received little public attention—limited Local 4's jurisdiction to only include women. However, in breach of this agreement, but in keeping with the single-unit agenda of Sullivan, Local 4 began to organize the janitor-like housemen of nursing homes.⁹⁹

The fact that McFetridge willingly relinquished the women of Chicago to Local 4 underlined a deeper problem with his administration of Chicago. When Local 7 went moribund in 1955—with most of its membership presumably absorbed by Local 46—women in the BSEIU of Chicago lost their last toe-hold on power in the union. After Elizabeth Grady became inactive in the union during the 1940s, the organization lacked significant female leadership. The flat janitors, effectively the

98 “Rival Pickets Appear at [sic] 2D Nursing Home,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 2, 1961, 43.

99 “G.E.B. Meeting: minutes,” April 1961, Box 1, Folder 69, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

aristocracy of Chicago BSEIU and among the highest paid laborers in the union, remained entirely male. These factors ensured that the pay gap between men and women in the Chicago locals remained significantly larger than that in New York throughout the 1950s and 60s—in fact the pay disparity in Chicago was often the largest in the country. Though women in Chicago generally made more than their New York counterparts, the disparity reveals the lack of interest that many in the union had for women workers¹⁰⁰ Though these problems were worst in Chicago, gender equality did not appear to be a major issue throughout the union with contracts rarely including gender in non-discrimination clauses and there remained a lack of female leaders at the International level.¹⁰¹

Fairchild likely entered into the agreement with McFetridge in good faith, as the workers he intended to organize in nursing homes and hotels tended to be African-American women. However, the single-unit rule effectively forced him to organize housemen, violating the terms of his agreement with McFetridge. Sullivan's personal notes from December 1961 make this contradiction clear, "Local 1 has clear jurisdiction over Housemen... But the problems of NLRB decisions on overall unit and difficulties with Hotel-Restaurant. So this may not work in best interests of members and the International. [Local 4] has had authority to organize Nursing Homes since '57 [and they too] must be organized on an overall basis."¹⁰² Since the BSEIU's jurisdiction in the hotels and nursing homes overlapped with other organizations, ensuring that they could survive contested NLRB elections became paramount in Fairchild and Sullivan's minds, and meant that compromise with McFetridge could only come at great costs. In the same way that the NLRB's decisions put the BSEIU on a collision course with HERE, they also forced McFetridge and Fairchild into conflict.

100 "Annual Wage Increase Survey," Box 1, Folder 1-25, SEIU Research Department, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

101 "No discrimination clauses in local agreements: examples," September 28, 1961, Box 2, Folder, 33, SEIU Research Department, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

102 David Sullivan, "Notes," Box 1, Folder 73, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

McFetridge responded to the challenge of his authority with pickets against hotels and nursing homes. As reporter George Bliss put it, the “inter union fight pits McFetridge, 67, one of the most powerful and best known labor leaders in the country, against Fairchild, 47, who handles the finances for one of the richest labor organizations in the country.”¹⁰³ The peculiar spectacle of the BSEIU picketing itself attracted the attention of the press, embarrassing Sullivan immensely. Speaking with McFetridge shortly after the picketing began, Sullivan recalled that he told McFetridge, “I thought it was a disgrace that the name of Building Service was being bandied about in the press.”¹⁰⁴ Despite Sullivan's objections the picketing continued. The pickets destroyed the vestiges of McFetridge's once friendly relationship with Fairchild with the elder leader vowing to “run Fairchild out of Chicago and the labor movement.”¹⁰⁵ Although the larger issues initially shaped the conflict, and virtually guaranteed that a mutually beneficial outcome was impossible, the feud clearly became personal between the two men.

McFetridge maintained that he only asserted jurisdiction to save housemen—effectively flat janitors—from the perfidy of Local 4's business agents. In his conversations with Sullivan, he highlighted rumors that these business agents effectively established company unions through collusion with employers.¹⁰⁶ It is unclear if McFetridge truly believed this or if it simply served as an excuse. However, the contracts that Local 4 negotiated provided far lower wages for housemen than the prevailing standards of Local 1. As a representative of Local 1 wrote in an October 1961 memo to Sullivan, “Local 4's gross mistreatment of its own members, its attempts at stealing the jurisdiction of its sister local unions... its undermining of the wage scales of its sister local unions...

103 George Bliss, “Feud Between Janitor Union Leaders Aired,” *The Chicago Tribune*, April 1, 1961, 2.

104 “G.E.B. Meeting: agenda, reports, etc.” SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

105 George Bliss, “Feud Between Janitor Union Leaders Aired,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 1, 1961, 2.

106 “G.E.B. Meeting: agenda, reports, etc.” SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

and its repeated disregard of the most elementary concept of decent, honest trade unionism cannot be permitted to continue.”¹⁰⁷ Given this, McFetridge did have a reasonable belief that Local 4's contracts could undermine the prevailing standards enjoyed by the workers of Local 1.

The pickets, which continued intermittently throughout 1961, began to seriously damage Local 4, in June, when the Residential Hotel Association advised its members to nullify their contracts. Head of the association, R. L. Vanderslice claimed that he made the recommendation due to “fears [that] the association and its members will become victims of a 'retaliation' move by labor leaders.”¹⁰⁸ Reports on the announcement implied that McFetridge made a significant threat. George Bliss reminding readers that the head of the flat janitors remained “Chicago's most powerful labor leader.”¹⁰⁹ With Local 4 rapidly wilting underneath McFetridge's scorn, Fairchild took the unusual step of picketing McFetridge's pickets.¹¹⁰ Suddenly the BSEIU was picketing the pickets that had been picketing the BSEIU—a nearly unprecedented situation. In the coming months, both Fairchild and McFetridge sued each other for defamation.

Sullivan did not want to directly intervene in the matter, likely out of respect for McFetridge and his position in Chicago. However, the spectacle that emerged in November forced his hand. In a crossed out portion of a draft of a memo, Sullivan described the “Picketing [as an] Act of irresponsibility.” Sullivan viewed McFetridge's continued efforts to discipline Local 4 as a direct challenge to his authority noting, “[I] want [the] lawyers [to] make it clear, Bd [the Executive Board] has power [and we] can't tolerate this.” Internally he even considered putting Local 1 over

107 “Local 1 to Sullivan,” October 9, 1961, SEIU Research Department Historical, Box 1, Folder 21, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

108 George Bliss, “Hotels Urged to Disregard Union Pacts,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 22, 1961, 39.

109 George Bliss, “Hotels Urged to Disregard Union Pacts,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 22, 1961, 39.

110 “Rival Pickets Appear at [sic] 2D Nursing Home,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 2, 1961, 43.

trusteeship but ultimately decided that “[I] don't think [we] should go this far.”¹¹¹ Instead he ordered a judicial proceeding to determine the case—and began to organize a longer term resistance against McFetridge.

