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Revaluing Immigrant Women's Labour in Vancouver's Low-Paid Health Care Sector: *A Case Study of the Hospital Employees' Union (HEU)*

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REVALUING IMMIGRANT WOMEN'S LABOUR IN VANCOUVER'S LOW-PAID HEALTH CARE SECTOR: A CASE STUDY OF THE HOSPITAL EMPLOYEES' UNION (HEU)

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INTRODUCTION

Between 2002 and 2004, approximately 9,000 people – the majority of whom were immigrants and women of colour – were laid off in British Columbia’s health care support services sector. Bill 29 - officially known as the BC Health and Social Services Delivery Improvement Act of 2002 – granted public health sector employees the “right to reorganize the delivery of its services by transferring functions or services...to another health sector employer.”¹ Drastic wage cuts followed mass layoffs as three multinational corporations – Compass, Aramark, and Sodexo – took over the house-keeping, dietary, laundry, and maintenance and security services in public hospitals and long-term care facilities in the larger Vancouver metropolitan area. Jobs that once paid upwards of \$20 per hour offered as low as \$9.50 per hour for similar work in the same workplaces. The new private sector employers also significantly downgraded workers’ extended health benefits, vacation pay, and sick leave and eliminated benefits such as pension contributions, long-term disability, and seniority (Stinson, Pollak and Cohen 2005, 11-12). For workers taking newly privatized jobs, it was a different world of work. “Survival” jobs – the kind of jobs that one took out of dire economic need – had replaced career jobs – the kind of jobs upon which one could support a family and develop a sense of self-worth and dignity.²

Outsourcing and privatization in the public sector are common features of neoliberal economic restructuring. The high wages and benefits associated with unionized jobs in the public sector have made labour costs a visible target of government cost-savings efforts, especially in cities with a large wage gap

¹ http://www.bclaws.ca/EPLibraries/bclaws_new/document/ID/freeside/00_02002_01 (accessed August 20, 2010)

² Creese and Wiebe (2010) describe “survival employment” as a form of employment that one takes out of dire economic need, regardless of the match with one’s skill or educational level.

between private and public sector employees (Ferris 1986). What makes the case of Vancouver's health care support services sector particularly noteworthy is the interlocking nexus between gender, race, and immigration status. The reclassification of thousands of public sector jobs in the region's hospitals and long-term care facilities has disproportionately affected immigrant and visible minority women, who have been the primary recruits in the newly privatized sector (Cohen 2006, 626). Once considered relatively good jobs, private sector employment in public care facilities has become synonymous with the kind of low-paid and insecure work found in restaurants, cafeterias, and hotels. The shift of reproductive labour from the household to the market has intensified what Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2001) calls the "race-gender division of labour." Women of colour who have historically done the "dirty" work of cleaning and laundering in private homes are doing similar work in new institutional settings such as hospitals, nursing homes, and other health care facilities.

This paper explores organizational efforts to challenge the interlocking nexus between social and economic disadvantage. Specifically, it focuses on how one union, the Hospital Employees Union (HEU), has attempted to challenge the deterioration of wages, working conditions, and job security for a predominantly immigrant and women of colour workforce. Most labour unions have been slow to organize immigrants, women, and people of colour employed in low-paid and subcontracted work arrangements. For example, it took UNISON, the largest public sector union in England, many years after the sector was contracted out to re-organize cleaning and food service workers, the majority of whom were foreign-born migrants (Holgate and Wills 2007; Wills 2009). Surprisingly, in the case of the HEU, the decision to re-organize privatized workers was immediate and decisive. HEU launched a resource- and time-intensive organizing drive to recruit new union members employed by

private sector companies, especially immigrants with limited English language skills and minimal prior experience with unions. The union also expanded its conventional bargaining approach to include a broad-based living wage campaign aimed at publicly shaming profitable multinational corporations that pay workers poverty-level wages.³ At stake was not just winning higher wage standards in union contracts; HEU's efforts to improve living and working conditions for the predominantly female and immigrant workforce were also linked to its broader commitment to promoting social and economic justice.

Why and under what conditions did HEU decide to challenge the degradation of work and employment for newly privatized health care workers? What factors led the union to broaden its membership criteria beyond the public sector and adopt more innovative movement-oriented organizing strategies? What does this case illuminate about how and under what conditions labour unions seek to organize a predominantly female, immigrant, and racialized workforce? By examining how and under what conditions HEU has sought to challenge the devaluation of immigrant women's labour in Vancouver's health care sector, this paper seeks to deepen our understanding of the role of labour unions in challenging the nexus between social and economic disadvantage – dynamics that not only characterize historically entrenched patterns of labour market inequality in regions such as Vancouver but are also an increasingly prevalent feature of labour markets around the world.

My research findings, based primarily on in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted with HEU members, staff and leaders, reveal that emotions played a central role in the union's decision to redefine its membership criteria and expand its organizational practices. Rather than remain contained as the

³ See Stephanie Luce (2005) for background on living wage campaigns.

private troubles of aggrieved individuals, the affects and feelings associated with Bill 29 and the subsequent outsourcing of health care support services workers generated what Randall Collins calls an “emotional energy” in which a combination of *negatively-* and *positively-charged* emotions circulated and gained traction in the context of organizational conflict and change. Anger and disgust at the provincial government’s neoliberal policies and the collusion of a male-dominated labour union in devaluing women’s labour sparked moral outrage and indignation among HEU’s feminist leaders, who began working together to devise new strategies and approaches to reorganizing the private sector workforce. Feelings of anger, grief, and mistrust were also pervasive among newly privatized workers, some of whom were former members of HEU and blamed the union for the layoffs. HEU’s higher-paid and predominantly white public sector members also began harboring negative feelings regarding the leadership’s seeming lack of concern for their interests in favor of a small and racially-ethically disadvantaged minority. To diffuse and redirect these negative emotional currents, the union sought to create new spaces of emotional connection and mutual understanding through its living wage campaign. By presenting moving stories told directly by immigrant women and women of colour, the union mobilized affective states and emotions that aimed to promote the living wage campaign’s goals and tactics, as well as suppress those that undermined them (Gould 2009, 213).

The following sections of the paper are organized as follows. First, I discuss the characteristics of labour market disadvantage for immigrant workers. Second, I provide details on my methodology and research design. Third, I provide empirical background about HEU’s membership recruitment drive among private sector workers, which resulted in the union’s first living wage campaign. Fourth, I discuss the emotional undercurrents of the living wage

campaign. I conclude by discussing the limits of emotional strategies for generating more enduring forms of organizational and structural change, especially in regards to historically-entrenched patterns of gendered and racial-ethnic inequality.

REVALUING IMMIGRANT WOMEN'S LABOUR

While there may be a variety of reasons to explain the connection between social and economic disadvantage, studies routinely highlight the disproportionate concentration of immigrant women and workers of colour on the bottom rungs of the labour market (Galabuzi 2006; Zaman 2006; Creese and Wiebe 2010).⁴ Since the mid-1980s, immigrants have accounted for over half of Vancouver's job growth, yet the increased labour market participation of immigrants has not corresponded with an overall expansion of job opportunities and improved levels of economic well-being (Hiebert 2009). In comparison to the 1980s, immigrants today face higher levels of unemployment and poverty, experience more difficulty finding well-paid work and a higher prevalence of low income than the total population (Hiebert 2000, 11; Hiebert and Sherrell 2009, 10), and tend to work in sectors with lower pay levels and longer working hours such as labor-intensive manufacturing, sales, accommodation, and food services (Hiebert and Pendakur 2003). While the figures for recent immigrants display markedly higher income and employment gaps, individuals who have lived in Canada for over fifteen years con-

⁴ Studies point to the significance of a variety of factors for explaining the correlation between economic and social disadvantage for immigrants: the non-recognition of foreign credentials; the lack of Canadian experience (Liu 2007); the deskilling of immigrants with high educational and skill levels (Bauder 2003; Li 2003; Man 2004); the mismatch between Canada's immigration policy and employer behavior towards certain groups of skilled immigrants in the labour market (Bauder and Cameron 2002; Pratt et al. 2008); employer aversion to non-Western job applicants and preference for native Canadian and Western European job applicants (Oreopoulos 2009); English-language accent discrimination (Creese 2003, 2010); and the role of immigrant settlement agencies in channeling immigrants into low-paid work (Creese and Wiebe 2010).

tinue to experience lower earnings in comparison to their native-born counterparts.⁵ The earnings gap is particularly significant on bottom of the wage spectrum: according to a 2008 Statistics Canada report, immigrants are 1.8 times more likely than native-born Canadians to earn less than \$10 per hour.⁶ Immigrants straddling multiple forms of social difference such as racial-ethnic minority status and gender are often doubly and triply disadvantaged in the labour market. For example, in 2006, immigrant women aged 25 to 54 had much higher unemployment rates than both immigrant men and Canadian-born women, regardless of how long they have lived in Canada (Morissette and Picot 2005).

Despite the pervasive link between economic subordination and social status for certain groups such as immigrant women of colour, the existence of ascriptive inequalities along gender, race, and immigrant status rarely generate opposition or ardent demands for change. We have become familiar with stories of nurses and teachers from the Philippines working as live-in nannies (Pratt et al. 2008); and we regularly interact with taxi drivers from Pakistan and India and fast food cashiers from China and Taiwan with advanced university degrees. In the words of Barrington Moore (1978, 460), one might even say that we have been “morally and psychologically anesthetized” to the everyday injustices associated with racial, ethnic, and immigrant disadvantage.⁷

5 2006 Census figures show that immigrants who had arrived in Canada between 1991 and 1995 received 79% (\$21,346) of the annual median earnings of native-born British Columbians (\$26,974) in 2005 and immigrants who had arrived more recently between 2001-2005 received just 60% (\$16,293). From Table 2: British Columbia Median Annual Earnings, 2005 in Steve Kerstetter, “A Closer Look at Low Wages in BC,” BC Office Reports and Studies. Vancouver: Canadian Centre for Politics Alternatives. <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/closer-look-low-wages-bc> (accessed July 31, 2010)

6 The 2008 Canadian Immigrant Labour Market: Analysis of Quality of Employment <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/71-606-x/2009001/part-partie1-eng.htm> (accessed July 31, 2010)

7 This is less about the absence of the will to rebel than the presence of a kind of anesthesia, explained Moore (1978, 460) states, “If no culture makes suffering an end in itself and all cultures treat certain forms of suffering as inherently painful, we are justified in considering the absence of felt pain as due to some form of moral and psychological anesthesia. From this standpoint the assertion that there is no indomitable spirit of revolt takes on a different

The eruption of struggles to revalue immigrant women's labour in the aftermath of Bill 29, then, is noteworthy as an exception to the rule. It represents a rare historical case in which to examine the processes whereby individuals and organizations attempt to challenge and transform, as opposed to passively accept, familiar patterns of inequality and subordination.

HEU's efforts to reorganize low-paid and predominantly immigrant women of colour in the privatized health care sector serve as a concrete example to examine how, why, and under what conditions labour unions seek to challenge seemingly accepted forms of social and economic disadvantage. HEU was one of the first unions in the region to actively organize immigrant and visible minority women in hospital support services work.⁸ This was partially due to the more diverse composition of the workforce, which already included a larger proportion of immigrants and workers of colour than the general population, but it was also related to HEU's history of engaging in militant and progressive union action (Isitt and Moroz 2007, 95). HEU was a leader in the struggle for gender pay equity in the 1980s and actively supported a range of community struggles. HEU was also one of the first unions that worked in solidarity with civic organizations such as First Call BC, an anti-child poverty coalition, and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) to launch a broad-based living wage campaign aimed at improving the employment conditions and livelihoods of workers at the bottom rungs of the labour market (Richards et al. 2008). While the focus on HEU does not provide a generalizable picture that applies to all immigrants employed in low-paid and socially devalued work, it does provide concrete insight into how a new generation of unions, motivated

meaning. It means that under certain specifiable sociological and psychological conditions the anesthesia can be terribly effective.”

⁸ Low-paid workers are defined as employees earning less than two-thirds of the median in each country. A wage of less than \$10 an hour is widely considered to be low-paid in Canada, because a single individual working full-time all year would need at least this amount to reach the poverty line.

by social justice concerns, are utilizing innovative strategies and progressive political visions to organize the growing number of immigrant and women workers employed in low-paid, service sector jobs.

DATA AND METHODS

The analysis offered in this paper draws primarily on interviews and focus groups conducted with 25 HEU members, staff, and leaders between April 2008 and February 2009. Almost all of the interviews with union staff and leaders were conducted at HEU's main headquarters in Burnaby, and the focus groups were conducted at venues convenient to workers' homes and workplaces. The interviews and focus groups, which were all conducted by the author, were semi-structured in format and included questions about one's job history, union involvement, community involvement, and views on immigration, discrimination, employment, leadership, and social justice. The length of time for interviews and focus groups ranged from one to three hours, and they were all digitally recorded, transcribed, and coded.⁹ All research involving HEU staff and rank-and-file members was conducted with the formal permission of the union's research department and the valuable support of then HEU Research Analyst Jennifer Whiteside. Those individuals who provided informed voluntary consent to use their real identities are quoted without anonymity; those individuals who preferred to give confidential interviews were given a pseudonym and are referred to only by a first name. To supplement and provide context for individual reflections and accounts, I drew on union documents and reports, organizing pamphlets, educational materials, and training materials. HEU's website archive provided a comprehensive record of the union's past press releases and public statements.

⁹ Thanks to Geraldina Polanco, Carrie Baptist, and Pamela Toor for valuable assistance in transcribing interviews.

To establish the historical background of the case study, I begin with a chronological account of HEU's response to Bill 29 from 2004 to 2008. First, I describe HEU's membership recruitment drive among newly privatized workers and the sequence of events that led the union to adopt a broad-based living wage campaign. Interview and focus group narratives highlight two factors in particular in influencing HEU's priorities and strategies: 1) the role of feminist and social justice-oriented leaders in articulating and implementing a new direction for the union in the aftermath of privatization, and 2) the growing centrality of the "pains of privatization" among HEU's new private sector workforce, the majority of whom were immigrant women and women of colour (Stinson, Pollak and Cohen 2005).

After providing a detailed account of the case, I then analyze the dynamics of HEU's living wage campaign. In particular, I examine the role of affects and emotions in creating new spaces of connection and transformation within the union. I explore the emotional ruptures generated in the aftermath of Bill 29 and the negative emotions that circulated among HEU's predominantly white membership in higher-paid and more secure public sector jobs. I also explore the role of personal testimonies and public witnessing in generating a shared sense of pain and indignation among individuals from different racial-ethnic locations and employment conditions, or what I call the "mobilizing pain of others," to diffuse and redirect negative emotional reactions into more positive feelings of affinity and solidarity within the union.

HEU'S ROAD TO ORGANIZING LOW-PAID IMMIGRANT AND WOMEN OF COLOUR WORKERS

HEU's decision to expand its membership criteria and actively organize low-paid private sector workers is best understood in the context of its history organizing marginalized women workers in the health care sector and its more contemporary struggle for advancing gender pay equity. Founded in 1944, the HEU was the first union to officially represent both women and men working as hospital cleaners, orderlies, and kitchen workers among others at Vancouver General Hospital. Although its early years reflected the "biases and discriminatory practices of the era," HEU began actively fighting for gender wage equality in the 1960s and early 1970s in the context of the broader struggle for civil rights and women's rights (Cohen 2010, 4). HEU's struggle to secure gender pay equity gains was realized in the 1990s after the union won a historic strike against the provincial government. In addition to general wage increases, approximately 90 per cent of the union's membership received pay equity increases, and the union put a plan in place to achieve full pay equity for all job categories over a graduated period of time (Cohen and Cohen 2004, 72). By 2001, the gap between men and women's pay was "reduced to 1 to 4 percent compared to 10 to 29 percent in 1991," making HEU members some of the highest paid health care workers in the country (Cohen 2010, 6).

HEU's pay equity gains were undermined after May 2001, however, when the new Liberal government in BC was elected after a decade of progressive leadership under the New Democratic Party (NDP). The Liberal government publicly criticized the relatively high wages that the HEU had secured for BC health care support services workers and introduced Bill 29, which eliminated the ban against contracting out in HEU's bargaining agreements and authorized multinational companies such as Aramark, Sodexo, and Compass to take

over health care support services delivery. When the union learned of the provincial government's plans to pass Bill 29, many viewed the government's actions as a direct attack against the union and the pay equity gains it had made. Fred Muzin, HEU's President at the time, described the actions by B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell's government as similar to "what Thatcher did in Britain to the mine workers" (Isitt and Moroz 2007, 97). Although HEU attempted to block the passage of Bill 29 through public protests and media campaigns, it was unable to stop further plans for health care privatization until April 2004, when the union accepted 15% wage reductions for all health care workers, including higher paid medical technicians and licensed nurse practitioners (LPNs), in exchange for an end to government-initiated contracting out plans.