The judicial proceedings were overseen by Saul Wallen, a well-respected Boston labor arbitrator. After an extended investigation in April of 1962, Wallen effectively sided with Fairchild, supporting his claims on almost all levels and dismissing all of the charges of Local 1.¹¹² Wallen's report did identify many problems with the internal structure of Local 4, identifying many failures of accounting and situations in which employers managed to deceive the union. He noted that though it was clear that Local 4 did not do a good job of enforcing contracts, the fault rested with employers who took advantage of the diffuse nature of the union—which had members spread across 700 to 800 different buildings—and its failure to properly maintain records of all of its members and agreements. He also argued that the local faced difficult conditions as most of the workers it organized did not work for large enough employers to “qualify for cover under the National Labor Relations Act... As a consequence, organization depends solely on the voluntary recognition of the union.”¹¹³ Though, of course, Local 1 managed to overcome these exact conditions, Wallen felt like the failures of Local 4 could be attributed to them. However, none of McFetridge's charges beyond incompetence were supported by the report.¹¹⁴ Wallen is known as one of the most significant labor arbitrators of the post-war era, and his report displays a keen eye and systematic logic.¹¹⁵ However,

111 “G.E.B. Meeting: general materials,” December 1961, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.. Sullivan wrote his internal memos and notes in a rather cryptic and frankly non-grammatically sound shorthand. I do my best through the inclusions to expand his thoughts into a more coherent form. Despite this, Sullivan's personal note collection is perhaps the best maintained of any of the early BSEIU presidents and offers a far more personal portrait of the man than can be constructed for Quesse, Horan, or McFetridge.

112 “McFetridge, Fairchild Feud Called a Draw,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 20, 1962, 17.

113 “The Wallen Report,” Box 1, Folder 21, Research Department Historical Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Hereafter, *The Wallen Report*.

114 Brook I Landis, *Value Judgment in Arbitration: A Case Study of Saul Wallen*, (Ithaca: ILR, 1977).

115 *The Wallen Report*.

it also fails to uncover the voices of common workers inside of Local 4, unfortunately leaving many questions about the situation unanswered. Despite this, Wallen's failure to find clear evidence of internal corruption casts significant doubt on McFetridge's claims.

Behind the scenes, Locals 1 and 4 reached their own accords with Fairchild agreeing to a host of internal reforms to improve his union's rather chaotic structure. Such an outcome was, perhaps, the best anyone could have hoped for. However, McFetridge remained piqued over the issue and viewed Sullivan's intervention as a violation of the traditional regional autonomy of the BSEIU. For his part, Sullivan came to believe that McFetridge's continued power in Chicago meant that the Midwest remained only partially under his control. Given Sullivan's goal of bring the BSEIU in line with what he saw as the emerging new rules of labor relations in the United States, such an old-style regional fiefdom could not be allowed. Despite their intentions to the contrary, conditions forced the two leaders into a final, direct confrontation.

The Battle for Marina City

McFetridge and Sullivan continued to struggle behind the scenes throughout the early 1960s. Beginning in April 1962, Sullivan began to plan a move of the International headquarters to Washington, D.C.¹¹⁶ Although the formal reason for this move involved facilitating a closer connection with the NLRB, it also promised to significantly weaken McFetridge by moving the bureaucratic structure of the union out of his reach. When the move occurred in 1963, Sullivan notably fired most of the Chicago staff and brought in his own people to run the internal machinery of the union.¹¹⁷ McFetridge continued to work behind the scenes to protect various informal

116 "G.E.B. Meeting: report of activities," April 1962, Box 1, Folder 76, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

117 "G.E.B. Meeting: agenda, reports, etc." October 1963, Box 1, Folder, 89, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

jurisdictional agreements between Local 1 and other Chicago unions, effectively continuing to undermine Local 4. Some reports to Sullivan also suggested that he helped nursing homes owned by the Jewish Federation to fight against Local 4.¹¹⁸

Marina City increasingly became a point of contention between McFetridge and Sullivan. Like many real estate projects, Marina City suffered from cost escalations and complications. McFetridge continually hit the BSEIU up for greater financial commitments. Marjanović and Rüedi argue that Sullivan never felt comfortable with Marina City for numerous reasons. In particular he increasingly felt uncomfortable with building luxury apartments—which he viewed as incongruous with the union's mission—and did not appreciate the revolutionary elements of the building's construction. Given these doubts they argue Sullivan sought a way out of the Marina City project.¹¹⁹ However, Sullivan's personal notes from 1963 and 1964 focus almost exclusively on the issue of governance. McFetridge initially promised all of the stakeholders' places on the board for Marina City, but in practice did not provide Sullivan—or Hardy whose pension fund was also invested—with a meaningful place in the governance of the project.¹²⁰ McFetridge's motivation in fighting against Sullivan gaining his rightful voice in Marina City cannot be conclusively explained. However, given the larger context it is likely that McFetridge increasingly wanted to remove Sullivan and the rest of the union from the project so it could not become a potential source of influence for the International. Refusing to fulfill his commitments around Marina City likely represented an attempt to force Sullivan into voluntary divestment. After months of frustration, Sullivan began to explore

118 “G.E.B. Meeting: minutes,” April 1964, Box 2, Folder 2, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University, 2; “G.E.B. Meeting: agendas, etc.,” April 1964, Box 2, Folder 4, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

119 Marjanović & Rüedi, *Marina City*, 103.

120 “G.E.B. Meeting: report of activities,” Box 1, Folder 85, April 1963, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University; “G.E.B. Meeting: minutes,” November 1963, Box 1, Folder 88, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

divestment, McFetridge did not resist him and even suggested that he could sell the shares for a profit. In October 1963, the International, Local 32B, and the West Coast Pension Fund all withdrew their support—effectively eliminating two thirds of the union's stake in the building. Swibel purchased their shares making him the effective leader of the project.

The subtle conflict between McFetridge and Sullivan became open in 1964. Frustrated with Sullivan's continued support of Local 4, McFetridge sought to radically limit the powers of the presidency through a series of amendments at the May 1964 convention in Los Angeles. However, McFetridge's reach finally exceeded his grasp and he not only failed to pass his amendments but could not secure the re-election of Burke and Kruse, his chosen representatives on the executive board. Instead, Sullivan brought McFetridge up on charges, for his hostility towards Fairchild, to be adjudicated during a June 1964 executive board meeting. Though the hearing failed to strip McFetridge of control over Local 1 and Marina City, he returned to Chicago greatly diminished.¹²¹

After the convention, Sullivan openly declared war on McFetridge. Sending his longtime confidant Eugene Moats to start an office in the city with the explicit purpose of breaking McFetridge's power, Sullivan argued that every leader in the BSEIU must show their allegiance to him and reject the alternative power structure of Chicago. The labor movement in Chicago rapidly broke into pro- and anti-McFetridge factions. According to the *Chicago Tribune's* reckoning, McFetridge could continue to trust in the loyalties of his own local as well as the Teamster's Joint Council, an important ally as most service unions relied on the Teamsters to respect pickets.

¹²¹George Bliss, "McFetridge Attacks Top Union Leader," *Chicago Tribune* April 21, 1964, 35; Seymour Korman, "McFetridge Loses Round in Union Fight," *Chicago Tribune*, May 7, 1964, 12; "G.E.B. Meeting: minutes," May 1964, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer's Office: International Executive Board Records, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University. As far as I can tell the records of the June 1964 hearing were destroyed or otherwise "lost."