HEU continued its fight against the passage of Bill 29 by waging a legal challenge in the courts, which it successfully settled in January 2008; however, the union leadership turned its focus more squarely on the consequences of contracting out in 2005, when it began actively re-organizing private sector workers.¹⁰

Organizing Private Sector Workers

HEU's decision to expand their membership base to include newly privatized workers was consistent with its historic commitment to representing lower-paid health care workers, but it was a distinct departure from their previous focus on the public sector. Part of the motivation for the decision to ex-

¹⁰ On June 8, 2007 the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that key provisions of Bill 29 were unconstitutional and violated Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Community Bargaining Association reached an agreement in January 2008 with the Government of B.C. and the Health Employers Association of B.C. in January 2008 that included \$1.5 million in compensation for members and former members impacted by Bill 29 and \$2.5 million for retraining workers laid off due to contracting out in the past or in the future. See <http://www.heu.org/~DOCUMENTS/BILL%2029/communityhealthbill29report.pdf> (accessed September 20, 2010).

pand the unions' membership boundaries to private sector workers stemmed from the intense anger and hostility that several feminist union leaders felt towards the actions of another union, Local 1-3567 of the Industrial, Wood and Allied Workers. IWA Local 1-3567, which historically represented male lumber workers, sawmill workers, and timber transport workers, took an unexpected turn in 2003 when it chose to represent private health care sector workers, the majority of whom were immigrant women and women of colour.¹¹ IWA Local 1-3567 negotiated union contracts for newly privatized workers at pay rates that HEU leaders believed that the IWA would have never "tolerated for its core, male membership" (Cohen 2006, 638). As a result of these union contracts, BC workers went from some of the highest- to the lowest-paid health care workers in the country.¹²

The manner in which the IWA recruited new union members also generated feelings of shock and disgust among HEU leaders. The majority of the IWA's 3,500 new members were acquired under "voluntary recognition agreements" in which the "terms and conditions of employment [were] established by mutual agreement between the union and company prior to hiring the workforce" (Cohen and Cohen 2004, 72). Many new IWA members, who were new immigrants with limited English language skills and had never been part of a union, explained that they felt confused by the presence of IWA union representatives during on-site job interviews and believed it was a re-

11 The IWA's March 2004 newsletter, *The Allied Worker*, prominently featured its new members in a front page article entitled, the "Changing Face of IWA." The article, which was accompanied by a photo of two South Asian women workers, highlighted the IWA's commitment to taking on the challenge of representing over 3,500 new members in the private health care sector, "many who have never been union members before. Changing Face of IWA. *The Allied Worker: News from the Industrial, Wood and Allied Workers of Canada*. Vol. 69, No 1. March 2004.

12 For a more detailed discussion of the IWA's union contracts with Aramark, Sodexo, and Compass, see Cohen and Cohen 2004.

quirement of the new job to join the IWA.¹³ Others recalled being completely unaware they were signing 6-year union contracts when accepting the job. When recalling the IWA's role in taking advantage of more vulnerable women workers, Sue Fisher, HEU's Organizing Director, expressed pointed disdain: "Why would you let bad companies and a bad union give labour a bad name and condemn these workers to this terrible collective agreement?...It was so grossly unjust that we just could not leave it alone. We had to try to break that deal" (Interview SF0806, 2008).

Sue's background as a feminist union leader helped link her personal experiences with male-dominated unionism to the discriminatory treatment of newly privatized workers by private sector employers and the IWA. Sue first became involved in the union movement after starting her first job as a typist for B.C. Hydro's credit union. She describes herself as coming from a "very traditional" background: her mother "never worked," she was the oldest of five girls, and she was married at the age of 17. After joining the union women's committee at her first job and going on to serve as an elected leader in her local, she confronted fierce opposition from male unionists who opposed female leadership in the union. She eventually left her post as a rank-and-file leader and worked as a paid union servicing representative before becoming one of HEU's most important and influential leaders as the Director of Organizing and Private Sector Bargaining. Fisher and other leaders at HEU publicly denounced the IWA's actions, arguing that they did not just violate constitutional guidelines regulating the behavior of affiliates under the Canadian Labour Congress, but that they also "set back women's wages over 20 years."¹⁴

13 These job fairs, which were held at venues such as BC Place, the Hilton Hotel, and the Holiday Inn, were aimed at hiring workers to fill thousands of job openings in a relatively short period of time. IWA officials were present during on-site job interviews to directly sign up union members to pre-negotiated union contracts.

14 With the support of a 600,000-member-strong Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), HEU filed and won its grievance against the IWA-Canada with the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). <http://cupe.ca/>

Once the union leadership made the decision to launch a reorganizing campaign in the private sector, Sue relied on the hard work and creativity of paid staff organizers to recruit newly privatized members into the union.¹⁵ Lila Murao was one of the union's first paid organizers hired on a temporary basis, and she became a full-time union staff organizer in 1994.¹⁶ Although she had "no clue" how to organize new members when she first started in 1989, she was a veteran organizer with 15 years of experience by the time she started organizing private sector workers after Bill 29. Lila recalled spending many nights and weekends going "above and beyond" the usual "9 to 5":

"We worked very hard. We worked very, very hard...We spent a lot of time in the hospitals, talking to people on their breaks. We spent a lot of time drinking coffee. We would leaflet workers coming off shift, coming on shift... [on the] weekends. We would be there early morning. We would be there at 10:30 to 11:30pm at night. We would stand at bus stops...It was almost like casing a place, sort of sitting there, watching and wondering, 'were those the new workers that had the new uniforms? What time did they come to work? What time did they finish work? What time did they take their break? Where did they park their cars?'" (Interview LM0825, 2008).

Lila also recounted the creative tactics they employed to make direct contact with workers, some of whom had no prior familiarity with the HEU or the purpose of a labour union. She explained:

[NPOReportnovemberdecember/ART4023b7439e91c](#) (accessed October 10, 2010).

15 HEU's efforts to reorganize private sector workers and improve their wages and benefits were aided by Section 54, a clause in BC's Labour Relations Code. Section 54 required that the union be given 60 days' notice before a facility officially terminated the employment of one of its members "due to a measure, policy, practice or change that affects the terms, conditions or security of employment of a significant number of employees to whom a collective agreement applies." When HEU learned which hospitals were conducting layoffs, union representatives were able to schedule face-to-face meetings with workers about their options. This was particularly important to HEU's reorganizing efforts, because a significant proportion of newly hired workers in private sector firms were workers who were laid off under Bill 29 and had little economic choice but to accept re-employment under private sector employers at much lower wages. http://www.bclaws.ca/EPLibraries/bclaws_new/document/ID/freeside/00_96244_01#section54 (accessed September 30, 2010).

16 All paid union organizers were initially hired on a temporary, casual basis.

"We would try and do anything to talk to people...We had advertisements at bus stops....If there were special days that were coming up, like say Chinese New Year, we had fortune cookies made with little fortunes in it and give them out to people. I think it said something like, 'if you have any questions, call Hospital Employees Union.' So it became very creative, like how do we approach workers, rather than the traditional, we're going to sit in the cafeteria during their breaks" (ibid).

In addition to the time-consuming work of engaging in face-to-face outreach, the organizing department faced the challenge of building relationships of trust with a workforce that was either alienated or disconnected from the union. Although HEU had historically contained a more diverse membership than other unions, there were few elected union leaders and paid union staff members with linguistic and cultural ties to the newly privatized workforce. Lila was from a visible minority background as a second generation Japanese-Canadian, but she did not have the language ability or cultural knowledge to connect with many of the new immigrants that were hired into private sector jobs on her own. To overcome these challenges, Fisher hired staff organizers with language skills in Punjabi, Tagalog, and Fijian who were either recently laid off under Bill 29, or who were active rank-and-file leaders in their locales. In doing so, the Organizing Department took concrete steps toward diversifying the ethnic and racial composition of the staff and building ties to historically underrepresented and "hard to reach" workers.

Many of HEU's rank-and-file members from visible minority communities were unfamiliar with the idea that the position of a paid staff organizer even existed. Marie Pantelis immigrated to Canada from the Philippines in 1978 when she was 18 years old and had been an active member of HEU for 29 years. The majority of Marie's co-workers were Filipinos and had worked in the

health care sector since the 1970s. She explained, "There's quite a bit of Indo-Canadians and Chinese, but the majority in our workforce are Filipinos. We're talking like 97%...If I wanna talk to maintenance – Filipino. Who's the house-keeper? Filipino.... [This was also the case from] the care aids to the nurses." (Interview M924, 2008). Although she did not personally lose her job as a care aide after Bill 29 was passed, witnessing many of her co-workers lose their jobs generated feelings of tremendous guilt and responsibility. Culturally, Marie believed that most Filipinos had no intention of leaving the job unless they died or won the lottery, and she would have probably also remained in her 29-year position as a long-term care aide had she not been directly approached by Sue Fisher to join HEU's organizing department.

Other rank-and-file union members who lost their jobs after Bill 29 had become quite disillusioned with the union. Hiring co-ethnic organizers allowed HEU to begin repairing their relationships with the newly privatized workforce, many of whom were fired and rehired into the same job positions at significantly reduced wages and benefits. Harjeet Dhama's experience with the union highlighted the negative attitudes that laid-off workers developed towards the union. Shocked and angry after receiving the formal termination of her employment after Bill 29, Harjeet led a delegation of 42 laid-off workers to HEU's central office in Burnaby to demand that the union intervene on their behalf. She explained, "HEU was our union, but we never ever came here. We just paid our union dues...I [started] wondering, 'We have really big union and they can protect us.'" When Harjeet arrived at the office, she told the receptionist that she wanted to see her "rep" (union servicing representative) because she was "always sick" and "was pissed off with her too." Instead, she recalls, "An organizer came to meet us and I said [to her], 'I want to know what you guys did for us. Because that time our feeling was it's union, because the employer

put in our minds because of union, you are losing your jobs. So we are not blaming government, we are blaming union." Unable to calm Harjeet and the others workers down, the union organizer called Chris Allnutt, the Secretary-Treasurer at the time, who emphasized that it was the government, not the union, who was responsible for the layoffs. Harjeet was not convinced, however. She said, "It was long conversation...and we returned from here [the union office] like very disappointed. Very, very disappointed."

When HEU approached Harjeet to join the staff as a paid organizer in 2003, she initially rejected their offer, saying, "No, you guys lost our jobs. What can I do because I have no office skills? What can I do in your office?" (ibid). But, Sue convinced her that she had exactly the skills they were looking for, and she eventually accepted the position. Harjeet told me during the interview that she eventually came to realize that she always had the skills to be an organizer; she just did not know it at the time. One of the advantages Harjeet had when organizing new members was her racial-ethnic identity. As an older South Asian woman who spoke six different languages including Punjabi and not a native white woman or man, it was helpful that she didn't "look like an organizer." Once inside the hospitals, she would quietly walk around and look for potential recruits to talk to, but it was not easy to gain workers' trust in light of the fear and mistrust that characterized the post-Bill 29 workplace. She explains:

"It was big challenge for me. Because I was affected with the Bill-29. What I do always when I go in hospital or care facility [is that] I don't be an organizer, I be an employee....I just talk to them about how hard [the] work is and what they are doing and how they feel. 'Are they satisfied? Are they angry?' Like this...Sometimes [I met people who were] more aggressive [than I was] and angry, angry. But when I cry with them and I share my own experience, my own feelings, then it really works. They stop and they

listen to me...When I see there is room, then I talk to them about union. If I see there is no room than I don't talk to them...Because I don't say, 'No, I don't care what you have feeling and I want to sign you.'

Harjeet used her ability to understand and empathize with others in similar situations – or to “feel the same pain” – to emphasize the common experience of trauma and suffering that linked her to other workers in similar but different situations. She recalled meeting one woman who had worked for 30 years in the housekeeping department of a hospital before getting laid off and rehired to work the exact same job for less than half the wages. Although Harjeet had only worked for five years, she emphasized the value of sharing the emotional pain of others to overcome differences between workers. She stated:

“This pain is like that when people share their pains. Because pain always cuts the pain. If somebody in pain and you are singing in front of that person, you won't stop their pain. But when you talk to your own pain, then they compare, then they see that you are on the same level. Then they start to talk to you. Otherwise they say no, go away, you don't know how I feel, how much I have pain. When I put myself in that group, then they feel we are all same level and [they see] I feel in my heart [the] same pain” (Interview M0924, 2008).

Hiring a diverse group of staff organizers provided the union with a more intimate understanding of the painful and discriminatory consequences of employment reclassification. Union staff and leaders repeatedly heard about the difficulties workers experienced trying to take care of themselves and their families while working long hours at low wages. They also learned that it was not uncommon for a worker to hold two or three low-paid jobs, which sometimes even included working different shifts at the same workplace under different companies. Ninety-five to one hundred percent of the organizing meetings Sue Fisher attended were filled “overwhelmingly [by] women with families [and] women of colour,” she explains, “and they were devastated. You

could just not ignore the impact, so it was very, very hard. It was really, really painful for people" (Interview SF806, 2008). Although the pressures and demands of waging a labour-intensive reorganizing campaign left little capacity at the time for union staff to address the deep and enduring emotional pain of their new members, hearing repeated stories of pain and suffering from newly organized private sector workers left a lasting imprint on many of the union staff involved and would later serve as an unexpected source of revitalization and renewal in the conflict-ridden organization.

Bargaining with multinational contractors: from workplace strikes to a living wage campaign

Once HEU recruited approximately 3,000 newly privatized workers as new members, it began the next stage of its reorganizing campaign: raising poverty-level wages at the bargaining table. HEU was tasked with negotiating contracts with each of the three companies that employed private sector health care workers. Union negotiators were able to secure its first collective agreement with Aramark relatively quickly, but they encountered severe resistance from employer representatives at Sodexo, where the wage levels were the lowest among the Big 3 companies and, also, the lowest-paid hospital support workers in Canada. HEU condemned multinational corporations like Sodexo that "recorded global revenues of \$17 billion" in 2004, but refused to "invest in its employees in British Columbia and to respect the critical role they play in health care."¹⁷ HEU eventually managed to negotiate a collective agreement on behalf of Sodexo workers, but it took approximately 1,400 HEU members across the province and an exhausting, expensive, and protracted 7 week

17 HEU news release, HEU strike against Sodexo escalates, October 19, 2005. See http://www.heu.org/?act=news&article_ID=5312&type=1&call2=6D957D27 (accessed October 10, 2010).

strike (51 days) in 2005 to raise hourly wage rates to \$13.05 over a three-year period.¹⁸ While this was a significant gain, it was still well below the wage levels of previous HEU union agreements before Bill 29 and far short of the wage gains HEU had hoped to recover during its new round of negotiations. Publicly, HEU celebrated its hard-fought successes at the bargaining table.¹⁹ However, internally, key union strategists had already begun discussing the need for alternative approaches, especially as they prepared for their second round of bargaining when employers were not under legal obligation to negotiate a contract with the union.

The difficulties HEU experienced during its strikes exposed the limits of conventional union tactics for low-paid and socially devalued subcontracted workers. Multinational subcontracting firms seemed to display little compassion or concern for the everyday hardships of low-paid employees. The union demanded that multinational corporations take responsibility for maintaining high standards in BC's most important public sector – health care, but their indignant calls seemed to have little resonance. Sheila, a union bargaining representative, recalled feeling shocked and dismayed by the callous attitude of employer representatives regarding the predominantly immigrant and women of colour workforce. She explained:

“Compass as an employer at the bargaining table was very disrespectful, rude, belligerent, disrespectful to the committee, to their workers. It was

18 HEU News Release, dated September 13, 2005. See http://www.heu.org/?act=news&article_ID=5305&type=1&call2=6D957D27 (accessed October 10, 2010).