However, Sullivan could rely on the support of George Meany and most of the AFL-CIO to back him.¹²²

Moats recognized that displacing McFetridge would be difficult. In a memo to Sullivan, Moats laid out the basic challenge in Chicago, “An analysis of our situation in Chicago must concern itself almost entirely with the power structure of William McFetridge. Our relationship to our Local Unions, the rest of the labor movement, the political apparatus, and the business community.” Despite McFetridge's defeat at the convention, Moats lamented that “I cannot, unfortunately, share optimism that his power has diminished to any great degree.” McFetridge maintained his control over the Park District, Police Board, Chicago Housing Authority, and the Urban Renewal Department, giving him tremendous power over city contracts. Moats continues, “In addition, he is consulted on the determination of rates and conditions relating to most other city departments.” To most workers in the Chicago BSEIU, “McFetridge is still more important... than the International Union... I do not believe it an overstatement that [this] is a nearly universal feeling among Chicago labor leaders.” Through his power in the city McFetridge commanded the loyalty of many business people and could intimidate those business leaders not loyal to him. Even worse, the continued connection between McFetridge and Daley provided him with significant influence throughout the entire Midwest.¹²³ Sullivan and Moats planned to break McFetridge's power by heavily leveraging the institutional power of the union. Beginning with the establishment of the office in Chicago, Moats sought to make it “clear that a dual relationship with the International Union will no longer be tolerated and that [we] will deal quickly and severely with mavericks. Reluctant Locals should be immediately audited.” Any locals or institutions that continued to follow McFetridge would be put

¹²²George Bliss, “Union Moving Here to Oust McFetridge,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 12, 1964, 1.

¹²³ “Moats to Sullivan Correspondence,” Box 64, Folder 13 SEIU Executive Office: David Sullivan Collection, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

under trusteeship until his influence could be fully purged.¹²⁴

Moats' report reveals the clearest portrait of what civic unionism became in Chicago. Over the years McFetridge used the political structure established by Quesse and Horan to gain tremendous power inside the bounds of Chicago. Though these efforts clearly empowered McFetridge more than the members of his union, they did result in unusually high wages for BSEIU members throughout the city. During McFetridge's presidency, base wages in Chicago remained consistently higher than those in New York and San Francisco—a situation that continued for women through 1967 and for men through at least 1969.¹²⁵ Local 1 continued to provide better wages on average than Local 32B through 1978. Civic unionism was not always pretty—or even ethical—but it was lucrative. However, Chicago greatly lagged behind New York in terms of new organization. Local 1 exemplified this trend growing by a paltry 57 workers between 1956 and 1970. Over the same period, even taking into account losses to elevator automation, Local 32B and its siblings grew by over 16,000 workers.¹²⁶

McFetridge's faction and Sullivan's continued to feud throughout the 1960s. In January 1965, Moats reported that his connections with other labor leaders in the city were becoming stronger, noting “I believe [an] understanding of the BSEIU situation in Chicago and the desire on the part of other labor organizations, and political, and related groups is much more widespread than I had heretofore felt and more importantly the desire for a change is deeper than I had thought.”¹²⁷ In

January 1966, McFetridge succeeded at re-electing Kemp president of the Chicago Joint Council

124 “Moats to Sullivan Correspondence,” Box 64, Folder 13 SEIU Executive Office: David Sullivan Collection, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

125 “Annual Wage Increase Survey,” Box 1, Folder 1-25, SEIU Research Department, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

126 “Local union membership,” Box 5, Folders 79-80, SEIU Research Department, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

127 “Moats to Sullivan” January 20, 1965, Box 64, Folder 16, SEIU Executive Office: David Sullivan Collection, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

and electing Henry Kruse, a Local 1 representative, vice president. Moats described winning control of the Joint Council had been the center of his entire strategy in Chicago, making this a severe loss to Sullivan's faction.¹²⁸ In January 1967, Sullivan attempted to put Local 321, the College, University, and School Employees Union—a small union of maintenance personnel at University of Chicago and University of Illinois at Chicago—into trusteeship for their failure to call a new election after the International discovered they had only kept the polls open for an hour. Local 321, headed by a former assistant to McFetridge, resisted and succeeded at blocking the trusteeship with a court order.¹²⁹

Although McFetridge and Sullivan struggled for power inconclusively, the larger structure of McFetridge's empire began to crumble as he approached his death. In November 1968, Local 1 engaged in a major walkout directed at improving conditions for janitor's helpers in high-rise apartment buildings. The strike succeeded but the very fact that it was needed displays the declining power of McFetridge and civic unionism. After McFetridge's death in 1969, the CREB became increasingly resistant to the union, acquiescing to their demands but publicly blaming them for high rents. In 1972 the CREB refused to continue its role as the central bargaining agent for the city, returning the flat janitors to the old model of organizing individual buildings.¹³⁰ Although Local 1 remained, the model of unionization established by William Quesse in 1917 finally came to its end.

Conclusion

William McFetridge laid out criteria for evaluating his own legacy, "The yardstick that will be

128 George Bliss, "Rivals Vie for Service Union," *Chicago Tribune*, December 27, 1965, 24; George Bliss, "McFetridge Faction Keeps Union Control," *Chicago Tribune*, January 5, 1966, 14.

129 "Go to Court in Building Union Fight," *Chicago Tribune*, January 12, 1967, 25.

130 James Strong, "Janitors' Raises May Hike Rents," *Chicago Tribune*, December 5, 1970, 36; Alvin Nagelberg, "C. R. E. B. Dropts Role in Janitor Pay Talks," *Chicago Tribune* May 4, 1972, 73.

used for all of us in the final analysis is this: 'Was this a better place in which to live because of us?' That is the final judgment that will be used as to whether we have made our lives useful—not selfishly for ourselves—but for the public interest.”¹³¹ Judging McFetridge by this standard leads to ambiguity. Unquestionably, his early successes with Local 46 played a huge role in improving the lives of school and public sector janitors. Though not the sole exponent of professionalism and public service in the union, his many thoughtful, pithy essays about the dignity of janitorial labor helped many workers to discover the social value of their own labor. He saw the BSEIU through an incredible crisis post-Scalise and, if not entirely cleaning the union, at least pared back the worst excesses of corruption. After World War II, McFetridge established a political dynasty that ensured labor unions received exalted places in the corridors of city hall. Yet at the same time, through his commitment to Daley and the status quo, he commonly turned his back on his own beliefs in racial equality and promoted corruption and inefficiency throughout the city he loved. During his declining days, his unwillingness to adapt to the changing legal and social conditions of the day combined with his commitment to protecting the interests of the Mayor, and pushed him into a self-defeating conflict with his own union. We cannot laud McFetridge as a hero, nor castigate him as a villain.

In Chapter Six I argued for the use of a complex, contextual definition of corruption that focuses on how leaders engage with their commitments to the people who have entrusted them with power. From the perspectives of locals 1 and 46, it is difficult to declare McFetridge as corrupt. Although he might have done better at promoting internal democracy, and punishing abusive business agents, his union accomplished and maintained an amazing transformation among the janitors of Chicago. However, from many other perspectives McFetridge became corrupted by power and success.

¹³¹ 25th Anniversary of the Presidency.

Although McFetridge spoke of promoting wide-spread organization, in practice he held back the expansion of the union in Chicago whenever it threatened the vested interests of his existing members or of the political status quo he played a large role in establishing. By defending these established interests, he betrayed the thousands of unorganized service workers, notably women, that had not been integrated into his regime. Even worse, he turned his back on the racial egalitarianism that animated his early career. By supporting Swibel, McFetridge helped to prevent housing integration in Chicago—a moral failure with deep and troubling implications for the city. Through his failure to not only uphold the labor movement's commitments to equality—exemplified by figures such as Fairchild and Sullivan, who played roles in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom—but also violated his own principles.