19 HEU signed its first collective agreement with Aramark in November 2005, which included 700 cleaning staff at more than 25 hospitals and care facilities in the Lower Mainland and on the Sunshine Coast. HEU signed its first collective agreement with Sodexo in December 2005 on behalf of 1400 dietary, cleaning, and other support staff who work in contracted services at hospitals and care facilities throughout the Fraser Valley, Lower Mainland, Sunshine Coast, and Victoria. HEU signed its first collective agreement with Compass on behalf of 250 dietary and cleaning staff at the B.C. Children and Women's Hospital, Sunnyhill Health Centre for Children, and the B.C. Cancer Agency in December 2006, which brought wages in line with existing agreements for Aramark and Sodexo workers. See HEU News Releases dated November 10, 2005, December 9, 2005 and December 22, 2006.

truly amazing to think that these people [employer representatives] could sit at the bargaining table and just have so much disrespect for their workforce, and of course, disrespect for the union, but that was sort of [what] we had anticipated. What we didn't anticipate was, you know, how they really felt about their workforce. They were completely kind of disposable." (Interview G917, 2008)

For Sheila, witnessing the apathy and disregard of employers towards a racialized workforce highlighted the dilemmas of creating a shared moral standard between multinational companies and the union. She stated,

"[During] the membership meetings that I had with the workers, I think I saw three white faces that I can visualize right now. The rest were new immigrants, in fact a lot of them were... [pause....begins crying]. I guess for me it was astounding the attitude that Compass had towards their workforce. And I think you know that was probably part of it because these were people who were new to the country, in some cases there were some difficulties communicating, and it was just like no respect, no dignity, no, it was appalling you know the treatment of another human being." (ibid)

When I asked her if this was her first experience personally witnessing this kind of treatment, she highlighted the issue of racial identity:

"Yeah. I had spent thirty years in the Kootenays and that was, you know, it's not very multicultural. And servicing you know most of our membership, 90% of our members were, you know, Caucasians and long-time Canadians but whatever. So there was a real eye-opener for me. I couldn't believe it. I mean you hear about it, right? You know it exists, but to experience it first-hand like that - it was appalling. I mean with those kind of, you know, you see racism, but from people in those positions, you know it was disturbing." (ibid)

While she recognized the salience of racial and ethnic prejudice in the treatment of a primarily immigrant workforce, she attributed part of this disregard to the difference between the public and private sector:

"There wasn't a relationship whereas with the public sector there is a relationship, you know, both sides kind of understand what working in health-care is. These [private sector] companies still, I believe, think of themselves as being in the hospitality industry and make their comparisons to workers outside of healthcare." (ibid)

HEU's difficulties negotiating higher wage standards and working conditions for devalued private sector health care workers presented a vexing puzzle for union strategists. Marcy Cohen, HEU's Research Director, was particularly concerned about the increased difficulties of negotiating with multinational employers when they were not legally required to settle a dispute. Marcy explained:

"We had no bargaining power in our organization [because you couldn't shut down an essential public service in a hospital]...so that traditional form of power of going on strike isn't there...We got the first collective agreement because there are rules in the labour laws that they had to be arbitrated [but] it wasn't going to be [there again]. We had [to find] a different form of power; it had to be some kind of moral authority and some kind of recognition of community responsibility and community benefit." (Interview M1001, 2008).

Part of the challenge Marcy and others needed to address was the lack of moral resonance among new private sector employers about issues related to quality public health care and low-paid employment. HEU had no prior experience with major multinational corporations that conducted business operations according to a narrow profit-driven mandate, and they had few other models to draw upon from Canada.

Another source of concern was the high cost of waging prolonged strikes in an essential public sector. HEU trained rank-and-file members to coordinate the picket lines at each strike location to ensure that there were enough workers to maintain sufficient operation levels. These rank-and-file strike rep-

representatives not only assigned union members to walk the picket lines at various time blocks from 9am to 9pm, but they also oversaw the work rotations inside the hospitals. This control over resources and schedules made them the target of resentment and frustration by their co-workers. One rank-and-file member explained:

“We encountered a lot of problems with some members, sad to say. Once some members finished the 20 hours out [on the picket lines], because they are only allowed 20 hours [of strike pay per week], they also wanted to be in [inside the hospital working to] finish [the rest of their] hours. But it cannot be” (Focus group CCN, 2008).

Another worker explained:

“And then another thing is that people want to be out [on the picket lines] because it's more pay than being in [the hospitals working]. At that time, you were only receiving \$10.15 an hour [from the employer], but when you go out for picket, it's \$12.50 [per hour] plus HEU pays \$35 per dependent, right? So, I mean, they earn more when they are in the picket line than [working in the hospitals].” (Focus group CCN, 2008).

The irony of earning higher pay on the picket lines, as opposed to on the job, revealed the organizational complexities of engaging in conventional union tactics such as strikes when representing low-paid workers.

To prepare for its second round of contract negotiations, Marcy began searching for alternative models of cultivating leverage for subcontracted workers in two-tiered wage agreements. Marcy's background in community work, her interest in alternative forms of community organizing, and her wide social networks directed her attention to a transnational example that decisively shifted HEU's bargaining strategy during the next round of contract renewals. While visiting London on a personal vacation, Marcy fortuitously arranged to meet Deborah Littman, who provided bargaining support for UNISON, UK's

largest public sector union with 1.3 million members. Deborah was also a board member of London Citizens, the main organizational body responsible for launching the London living wage campaign in 2001. Marcy was well aware of the origins of privatization under Thatcher's policies in England and its role in paving the way for private sector hospitality firms to take over essential public health care services. Eager to find out how UNISON was organizing their subcontracted union members, Marcy visited with leaders and members of London Citizens and learned about the success of their labour-community coalition to secure a living wage.²⁰

According to Deborah, it was especially important for labour unions to collaborate with community organizations if they were going to adapt to the profoundly changed conditions of employment for low-paid workers. Employment reclassification practices under labour contracting systems fundamentally eroded the social obligations between workers and employers, requiring the development of alternative sources of community-based associational power.²¹ Deborah explained:

“[People who] used to work for a company, or for a public sector organization, now work for an agency that works for a contractor, that works for a

20 London Citizens first began as the East London Communities Organisation (TELCO) in 1996 and spread across the city to form the UK's largest independent community alliance, with members from 80 community organizations, faith-based groups, trade union branches and schools. After holding a “Listening Campaign” in which TELCO listened directly to community members about the pressures of living and working in London's East End on low pay, over 1,000 leaders from London Citizens gathered together to demand that employers recognize their responsibility to end poverty by paying living wages, not poverty-level minimum wages. The first victory of the London Citizens' living wage campaign occurred in 2003 and involved 500 workers in four East London Hospitals. UNISON and London Citizens worked together to persuade the Health Authority to guarantee a living wage to the lowest-paid staff in hospitals. The height of the campaign involved a march down the streets of London during the pouring rain with 1,000 people, but Littman strongly emphasized that the crux of London Citizens' living wage campaign was their emphasis on building community relationships. For more info on London Citizens and its living wage campaign, see Holgate and Wills 2007. Also see <http://www.citizensuk.org/campaigns/living-wage-campaign/history/> (Accessed October 15, 2010).

21 See Beverly Silver (2003, 110); Fine (2006) and Chun (2009) for a more in-depth discussion of new forms of community-based associational power.

subcontractor, that works for a company – half the time we don't know who we work for. So, the idea [of London Citizens] is, we have to say workers also live in places. They live in their neighbourhoods...They belong to churches. They belong to mosques. Their children go to schools... We have to mobilize those organizations. It isn't just enough to have our union locals anymore. We have to go out and find people where they are."²²

As she learned about UNISON's success in developing a new type of labour organizing based on relational ties with community organizations, Marcy was "immediately taken with London Citizens as an organization." She explained:

"It's a community organization bargaining as a union, based on community power...It [wasn't about] confrontation as much as relationship building... They had these training sessions where they brought people together from these different organizations – from the church or the school or from the union, and worked with them as organizers. It was inspiring. I said to them, 'You guys have to come here [to Vancouver]. We really need this'" (Interview MC 1012, 2008).

When Marcy returned to Vancouver and began talking to other HEU leaders about what she had learned about the London Citizens' living wage campaign, the idea quickly found resonance with other HEU leaders. As the Director of Private Sector Bargaining and the Director of Organizing, Sue Fisher was interesting in finding alternative sources of bargaining power for private sector workers after their difficulties negotiating with multinational corporations. There was also "a lot of commonality of understanding" with a new leader at HEU, Judy Darcy, who was appointed as HEU's Secretary Business Manager in March 2005. Marcy explained, "Judy also understood that the living wage is the next equity issue. It was like pay equity in the 80s and 90s, and really

²² This is quoted from Deborah Littman's presentation at the HEU sponsored launch of the Living Wage Campaign on April 1, 2007. To hear the audio transcript, go to <http://www.workingtv.com/livingwage.html> (accessed October 5, 2010).

in this era living wages really was a kind of catchword for what needed to be done around inequality" (Interview MC1001, 2008).

As chief spokesperson and chief negotiator for the union, Judy brought strategic know-how and emotional dynamism to HEU's new bargaining direction. The "abiding passion" she felt about these issues, she explains, was directly rooted in her personal history as a feminist and social justice activist. She was politicized by the anti-Vietnam war movement in the late 1960s at York University and was a leading feminist activist in the Toronto women's movement. Even before she became a card-carrying member of CUPE in 1972, she stated that "the issues of low-paid workers, women workers, immigrant workers and economic justice were very near and dear to [her] heart" (Interview JD919, 2008). Her experience "walking picket lines supporting Portuguese and Italian workers in downtown Toronto in the early 1970s" was formative to her deep solidarity with and commitment to immigrant women workers in low-paid and exploitative work.²³ Judy recalled one incident in particular, when company-hired strikebreakers "hit one of the workers over the head [with a big long light fixture] and a bit of a melee ensued." To Judy's surprise, "it was the women who were on strike who ended up being carted off to jail rather than the person who had assaulted [them]." It was this experience, she emphasized, that first exposed her to the "power relationship

²³ At the time, Judy Darcy was deeply involved in the Toronto women's movement. It was a diverse movement, including women's business and professional groups, but the "women's groups she got involved with in Toronto were focused very much on supporting women workers [which included] economic inequality issues as well as reproductive choice issues" (Interview JD 919, 2008). When a group of immigrant women workers employed at Weiner Electric began organizing against wage violations under subcontracted employment relationships, she became actively involved in their struggle. She co-chaired the "Committee for Cleaners' Rights" with a Portuguese priest and an Italian city councillor and helped lead a highly mobilized public pressure campaign against the company, which included leafleting at churches, collecting petition signatures, and lobbying the provincial for "successorship" laws that guaranteed union collective agreements in the event of the transfer of business management or a turnover of the workforce.

in our society and what these low-paid women workers were up against" and "cemented [her] commitment to social and economic justice" (ibid).

With the support of several key leaders in place, HEU officially announced its adoption of a living wage campaign. On April 1, 2007 HEU held a public launch event at the Vancouver Public Library called "All Workers Deserve a Fair Pay" and called on "community, labour and faith-based organizations" to work together "to change poverty wages into living wages for workers and their families." In attendance were HEU President Fred Muzin, HEU Finance Secretary Donisa Bernardo, and HEU staff and rank-and-file members as well as the President of the BC Government Employees Union (BCGEU), researchers affiliated with the CCPA, and other community members such as First Call BC, a child anti-poverty organization. Also in attendance were Deborah Littman and her colleagues, Rodney Bickerstaff, former UNISON President, and Catherine Howarth, London Citizens' community organizer.²⁴

HEU's strategic reframing from a narrow union struggle to a broad-based living wage campaign was clear in the structure of Judy's passionate and moving welcome address. Although HEU billed the event in promotional posters as a broad-based effort among "community, labour and faith-based organizations working together to change poverty wages into living wages for workers and their families," the focus on the union and the needs of its members were front and center. Judy paid special tribute to HEU's rank-and-file members in attendance who showed "incredible perseverance and determination" during a bitter four-year campaign against multinational corporations to secure a first union collective agreement. As Judy continued her moving speech, she

²⁴ Cohen helped organize the conference, "Jobs and Justice: Strategies and Solutions for Economic Security" in March 2007. Cohen had worked with other CCPA researchers on the impact of privatization on health care support workers, and she explains, "it sort of came out [that] the living wage was kind of the solution." Also, as chair of the CCPA's board, Cohen was attuned to the need to develop "alternatives and solution-type policy research" to address issues associated with social and economic injustice.

emphasized that “this was absolutely not a struggle and a goal [HEU] could win alone” and that it was “going to take the energy of everyone in this room, and especially of all our communities [to] make it politically unacceptable in the 21st century in the province of British Columbia for any worker to earn poverty-level wages.”²⁵ By framing HEU’s fight against low-paid work in the private health care sector as a broader community-based campaign against working poverty and social injustice, Judy’s moving words captured the union’s transition from an ideological battle against the neoliberal economic policies of a conservative provincial government to a moral struggle for a more just and human society. At stake was more than just economics according to Judy, who ended her speech with a rousing mandate and a clear moral imperative for everyone concerned with morality and democracy. She stated:

“This is a battle that is about women. This is a battle for immigrant workers’ rights. This is a struggle that involves predominantly workers of colour...I am absolutely convinced that this is the paramount equity issue of our generation in the trade union movement and in social movements – the right of every worker to a decent living wage.”²⁶

Chronicling HEU’s response to Bill 29 shows a clear shift from the union’s initial opposition to state-initiated privatization to its adoption of a morally laden living wage campaign. This shift was rooted in the decision by key union leaders to reorganize private sector workers after Bill 29 and the difficulties it experienced at the bargaining table attempting to convince multinational private contractors to raise standards for socially and economically disadvantaged workers. Several key leaders with strong feminist and social justice politics were crucial to HEU’s embrace of limited-English speaking immi-

25 This is quoted from Judy Darcy’s presentation at the HEU sponsored launch of the Living Wage Campaign on April 1, 2007. To hear the audio transcript, go to <http://www.workingtv.com/livingwage.html> (accessed October 5, 2010).

26 Ibid.

grant women and women of colour employed in low-paid private sector jobs. However, while HEU's history as a feminist and social justice-oriented union and the progressive tendencies of a few key leaders within HEU was a predictive factor in the union's adoption of a more broad-based community organizing vision, it does not fully explain why the union's efforts took on such a fervent emotional tenor. The next section turns our attention to the affective and emotional undercurrents that saturated the organizational climate in the aftermath of Bill 29 and the role of the living wage campaign in channeling the divergent emotions of a racially stratified membership into a transformative emotional energy.

THE EMOTIONAL UNDERCURRENTS OF UNION CONFLICT AND CHANGE

HEU's decision to invest time and resources in a broad-based living wage campaign was a risky decision. Although there was a strong precedent in London and various cities in the U.S., there was no such precedent in Canada (Luce 2004; Wills and Holgate 2007; Wills 2010). Also, unlike the U.S. and U.K. trade union movements, the Canadian labour movement did not experience steep membership declines in the 1980s and 1990s and maintained a union density rate of over 30% after 2000. The loss of approximately 8,000 to 9,000 members in BC within a short period of time could explain why HEU chose to pursue a time- and cost-intensive living campaign. However, union revitalization scholars have found that the existence of adversity is just as likely to result in the embrace of a more conservative business union agenda, as it is the adoption of a more risky and creative path of social movement unionism (Murray 2005, 160).

To better understand how and under what conditions HEU promoted a social justice-oriented union agenda, we need to analyze the underlying emo-

tional ruptures that threatened to undermine the union's unity in the face of profound change and transition. Bill 29 and the employment practices by multinational private contractors not only generated feelings of distress, suffering, anger, and indignation among private sector workers and movement-oriented union leaders and staff, it also generated feelings of disappointment, betrayal, and confusion among HEU's core membership of public sector employees in higher-paid facilities sectors who felt abandoned by the union's decision to end its 2004 strike against Bill 29. When the union leadership decided to shift its focus to a resource and time-intensive reorganizing campaign in the private sector, some of HEU's public sector facilities members started to become frustrated and disaffected with the union. These disparate and divergent feelings created a new set of emotional ruptures within the union, which became openly expressed as a form of racial-ethnic hostility and antagonism during HEU's private sector strikes in 2005.

Concerned by the threat of internal divisions along racial-ethnic and employment status, key HEU leaders embraced the living wage campaign as a means of rechanneling the apparent racial-ethnic antagonism of public sector members into more positive feelings of solidarity and unity. Key to this process was the role of immigrant women of colour union members from the private sector in "bearing witness" to the collective pain and suffering associated with low-wage and discriminatory employment. By rendering visible the hardships and suffering of immigrant women of colour living on low private sector wages, the public presentations of living wage activists provided an avenue for HEU's public sector members to act as "living proof" to the trauma of private sector employment – that is, to offer their "life stories, subjectivities, bodily materialities, and practices...as acts of courage and political claim staking," as Ethel Brooks explains (2007, 138). By presenting themselves as "living proof" of the

pain and suffering of poverty wages, HEU's living wage campaign attempted to persuade the largely white public sector membership that they, too, should feel traumatized by the discriminatory wage practices of multinational private contractors. It also sought to diffuse mounting conflict and tension among the membership and restore feelings of unity and solidarity across racial-ethnic difference and employment status.