The corruption of McFetridge leads me back to the literature on the failures of the modern SEIU. In *The Civil Wars in U.S. Labor*, Steve Early paints a vivid portrait of the SEIU's internal and external struggles during the 2000s. During this period, Early makes the case that the SEIU's president Andy Stern developed and ruthlessly enforced his own vision of the labor movement. Early argues that in the wake of “globalization, corporate restructuring, deregulation or privatization, and myriad forms of outsourcing... Stern essentially concluded, if you can't beat them, join them—corporations.”¹³² Early argues that “Stern/SEIU model... abhors rank-and-file initiative, shop floor militancy, and democratic decision making by workers themselves. In the name of 'building power for workers,' it embraces labor-management cooperation (from a position of weakness), bureaucratic consolidation, and top-down control.”¹³³ Under this model the concrete concerns of workers—such as improving wages and conditions, or maintaining local control of their

¹³² Early, *The Civil War in U.S. Labor*, 14.

¹³³ Early, *The Civil War in U.S. Labor*, 16.

unions—become continually undermined by the SEIU's continual press for expansion, centralization, and “big-picture goals.”¹³⁴ As Stern's approach relies upon the cultivation of allies amongst both business people and politicians on a national level, the union's activities are continually constrained by the needs of maintaining and cultivating these relationships. Early, with his characteristic focus, attributes these failures to Stern's total disregard for democracy and disrespect for the views of common workers. In Early's portrayal of Stern, I see a parallel to the tragedy of McFetridge. The leader pursued his own vision of what the labor movement should look like with determination and cunning. He built an amazing political structure capable of achieving amazing things. However, by effectively cutting workers out of the decision making process and focusing on the narrow interests of those he felt a direct responsibility to, he created monsters and eventually became one.

Was the tragedy of McFetridge the inevitable result of civic unionism? To a certain extent this entire dissertation begs that question. Like all questions of retrospective speculation, no-one can definitively say what might have been if circumstances had been slightly different. The greatest beauty of history is that it reveals how contingent the evolution of individuals and institutions truly are. However, there are a few elements of civic unionism that clearly encourage labor leaders to defend the status quo and to become dependent on the needs of politicians who rarely have the best interests of the working class in mind. Such a situation often leads unions to treat internal democracy as an inconvenience that can easily get in the way of larger activities. As union democracy declines, the organization and its leadership tends to drift away from the ideals that animated it—to become, in other words, corrupt. But viewing this as a teleological outcome is overly simplistic and unfair. Quesse, Horan, McFetridge, and Sullivan did not enact scripts based on

134 BSEIUEarly, *The Civil War in U.S. Labor*, 16.

a particular strategic formula, they did the best that they could to achieve the goals that they believed in. In this they each achieved successes and failures for the people they represented. As the labor movement looks to an uncertain future, its leaders and activists should look to them for both inspiration, and caution.

IX THE LEGACY OF HIS MAJESTY, A JANITOR

Introduction

Janitors inhabit a unique, but rarely enviable place in the pop culture of the United States. Television shows and movies commonly use them as a tool to illustrate failure or incapacity. The iconic example of this is Carl Reed in John Hughes' *The Breakfast Club* (1985). Reed was “Man of the Year” from 1969 at the high school he now cleans. Although often possessing a kind of wisdom, through his bitterness over his failures as a musician Reed represents blunted ambition and failure.¹ As they prove useful as symbols of poverty and dependence, sometimes janitors in media show a kind of obsequiousness. The cleaning woman—who has no name but is only credited as Lady—in the 1991 *Seinfeld* episode “The Red Dot” serves this purpose by responding to George Costanza's present of a cashmere sweater, offered to encourage her to conceal their illicit tryst in his new office, with comically overwhelming thanks.² She responds as if buying such a garment would not simply represent a financial splurge for her, but that it would be effectively impossible. Similarly, the Janitor in the series *Scrubs* (2006-2010)—who also has no name beyond a description—continually constructs an inconsistent, ever changing past to suggest that he once held a position of greater accomplishment. The comedy of these claims comes from the disjunction that they show with his current circumstances.³ Humor involving Groundskeeper Willie, the school janitor in *The Simpsons* (1989-present), regularly turns on him working in roles that his lack of cultural understanding makes him unsuitable for, including a turn as a French teacher in which he called the students

1 *The Breakfast Club*, Directed by John Hughes, Universal City: Universal Studios, 1985..

2 “Red Dot,” 29, *Seinfeld*. Directed by Tom Cherones, Written by Larry David, NBC, December 11, 1991.

3 “My First Day,” *Scrubs*. Directed by Adam Bernstein, Written by Bill Lawrence, NBC, October 2, 2001.

“cheese eating surrender monkeys,” and the fact that he lives in a shack on the school property.⁴ In the 2015 episode “The Millie-churian Candidate” of the animated series *Bob's Burgers*, the school janitor, Mr. Branca, reveals that he was the president of an unnamed country before a coup brought him to such low circumstances.⁵ Here, again, the comedy turns on the peculiarity of a once respected figure who now works as a janitor. Charlie Kelly, in the series *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (2005-present), continually falls prey to the exploitation of his friends who, despite all being co-owners of the bar they work in, make him work as the janitor. Characters in the show even refer to dirty, menial, or degrading tasks as “Charlie Work” and convince Charlie that they are part of his job.⁶

Less commonly but perhaps more troubling, television and movies often portray janitors as threatening outsiders. Most notoriously Wes Craven's iconic character Freddy Krueger, centerpiece of the long running *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series of horror movies, was a school janitor who murdered children before escaping justice, being killed by mob violence, and returning as a malevolent creature.⁷ Although few fictional janitors are as loathsome as Krueger, janitors commonly have a threatening edge. Carl Reed in *The Breakfast Club* uses his broad access to the school—including access to their lockers—as a threat to students who offend him. The Janitor in *Scrubs* devotes his life to harassing and undermining the show's main character. Groundskeeper Willie commonly frames Bart for various pranks. Charlie Kelly, despite arguably being more likable than some of his friends, regularly engages in bizarre, threatening behavior.

4 “Round Springfield,” *The Simpsons*, Directed by Steven Dean Moore, Written by Joshua Sternin & Jeffrey Ventimilia. April 30, 1995

5 “Millie-churian candidate,” *Bob's Burgers*, Directed by Don MacKinnon, Written by Greg Thompson, February 15, 2015.

6 “The Gang Gets Analyzed,” *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, Directed by Todd Biermann. Written by Luvh Rakhe. November 8, 2012

7 *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, Directed by Wes Craven, New Line Cinema, 1984.

Fictional janitors sometimes possess extraordinary abilities or conceal surprising secrets. In the 1989 “Weird Al” Yankovic vehicle *UHF*, the janitor Stanley Spadowski proves to be a surprisingly talented children's show host, largely because of his own childlike demeanor.⁸ The titular character in “Roland,” a 1994 episode of the *X-Files*, is a mentally handicapped man who works as a janitor but becomes possessed by the spirit of a physicist, making him both talented in math and murderous.⁹ In Frank Oz's 2001 film *The Score*, Edward Norton plays a thief who conceals himself as a handicapped janitor. The janitor's ability to conceal himself in plain site largely turns on his lowly or invisible status; as he is assumed to be incapable of being involved in a heist, security officers largely ignore minor inconsistencies in his behavior that conceal his true intentions.¹⁰ In each of these cases, the comedy or surprise of each character turns on the assumption that the janitor will behave in a subservient way and will be incapable of anything beyond menial duties.

The most famous variation on this theme occurs in Gus Van Sant's 1997 *Good Will Hunting*. In the film, Matt Damon portrays a janitor, Will Hunting, who works at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology but possesses an uncanny and purely self-taught ability to perform advanced mathematics. Despite his hidden abilities, Hunting otherwise lives the life of a typical, working-class Bostonian. When his nightly solving of equations left on boards leads a professor to discover his abilities, Will must choose between his friends and his life in Boston and his potential as a mathematician. When he decides to embrace the lifestyle that he was born into, his best friend Chuckie responds with horror, responding, “Fuck you. You owe it to me [to make something more of yourself]. Tomorrow I'm gonna wake up and I'll be fifty and I'll still be doin' this.... you know

⁸ *UHF*, Directed by Jay Levey. Orion Pictures, 1989.

⁹ “Roland,” *X-Files*, Directed by David Nutter. Written by Chris Ruppenthal. May 6, 1994.

¹⁰ *The Score*, Directed by Frank Oz, Paramount Pictures, 2001.

what the best part of my day is? The ten seconds before I knock on [your] door 'cause I let myself think I might get there, and you'd be gone. I'd knock on the door and you wouldn't be there. You just left."¹¹ Although Chuckie's desire for Will to pursue opportunities is understandable, the visceral horror that he feels for the idea that Will might remain a janitor suggests that it is an outcome which is not only less lucrative, but degrading.

All of these examples assert that a life as a janitor is a life of failure. In each case, janitors become janitors not because they find value in the labor, or even because it provides a good livelihood, but because they are failures, incompetents, or morally questionable. Although these fragments of popular culture are separated from the world of the Chicago flat janitors by many decades, they reflect a surprisingly consistent popular attitude towards them. From the flat janitor's pervasive fear of being falsely accused of a crime to the many ways employers exploited them prior to unionization, society continually reinforced—and still reinforces today—the subservience and marginality of janitors. Certainly the broader culture provides janitors with little cause for pride.

Over fifty years, the efforts of Quesse, Grady, Horan, McFetridge, and dozens of other organizers and business agents helped janitors to gain the wages, the conditions, and an ideological framework that allowed them to find value in their labor and themselves. Although they struggled to achieve the respect that they felt they deserved, the political power, high wages, and community roles that janitors achieved all cut against cultural narratives that emphasized their worthlessness. The faults of the BSEIU of Chicago cannot be forgotten or minimized, but this success alone makes the union worthy of a degree of respect.

I have argued that Quesse, Grady, and McFetridge developed a particular approach to labor

11 *Good Will Hunting*, Directed by Gus Van Sant, Miramax Films, 1997.

unionism to accomplish this feat, which I describe as civic unionism. I do not intend civic unionism as a highly circumscribed, systematically defined system or philosophy of unionism, but instead view it as a category that captures the diverse tactical toolkit used by the Chicago locals. Civic unionism grew out of the craft unions of Chicago, particularly their emphasis on the governance of markets through semi-formalized procedures and institutions, but adapted to suit the needs of largely unskilled service workers. Although janitors partially relied on the traditional tactics of a craft union to achieve their successes, the ease with which each janitor could be replaced forced them to look elsewhere for leverage. They found this leverage in alliances with other players and organizations in their community. These alliances initially consisted of solidarity-based connections with other craft unions, but expanded to include a dense network of political appointees, politicians, and business people.

As these networks of influence allowed the union to achieve high wages and significant on-the-job power for a group of workers often viewed as menial and subservient, the union needed to justify these gains to both their own members and the public. These justifications moved beyond the traditional rhetoric of craft unions to embrace the identities of professionalism and public service. Janitors, in particular flat janitors, increasingly viewed themselves as guardians of their tenants and of their city. Major events, such as World War II and the construction of Marina City, shaped and intensified these views. The political power that the union achieved allowed them to transform these views into reality. Through McFetridge's intimidating influence, janitors achieved symbolic power in the city and came to view themselves as serving a public role in the organic community of Chicago.

Civic unionism proved successful for several decades, but in the 1960s it proved inflexible to change and adaptation. As de-urbanization weakened the union's traditional strongholds in the city, McFetridge's civic unionists struggled to adapt and find new niches to fill. The hostility of the NLRB to the craft model of organization that served as the basis of civic unionism, limited their ability to interact with the new regime in labor relations. To Sullivan, whose model of unionism shared some elements with civic unionism but emphasized industrial organization, the structure of the BSEIU in Chicago increasingly became a detriment to his aggressive campaign of expansion. Although the fight between McFetridge and Sullivan had direct, proximate causes, these underlying issues virtually ensured that they would come into direct conflict.

The decline of civic unionism may not have been inevitable, but the approach suffered from several key faults. Civic unionism, as implemented by McFetridge and Quesse, tended to concentrate power in the hands of a single leader who eventually became largely unaccountable to his members. Even though they relied on the political labor of their members, these leaders became the personal embodiments of the union's influence. In some cases, such as among the school janitors, figures like Grady and McFetridge even used corrupt political players to choose who their members were, allowing them to ensure loyalty in their locals. Such concentrations of power, with McFetridge virtually becoming the public representation of the BSEIU during his presidency, inevitably decreased the ability of the membership to communicate their needs.

These leaders tended to be men. Despite organizing a significant number of women, the union failed to include them in its leadership. The irrepressible Elizabeth Grady is the exception that proves this rule. Grady, the only major female figure in the union prior to the 1970s, achieved her position by bringing a pre-existing group of school janitors along with her and by playing a role in

the union's foundation. Though she built her own empire of political allies outside of the union, inside the other leaders of the union continually marginalized her. After her retirement, no one replaced her as the de facto voice of women in the union. Even as the union spoke about the importance of providing an equal place for women in the union, in practice McFetridge and his allies tended to undermine and relegate them to a position of subservience. Some of this may be the result of the peculiar history of gender in the union—after all the flat janitors organized partially to remove their wives from economic exploitation as unpaid janitor assistants—but that does not excuse the union's failure.

The union's reliance on the alliances that these leaders made, committed it to defending the interests of its allies, even if those interests conflicted with the interests of the union or their community. Under Mayor Thompson, these commitments forced the union to defend a deeply flawed administration, and to support a massive system of graft and patronage. Later, during the presidency of Mayor Daley, many in the union turned their backs on a tradition of racial egalitarianism that went back to the Flat Janitors Union, and supported housing segregation. Commitments to sitting politicians resulted in the union having a significant stake in the existing status quo. The BSEIU never became a significant source of labor radicalism, nor did its members or leaders tend to question the broad outlines of capitalism. Indeed, during his time in the leadership of the AFL-CIO, McFetridge actively worked against leftists.

Certainly civic unionism suffered from many faults and a wide streak of reactionary thinking. Yet there is also an idealistic core to civic unionism. The flat janitors envisioned a society where workers received compensation relative to the good that they did for the public, not the dictates of the marketplace. They believed that through their representatives in the union, they retained the

right to structure their labor market for not just their own benefit, but the benefit of their community. Such a view is not so different from the republicanism of Wilentz's artisans, the radicalism of Johnston's middle class, or the moral capitalism of Lizbeth Cohen's industrial workers. In their own ways, figures like Quesse articulated their own visions of a fairer, more just society, and fought to bring it into reality. If nothing else, they deserve admiration for that.