Challenging racial-ethnic conflict between higher-paid and lower-paid union members

Many of HEU's core members in the public sector grew increasingly discontent and disillusioned after the union leadership turned its attention to the private sector. Many public sector workers harbored feelings of disappointment, anger, and frustration after HEU's failed 2004 strike. The government's refusal to meet the union's demands during its 2004 round of bargaining negotiations resulted in a "full-scale, legal strike" in which HEU members "picket[ed] every hospital and long-term care facility in BC" (Isitt and Moroz 2007, 98). In addition to 40,000 HEU members, another 30,000 unionized public sector workers joined the strike action in what came to be seen as a united front by organized labour against the anti-union policies of the Campbell government and the social right to public healthcare in BC (ibid, 99).²⁷ In response to the HEU's massive escalation, the government imposed a 15 per cent rollback on the wages of all health care workers. Rather than fight the across-the-board wage cuts, HEU leaders decided to cease its mobilization and end the strike on May 2nd in exchange for an end to further plans to contract out health care services. While some HEU members like residential care and support workers

²⁷ See Cohen (2006) for details on HEU's efforts to stop contracting out between 2002 and 2003 and Isitt and Moroz (2007) for background on the April 2004 strike.

preferred wage rollbacks to further contracting, other members in nursing, trades, and technical occupations who were not immediately threatened by outsourcing were upset by the union's decision.

When HEU leaders made the decision to launch a resource-intensive reorganizing campaign among private sector workers, rather than fight to regain their lost wages, these negative feelings began to deepen and fester.²⁸ According to Summers-Effler (2009), participation in social movement organizations creates intense and heightened emotional experiences, especially during periods of intense protest and collective actions. When risk-taking activity is met with success, they are successfully released in a flood of positive emotions, and participants' activities are imbued with a larger sense of purpose. When risk-taking behavior is met with failure, however, social movement organizations become susceptible to a range of unpredictable emotional responses that can create a potentially debilitating "emotional vacuum" within the organization. Rather than allow such emotional volatility to threaten the viability and long-term sustainability of the union, public sector members engaged in a form of "emotional slingshotting" in which organizationally dangerous negative emotions such as the loss of confidence in the union became redirected into more manageable and familiar negative emotions such as racial-ethnic chauvinism against non-white workers.²⁹

The hostile depiction of private sector workers as "scabs" epitomized the emotional slingshotting process that occurred among public sector members.

28 For example, the discontent of some members working in patient care technical occupations with HEU led them "to apply to the Labour Board to leave HEU and transfer to the Health Sciences Association (HAS), the union that represented paramedical professionals." The British Columbia Nurses Union (BCNU) also "took advantage of the dissatisfaction" of licensed nurse practitioners (LPNs) by attempting to convince HEU members to join the BCNU (Cohen 2010, 12).

29 Summers-Effler (2010, 116) explains that social movement organizations are vulnerable to certain negative emotions that have the potential to undermine the entire existence of the organization. Rather than allow the organization to unravel, organizational actors "transmute dangerous negative emotions into negative emotions that they [have] the capacity to release."

Most the union staff I interviewed directly challenged the notion that the immigrant women and women of colour who took downgraded work could legitimately be called “scabs,” but the frequency in which it was mentioned created the sense that this characterization was both insidious and pervasive. When I asked a high-ranking HEU leader how the union’s decision to allocate resources to support the living wage campaign came about, she responded by referring to the immediate crisis after Bill 29 and the need to challenge the sentiment among many of its members that outsourced workers were “scabs”:

“Well, the first initial thing was we made a conscious decision to organize in the new companies. Nine thousand of our members got terminated and the majority of them couldn’t get jobs with the Big 3 – Sodexo, Aramark and Compass. There was quite a struggle within the leadership who said, ‘Ok, if we’re going to survive and we’re going to improve on wages, and this was after the 15% cutback, then we had to organize those members. They were, you know, in our turf in the sense of working in our hospitals, but pretty much making minimum wage. There was quite a struggle in making that decision. We did make it, and I totally believe it was the right decision to make, but it was quite a process to explain to people, the members that still existed in the sites...most of them thought they newly privatized workers were *scabs* [my emphasis]. It was our rule as leaders and staff to explain, ‘No, these are working people that just applied for a job and got it. They’re just trying to make their lives better. You can’t be punishing them. But, it was quite a transition for people who watched their friends and co-workers lose their jobs and it’s hard not to take it out on the new employees”
(Interview E917, 2008)

Hostile sentiments by HEU’s core public sector members created rifts and tensions during the union’s drive to organize new members in the private sector. These sentiments were still palpable when I conducted interviews two years later. Uncomfortable pauses, awkward body language and facial expressions, shortened syllables and softer voices often accompanied questions about how HEU’s core public sector members responded to the union’s private

sector organizing campaign. When I asked one organizer what kind of resistance she faced with facilities sector workers during the reorganizing drive, she first hesitated and then re-asked the question. Our conversation then unfolded as follows:

Respondent: They were not accepting. They were not accepting of the new people.

Interviewer: And why was that?

Respondent: I think they felt that the new people were taking the jobs of the people who were being laid off, which really is not realistic, because the people that were hired by the new companies, some of those people were the people they worked with 2 weeks before.

Interviewer: Huh?

Respondent: So even if Susie was a friend of Joey, and Joey worked in the hospital and Joey was a lab assistant and Susie was the housekeeper and then Susie got laid off and then Susie got rehired again with a new company, it doesn't mean that their relationship was the same. And I think it's because, you know, they are now hired by the new company. It shouldn't have made any difference; that friendship should have still been there...

Interviewer: Why do you think there was this perspective, that these are totally new workers and not actually people that had always worked there?

Respondent: Or maybe they felt that they were, that they had taken the road that they shouldn't have. Like if they got laid off, they should have stayed laid off or gone elsewhere. And not been sucked in by the company, right.

Interviewer: Oh, I see.

Respondent: But people have to eat, pay their mortgage, that's my interpretation. Not everybody was kind to their co-workers. People were called scabs, which is really unfortunate. Because they weren't actually scabs...

Interviewer: Because there was no strike...

Respondent: They were *not scabs*. I think people get really confused with emotions and anger and yeah, it was a really difficult time and when we had to reorganize the new workers, and some of those workers were our previous workers. People were mad at us. Because we represented the union to them and you know, 'why didn't we do more, couldn't we have changed it, couldn't we have done something?' There were many times people really laid into us. So it was sensitive, because one day they're being laid off and then the next day or a week later we're trying to talk to them about organizing, that they have a choice, all those things. It was not fun. (Interview L825, 2008)

Many HEU leaders and staff were aware of negative emotions brewing among their predominantly white public sector members and tried to counter the "us versus them" mentality that seemed to be polarizing the membership. One union servicing representative explained that she engaged in a lot of "frank discussion" with the members she was in charge of to convince them that the new workers were "just like anybody else" not "scabs" that took union jobs (Interview K11001, 2008). Other union staff and leaders recalled engaging in "constant, constant conversations" attempting to convince existing members to view private sector workers with more empathy and compassion, not as the "enemy." While few of the union staff discussed the internal conflicts in terms of racial-ethnic chauvinism, the long history of viewing non-white immigrant workers as "racial others" was reinvoked through terms such as "scabs" and "enemies" (Bonacich 1972; Ward 1978).

Despite these efforts, the demanding nature of private sector organizing and bargaining campaigns provided little space to systematically address the complicated feelings and opinions circulating at the time. Growing discontent and frustration by public sector members manifested into more outright feelings of hostility and antagonism. Crossing the picket lines was considered a

serious violation of union protocol, especially for a union with a strong and proud history of solidarity and militancy. Although HEU members working as medical technicians and licensed nurse practitioners were required to continue working due to the legal requirement to maintain 100% of its operations in essential public services, the seeming disregard of HEU's public sector workers of the strike created the perception that public sector workers were routinely crossing the strike picket lines. One union staff recalled, "There were some sights where they didn't get any support from the facilities, and quite the opposite, the facilities [sector members] would walk through the picket lines and call them scabs for taking their friend's jobs" (Interview 0821, 2008). She went on to explain:

"These workers come in who don't speak very much English who are mainly women of colour, immigrant women of colour, they [facilities sector members] think what are these women doing here, they don't know anything about belonging to a union, right? So there's also a lot of assumptions made around HEU around what experiences these workers have had with unions versus the kind of longer-term HEU members" (ibid).