Chicago and the Building Services Employees International Union

From their role in ensuring Mayor Thompson's re-election to McFetridge's turn as Daley's "Machiavelli," a union of mostly building service workers significantly shaped the contours of the Chicago's history. The sheer scope of their impact illustrates the kind of influence and significance that a union can gain through hard effort and conducive circumstances. In particular, McFetridge's influence shaped many of the city's landmarks. The concrete corn cob of Marina City remains one of the iconic images of Chicago, featured on the cover of the Wilco album *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, amongst other places. In February 2016, the Chicago City Council declared the buildings a protected landmark noting in the proclamation that the towers are "in every Chicago souvenir snow globe."¹² Beyond Marina City, during his tenure as president of the Park District, McFetridge worked to expand the network of parks, attractions, and museums along Lake Michigan. Although most of these projects also provided him with a convenient excuse to employ more BSEIU members—often at wages far higher than their counterparts in other cities—they also helped to define much of what so charms me about modern Chicago. McFetridge also contributed to, and helped to support a wide variety of civic institutions and causes. He helped to establish the Chicago Special Olympics, a cause he supported vocally. Always a patron of the arts, he supported the Chicago Symphony

12 Blair Kamin, "Marina City Landmark Status Welcome, Long Overdue," *Chicago Tribune*, February 12, 2016.

amongst other institutions. Described as a personal friend of David Ben-Gurion, McFetridge was heavily involved with fund raising for the Israel Bond Organization. The leader received many awards and honors for this, and other, charitable activities. In recognition of his efforts, Daley posthumously renamed a stretch of 14th Boulevard by the Field Museum: McFetridge Drive.¹³

However, McFetridge's legacy as a civic leader too became tainted through his association with Daley. During 1968, Daley attempted to prevent anti-war protests across the city in the hopes that they could be discouraged at the Democratic National Convention that August. As head of the Park District it fell to McFetridge to prevent the parks from becoming spaces of protest. In April he announced that he would use his powers to “keep unpatriotic groups and race agitators from using parks.”¹⁴ Between this, and his continued influence over the Police Department, McFetridge became an integral part of the city's increasingly militarized approach to containing dissent. Although he continued working until his death in March 1969, Daley's heavy-handed approach to the convention will forever be the last major political controversy he participated in.

David Sullivan did not hold onto the presidency of the BSEIU—which changed its name in 1968 to simply the SEIU—for long after McFetridge's death. In 1971 Sullivan retired, and nominated George Hardy—Charles Hardy's son and longtime head of the union's west coast—as his successor. The younger Hardy became a well-known liberal influence in the labor movement who steadfastly campaigned for George McGovern after the AFL-CIO refused to endorse him.¹⁵ Hardy also began to seriously question the union's lack of interest in empowering female workers. He commissioned,

13 Sara Jane Goodyear, “1,000 Retarded Kids Compete in Chicago Special Olympics” *Chicago Tribune*, July 21, 1968, 28; Liam T. A. Ford, *Soldier Field: A Stadium and its City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 245; Timothy Shriver, *Fully Alive: Discovering What Matters Most* (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2014), 90; “W. L. McFetridge, Labor Leader, 75,” *New York Times*, March 17, 1969, 39; “City to Rename Boulevard,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 8, 1970, 3; *25th Anniversary of the Presidency*, 20.

14 Quoted in David Farber, *Chicago '68* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 151.

15 “Union Leaders Will Stump For McGovern Labor Vote,” *New York Times*, October 27, 1972, 24.

among other things, a widely distributed guidebook on securing equal treatment in the workplace, noting, “If you deny women equal pay for equal work—if you deny them access to meaningful jobs simply because they're women—you are discriminating against and cutting yourself off from one of the greatest resources this country has to offer.”¹⁶ In sum, through the 1970s Hardy placed the union on a far more progressive footing than his predecessors—arguably laying the groundwork for John Sweeney's eventual rise to the presidency in 1980.

Internally Hardy sought to eradicate the last vestiges of corruption in the union. Although his efforts were not entirely successful, he did manage to eliminate the final link in Chicago to George Scalise: Thomas Burke. Despite being universally acknowledged as corrupt, Burke maintained control over Local 25 throughout the 60s and early 70s. Burke successfully survived both McFetridge's reforms and Sullivan's purges partially because he did a decent job for his members. During his long tenure—lasting nearly 50 years—Local 25 succeeded at improving wages for office janitors and even funded an innovative union-run health center. However, Hardy proved less tolerant of corruption than his predecessors and, in July of 1973, put Local 25 into trusteeship over numerous violations.

James Strong, the labor editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, described the fall of Burke almost wistfully as the end of an era in the Chicago labor movement. Strong describes Burke as having “hobnobbed with gangland figures” and as counting “among his friends the city's top politicians, businessmen and reporters.” The reporter praises Burke for having “improved wages and working conditions” for a union of “roughly 8,500 custodial janitors in commercial buildings, movie houses, stadiums, and offices.” Strong laments, however, that the leader fell because of a “failure to

¹⁶ *A Woman's Rights, SEIU Guidebook to Equal Opportunity*, September 1975, Box 5, Folder 68, SEIU Research Department, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

recognized that the heyday of labor chicanery was over.” The bounds of acceptability in the labor movement changed and no longer could accommodate a figure who was “often involved in bizarre shooting scrapes and other misadventures.” Strong concludes that “Today, Burke is out, the last of organized labor's more colorful characters in Chicago.”¹⁷ A somewhat less sympathetic note on the *Tribune's* editorial page spoke optimistically about the “increasing insistence on efficiency and performance, in at least the members interest, if not in the public's. We are unlikely to see much of Mr. Burke's style of union leadership in the future. That's good.”¹⁸

Although the *Tribune's* epitaphs for colorful labor corruption were premature at best, Burke's fall did indicate the end of an era in the SEIU of Chicago. Although many of McFetridge's protégées and allies, such as James Kemp, led successful careers in the labor movement, their leader's death decisively shifted the momentum towards Moats, Sullivan, and eventually, Hardy. By 1980 Moats succeeded at both taking the presidency of Local 25 and control over the union's state council. Over time many of the positions that McFetridge established—including a customary control over the Park District—as more or less sinecures of the SEIU faded, slowly disentangling the union from the administration of the city. Although the strategies of civic unionism remained part of the tactical toolkit of the union, the particular set of structures established by Grady, Quesse, and McFetridge disappeared.¹⁹

Somewhat unfortunately, Charles Swibel remained the last great bastion established by McFetridge. Always charming, and possessing almost unnatural political reflexes, Swibel managed to ingratiate himself with successive mayors rising to his highest influence in the early 1980s during Mayor Jane Byrne's administration. Swibel managed to maintain control over the CHA until, in

17 James Strong, “Burke's ouster ends labor era,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 23, 1973, 2.

18 “Labor union era ending?” *Chicago Tribune*, July 24, 1973, 12.

19 James Strong, “Labor won't snub Dems' fund-raiser,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 20, 1980, 24.

1982, the department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) effectively forced his resignation over the massive graft that he foisted on the agency.²⁰ Even after losing his post, however, Swibel remained, in the words of his obituary, “known as the ultimate wheeler-dealer in a city known for wheeling and dealing.” From behind the scenes he continued to shape policy and protect his own, often shady, business interests until his death in 1990.²¹ With the death of Swibel, the last direct piece of McFetridge's legacy in city hall finally disappeared.

From the Building Service Employee International Union to the Service Employee International Union

The need to uncover the historical context of the modern SEIU animated much of this dissertation. Despite the significance of the modern organization, historians have paid little attention to its roots. Partially this results from a narrative that suggests that the “real” history of the SEIU began in 1995 when John Sweeney's “New Voice” movement seized power in the union. The union's history prior to that either becomes defined as a prelude, such as the Justice for Janitors campaign in Los Angeles, or as a cautionary tale, such as the union's continuing struggles with corruption in New York.²² Subjects unrelated to these two themes are generally only covered in union sponsored histories or in articles of limited chronological scope. In this dissertation I have set out, first and foremost, to suggest that there is something worth studying in the early history of the organization. Standing on its own, the history of the BSEIU in Chicago provides a new perspective on both the evolution of craft unions and into the role that a group of janitors played in changing the political and physical geography of Chicago.

20 Stanley Ziemba & Philip Lentz, “HUD still demanding ouster of CHA's Swibel” *Chicago Tribune*, May 29, 1982, 84.

21 “Charles R. Swibel, 63, former CHA chairman, dies” *Chicago Tribune*, January 20, 1990, 21.

22 Kim Moody, “Saviors From on High,” *Jacobin*, July 2015. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/07/sweeney-trumka-chavez-seiu-unions/>. Accessed October 1, 2016.

Although I remain focused primarily upon this history, I believe that I have uncovered some insights that undermine the idea that the “New Voice” movement represented a radical disjunction in the union's history. The New Voice movement promised many things including a systematic reworking of the union to include the insights of feminism, decrease the power of corrupt leaders, and engage in an aggressive campaign of social movement unionism. However, the reality proved to be somewhat different. As Kim Moody notes, the New Voice movement put into effect a “contradictory cocktail—progressive experiments, business methods, and toleration of the old and dubious.”²³ Moody's description could just as easily describe the civic unionism of McFetridge as it does the social movement unionism of Sweeney. Moody attributes this “cocktail” to the failure of the leadership to “change the essentially conservative culture of the unions.... What was missing in all these changes and innovations was anything directed at activating or mobilizing labor's ultimate source of power: its membership.”²⁴ Here again, we see a similarity to the reforms of McFetridge which, while reducing corruption, never managed to return the membership of the union to its rightful place—at its head. Indeed, many of the New Voice's successes came through the signing of neutrality agreements, in which an employer agreed to not fight unionization in return for the union's consideration in other areas. Such agreements, while more formal than those established by Quesse, Grady, or McFetridge, would have fit quite comfortably in civic unionism. It would be unfair to describe the New Voice movement as simply stirring back up the old ideas of civic unionism, but a degree of connection exists.

To be fair, there are important differences between the New Voice movement and civic unionism. Although McFetridge and his followers spoke about diversity and equality, they rarely put it into

²³ Moody, “Savior From on High,”

²⁴ Moody, “Savior From on High,”

action. Even if the New Voice movement did not always live up to its ambitions in these regards either, leaders like Sweeney clearly felt a more authentic desire to broaden the demographics and reach of the labor movement. Similarly, civic unionists tended to guard the interests of existing members and allies, whereas Sweeney and his followers instead aggressively pushed for new organization. In these ways, Sweeney better resembled Sullivan than he did McFetridge or Quesse. When Sweeney became president of the AFL-CIO in 1996, he handed leadership of the SEIU over to Andy Stern. Stern, who was president from 1996-2010, became the best known, and most divisive, labor leader in the country. A leader who both promoted innovative forms of organization and viscously suppressed internal dissent, Stern neatly fit many of the patterns laid down by Sullivan and McFetridge.

The model of unionization that Stern promoted resembled civic unionism in many ways. In his 2006 book *A Country that Works*, Stern proposes that unions must change to fit the needs of a new economy, and a new society. He argues against purely antagonistic models of class conflict by suggesting that “both employers and employees must begin with the presumption that all parties want a mutually beneficial relationship.”²⁵ He describes this as “value-added employer relationships” but it easily relates back to the kinds of mutually beneficial arrangements that McFetridge excelled at. He goes on to laud joint labor-management lobbying programs such as one “in California [where] the [nursing home] industry and union worked with the legislature [to secure] a \$660 million state legislative appropriation” that made employers more prosperous and helped the union to achieve better pay.²⁶ Stern even discusses the importance of unions working with employers to develop training programs to ensure the quality of workers.²⁷ He concludes by noting

25 Andy Stern, *A Country that Works: Getting America back on Track* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 105.

26 Stern, *A Country that Works*, 107.

27 Stern, *A Country that Works*, 107.

that “these are all new tracks for our union to walk down” but direct analogies for each of these proposals can be found in the work of Quesse, Grady, and McFetridge. Again, the SEIU of Stern often seems more a creature of its past than a radical disjunction from it.

I am not sure if these programmatic and ideological similarities arise from a concrete intellectual legacy, or if they are simply recurrent ideas and paradigms in the organization of service workers. More work must be done before I am comfortable positing a direct causal relationship. However, at the very least, the similarities between the SEIU's past and present suggest that its history deserves careful consideration and mining for ideas, cautions, and perspectives. Perhaps a bit more understanding of the union's past may help to temper its sometimes excessive hubris.

On less ideological grounds, several recurrent institutional patterns appear in both the BSEIU of Chicago and Stern's SEIU. The most notable is the recurrent tension between the International union and its local affiliates. As Steve Early describes in *The Civil Wars in U.S. Labor*, much of the 2008 conflict between Stern and the United Healthcare Workers (UHW) SEIU local stemmed from his desire to silence Sal Rosselli, who publicly criticized him. The conflict, which eventually resulted in Stern putting UHW under trusteeship, echoes efforts that both McFetridge and Sullivan made to discipline local leaders that they felt were out of touch with their larger, strategic plans.²⁸ In particular Sullivan's coordinated effort to destroy McFetridge, essentially to eliminate a challenge to his authority, appears to be a precursor to Stern's fight with Rosselli.

Of course, these kinds of fights can happen in any union. However, the highly decentralized structure of the early union creates many opportunities for internal structures. Moments where the union might have systematically resolved sectional conflicts, such as in 1940 when the union sought

²⁸ Early, *The Civil War in U.S. Labor*, 9.

to reform in the wake of Scalise, resulted only in the creation of regional spheres of influence. Yet successive presidents would each find reasons to try to take control over SEIU affairs outside of their regional sphere, resulting in a contradiction between tradition and reality. Perhaps more importantly, the wide jurisdiction of the union—covering everyone from janitors to nurses to bureaucrats—creates extremely complicated internal politics, which may encourage heavy-handed leadership. Simply stated, it is difficult to imagine a union leader who could easily find ways to equally serve the interests of every different group of workers in such an amorphous blob of a union.

The roots of the union's internal diversity come partially from the wide, somewhat vague jurisdiction that the AFL granted the union, but also are the result of the NLRB. The Board's reluctance to certify janitors and other building service workers as separate units from hotel workers, nurses, and clerks gave the union ample incentive to stretch its jurisdiction to the breaking point. Such policies reduced the SEIU's relationship with other service unions to a vicious competition for bodies. In Chicago this meant the eradication of delicately worked out divisions between craft unions and the institution of the laws of the jungle in the labor movement. These themes too resonate with the modern SEIU. Early argues that during Stern's presidency he engaged in a series of damaging conflicts with other unions that follow just these patterns. Most notably, the SEIU struggled to replace the narrowly focused California Nurses Association (CNA) in hospitals with a whole workplace, single-unit union that included nurses and other staff. Early also criticizes Stern's efforts to cleave off parts of UNITE-HERE and absorb them into the SEIU. He blames this “organizational cannibalism” on Stern's megalomania, but a better target might be the larger, legal dynamics that forced the SEIU to become an industrial, or single-unit, based union.²⁹

29 Early, *The Civil War in U.S. Labor*, 12-13. The language of industrial unionism is problematic here as we are not

The work of Steve Early serves as a foil for this entire dissertation. My initial reactions to Early's work tended to be negative, and I still believe that he is often overly dogmatic and ignores many of the SEIU's legitimate successes. At times I also disagree with the puritan standards of authenticity that he applies to labor activists and scholars. In particular I dislike his penchant for dismissing his critics among academics—including such venerable figures as Ruth Milkman—as “campus enthusiast[s]” whom he accuses of having been “cultivated” by the perfidious Stern.³⁰ However, despite these objections, many of my observations about the BSEIU support his core criticism of the SEIU: that the organization is critically undermined by its failure to directly empower its members. Certainly the fashion in which Local 1 degraded from a labor union into something akin to a government agency suggests the importance of ensuring that union members remain engaged at all levels of the organization. Without that constant turnover between the union's membership and its leadership, the national organization of the BSEIU often seemed to lose its way.

At the same time, however, I reject the more simplistic notion that the BSEIU of Chicago can fairly be described as a business union. Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to disrupt the simplistic binary that exists between business unions and, well, everything else. Instead I propose that, while the BSEIU certainly expressed some elements of business unionism, it also engaged in tactics and pursuits that might be described as community or social movement unionism. These different trends inside the union did not conflict, but arose naturally from tactical calculations and circumstances. Applying the same nuanced understanding to the modern SEIU might provide us

discussing industrial workers. Yet in a broad sense the term industrial unionism often simply means the organization of an entire workplace. Several different alternatives have been proposed such as wall-to-wall unions but I prefer single-unit unions because it keeps the artificial nature of the situation (more a product of labor law than workers' choice) at the forefront. In addition, single unit is the terminology that Sullivan tended to use.

30 Early, *The Civil War in U.S. Labor*, 3.

with real insights into the nature of the organization that transcends the simplistic division between its supporters and its critics.

Conclusion

When I set out some years ago to study the Chicago roots of the SEIU, I did so partially out of a contrary streak in my personality. Most studies of unions focus on organizations that one could admire or, somewhat more rarely, could despise. In my dissertation I wanted to study an organization characterized by moral ambiguity and practical success. The BSEIU locals of Chicago fulfilled this ambition amply. At no point in this dissertation are the heroes or villains entirely clear; yet somehow this ambiguous, faulty, difficult to simply admire organization improved the lives of hundreds of thousands of workers, and established the basis of the most significant union in the modern labor movement.

The ambiguity of this dissertation reflects what the growing understanding among scholars of the true complexity of labor activism. As labor history moved past the imperatives and structural outlook of orthodox Marxism and came to terms with the decline of industrial unions, historians have increasingly sought out interesting forms of labor activity among groups formerly dismissed as reactionary. Such projects broaden our understanding of the lived experience of union members. At the same time, however, we must be careful not to ignore the very real consequences of the actions of these less-than-perfect organizations and leaders. Clearly the failures of figures in the BSEIU to reform, and expand, their union held significant costs that neatly mirror the expectations of commentators such as Early. Maintaining a balance between our need to fairly examine flawed organizations, while still remaining cognizant of their flaws requires us to reject simplistic dichotomies and judgments.

The BSEIU of Chicago ultimately cannot fit into the simple categories that earlier labor historians used to construct historical narratives. Instead it must be viewed as a flawed but powerful organization that accomplished both good and evil. Whether or not the positive influences of the organization—on union members or the public at large—out-balanced the negative likely depends on one's perspective and priorities. However, I am continually drawn back to the many descriptions of janitorial labor prior to unionization as hopelessly degrading. Without a union, janitors felt powerless to change their conditions or to elevate their trade. The janitors of Chicago traveled a twisting, bumpy road to achieve it, but ultimately they achieved the power to do just that. In Chicago for a period of decades “His Majesty, a Janitor” became not a joke, but a reality. If nothing else, that improbable victory meant something—something that is worth remembering.

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SEIU Historical Collection, Walter Reuther Library

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FILMS

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Breakfast Club, The. Directed by John Hughes. Universal City: Universal Studios, 1985

Good Will Hunting. Directed by Gus Van Sant. Miramax Films, 1997.

Score, The. Directed by Frank Oz. Paramount Pictures, 2001.

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TELEVISION SERIES

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Alito, Samuel. Opinion of the Court. *Harris v. Quinn*.

VITA

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EDUCATION: Ph.D., History, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois; 2016.

M. A., History, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois; 2007.

B. A., History with Departmental Honors, Politics with Departmental Honors, Willamette University, Salem, Oregon; 2004.

TEACHING: Instructor, Tokyo International University of America, Salem, Oregon; 2013.
Classes Taught: American History I (Civil Rights), American History (Democracy), American Foreign Policy.

Full-time Instructor, Willamette University, Salem, Oregon; 2010-2013.
Classes Taught: History 114 (Modern American), History 121 (Topic: From Telegraph to Twitter), History 121 (Topic: Labor History), Politics 121 (Topic: Work/Labor/Class), Politics 210 (American Politics), Politics 315 (Topic: Corruption in American Politics), Politics 315 (Topic: Politics in the Age of Facebook), Politics 399 (Independent Study).

Teaching Assistant, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois; 2006-2009. Discussion Group Leader: History 100 (Western Civilization to 1648), History 101 (Western Civilization Since 1648), History 104 (Modern America).

RELEVANT EMPLOYMENT: Editorial Coordinator, *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, Chicago, Illinois; 2008-2010.

Political Organizer, Service Employees International Union, Salem, Oregon; 2004.

PUBLICATIONS: Peterson, B., Review of *The Making of the Middle Class: Toward a Transnational History*, A. Ricardo López and Barbara Weinstein eds., *New Global Studies*, VII (December 2013): 103-106.

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Peterson B., "Samuel Gompers," *Encyclopedia of United States Political History*, vol. 4 (1878-1920), Robert D. Johnston ed., Congressional Quarterly Press; 2010.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS: "Three Mayors & a Janitors Union," Urban History Association Conference, Chicago, IL; October 2016.

"Glittering Towers of Labor," Social Science History Association, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada; November 2012.

"Saving the World for Janitors," Business History Conference; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; March 2012.

"A janitor is the same as a doctor'," New School Conference on Power & the History of Capitalism; New York, New York; April 2012.

"Sweeping Up Change," Social Sciences History Association, Chicago, Illinois; November 2010.

Commentator, "Trade & Consequences," Chicago Graduate Student History Conference, Chicago, Illinois; April 2010.

"We Are Sanitarians," North American Labor History Conference, Detroit, Michigan; October 2009.

"After the Fall: Power, Corruption, Lies & the BSEIU." Labor & Working Class History Association, Chicago, Illinois; May 2009.

UNIVERSITY SERVICE: Coordinator, Willamette University Work, Class, Labor Discussion Group, Willamette University; 2011-2012.

Adviser, Carson Undergraduate Research Grant, Willamette University; 2011.

Co-Adviser, University of Illinois History Undergraduate Society; 2010.

Commentator, "Trade & Consequences," Chicago Graduate Student History Conference, Chicago, Illinois; April 2010.

Co-Founder and Co-Director, Chicago Graduate Student History Conference; 2006-2009.

Assistant Organizer, Newberry Conference on Labor History Across the Americas; 2008.

VITA (continued)**AWARDS AND
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Co-Organizer, Midwest Labor and Working-Class History Colloquium; 2008.

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