While it is not clear how pervasive these actions actually were, the perception that HEU's predominantly white public sector membership felt antagonistic towards its lower-paid and racial-ethnic counterparts in the private sector continued to circulate and gain traction among union staff and private sector workers.

After HEU finished its labour-intensive reorganizing campaign and successfully negotiated first contracts for private sector members, several concerned HEU leaders began taking steps to address the gravity of increasing divisions within the union. A leader on the Provincial Executive Committee explained:

"I watched us go from a militant, active union, that the labor movement respected with all the gains that we made, to when the Campbell government got in, trying to destroy us, but wasn't quite successful. I call them the 'black years,' because it was just very...to watch people lose their jobs and families destroyed an all that kind of stuff. So, we went through that up to probably that strike in 2004. In late 2004 the members were really angry because we had, as an executive, made a decision to stop the strike. And there were reasons for that, but it's hard to explain to members when they thought that you could be out and achieve the world, so there was quite a bit of backlash for the executive...A few of us kind of realized [that]... the old way of doing things just wasn't going to work and that we had to think of different ways of approaching how we were going to rebuild again" (Interview E917, 2008).

Marcy Cohen, who was spearheading the union's strategic shift to a living wage campaign, recognized the importance of maintaining HEU's strong traditions as well as balancing competing tension and conflicts emerging from a diversifying membership. To accommodate the concerns of HEU's public sector members who not only experienced pay cuts after the 2004 strike but also endured increased workloads, the union created space for workers to air their concerns. Specifically, the union organized "occupational conferences" in which "each of the union's five occupational families – patient care, patient care technical, trades, support, and clerical – had the opportunity to meet prior to bargaining and identify common concerns" (Cohen 2010, 12). This was the first time that HEU had made occupational differences among members, rather than industrial solidarity, a union priority. Marcy explained that "some people in the organization...thought we were deserting pay equity." But, she emphasized the importance of addressing the concerns of HEU's higher-paid as well as lower-paid union members. "We had to make some allowances for them, to keep them in our union," Cohen stated. "We had to [convince

them that] everybody would be in a worse position if we didn't have a diverse union, right?" (Interview M1001, 2008).

Union staff and leaders recognized the practical difficulties of shifting the union's priorities immediately following a disappointing collective mobilization. Jennifer Whiteside was hired as a Research Analyst after the strikes finished. Although she did not directly witness the hostility of HEU's public sector members on the picket lines, she emphasized the importance of proceeding with caution in implementing HEU's new organizing and bargaining direction. She said:

"We lose 8,000 members and right away we turn around and we're organizing in that sector, which I believe was absolutely the right thing to do. Morally, strategically, on every level that was absolutely the right thing to do, but it's pretty dramatic in thinking in terms of the union's history and culture around the public sector. Sure there are some days, sometimes I think it's like there's two different unions. There's a public sector union and a private sector union within the same organization and I think it is a huge challenge to figure out how to not, how to ensure that they're not completely isolated from one another."

To navigate deepening internal rifts within their diversifying membership, HEU recruited a charismatic leader who could lead a more systematic process to heal the emotional rifts that eroded the union's sacred values of strike solidarity. When the position of Secretary Business Manager opened up in the union, a high-ranking HEU leader saw it as an opportunity to bring in somebody who could help lead the union on this new path. She explained, "That's when I remember a few of us actually said, 'Well, the President of CUPE National is retiring and moving out to the West Coast, and she's still too young to really retire. Let's put out some feelers and see if she'd be interested in working for us [HEU]" (Interview E917, 2008). The Canadian Union of Public Employees

(CUPE) was the largest union in Canada with 540,000 members the year Judy Darcy retired in 2003. Darcy had been involved in CUPE since 1972 as a member and since 1989 as an elected union leader, serving as Secretary-Treasurer from 1989 to 1991 and National President from 1991 to 2003.

When Judy accepted the position as HEU's Secretary Business Manager in March 2005, she helped strengthen and reinforce the direction HEU was taking to prioritize the needs and concerns of immigrant women and women of colour in the face of internal resistance by the union's public sector members. Her reputation as the leader of Canada's largest public sector union bestowed authority and legitimacy to HEU's private sector organizing efforts on behalf of disadvantaged immigrant and women of colour workers. Her seasoned experience in labour-community struggles also strengthened HEU's credibility in launching a broad-based living wage campaign.³⁰ Her ability to speak with intensity and passion about the necessity of standing in solidarity with the struggles of the disempowered and marginalized made her a quintessential movement leader "who could inspire and organize others to participate in social movements" (Morris and Staggenborg 2004, 171).

Perhaps most important in relation to deepening internal divisions along the public-private and white-other divides was the construction of a new master narrative within the union that could replace negative feelings of in-

30 Although London Citizens and UNISON experienced great success in mobilizing community support against two-tiered wage agreements in UK's health sector, the terrain of labour-community coalitions in Vancouver was plagued by a prior history of conflict and resentment. During a jointly waged General Strike organized by the BC Federation of Labour and a wide array of community organizations in 1983, the "unions completely abandoned their community commitments" to roll back the conservative policies of the newly elected provincial administration led by the B.C. Social Credit Party. "What was widely referred to as the "sellout" of [Operation] Solidarity left a deep bitterness toward organized labor – and the BC Fed in particular – a rift that never fully healed" (Issit and Moroz 2007, 94). Although she was an "outsider" to Vancouver's movement communities, Darcy recognized the daunting political task of navigating these historic divisions and rebuilding relationships of trust and collaboration between labour unions and community organizations.

ternal hostility and conflict with more positive feelings of solidarity and unity.³¹ By engaging in an emotionally laden process of reframing, Darcy and other HEU leaders sought to convince HEU's public sector members and the broader labour movement that they, too, should feel traumatized by Bill 29 and the low-wage employment practices of multinational private contractors. They called attention to the nature of the injury – the indignity of poverty wages for working people and families, and the persons who directly experienced the pain associated with it, immigrant women and women of colour working in private sector jobs. They also emphasized the blatant violation to the union's identity and history as a strong, democratic, and socially conscious union. In a public union document about its history, HEU connected its struggle to securing living wages for its predominantly immigrant and women of colour workforce in the low-paid private sector to its history as a union committed to "equality, fairness, respect and social justice."³² When Bill 29 triggered the "biggest mass firing of women in the history of the Canadian labour movement," HEU once again emphasized its identity as the kind of union that would fight discriminatory wage practices and stand in solidarity with even the most marginalized and discriminated of workers.

While the master narrative of the living wage campaign resonated with HEU's history as a democratic, feminist, and social justice-oriented union, in order for the collectively narrated trauma to have "illocutionary success" as Alexander puts it (2004, 12), HEU leaders needed to "persuasively project the trauma claim" to all of its members, including the vast majority of its members

31 Four critical representations contributed to the development of a new master narrative, according to Alexander (2004, 14). First, the nature of the pain was established. Second, the persons and groups that experienced the trauma were identified. Third, the relation of the trauma victim to the broader collectivity was established. Finally, the identity of the perpetrator who was responsible for causing and, thus, remedying the trauma was named.

32 The History of HEU Public website document http://www.heu.org/sites/default/files/uploads/HEU_history.pdf (accessed March 26, 2011)

who were still employed in the public sector. In other words, “the members of this originating group [must] become convinced that they have been traumatized by a singular event” (ibid). To persuade disaffected public sector members to embrace the indignity of private sector employment practices as if it was their own, HEU’s living wage campaign turned its focus towards circulating a compelling trauma narrative that could not only diffuse internal divisions but also forge new solidarities and affinities across racial-ethnic difference.

The mobilizing pain of others: building unity and solidarity across racial-ethnic difference

On the surface HEU’s living wage campaign appeared to be tightly organized and well-coordinated. It had a clear and simple campaign message – that government and health authorities ensure their private contractors pay a living wage – and it provided moving firsthand stories about the difficulties and hardships workers experienced trying to make ends meet on low pay. From its press releases to Judy Darcy’s rousing public speeches to the personal stories of private sector members profiled on HEU’s website and in the media, HEU’s living wage campaign called attention to the stress of working two jobs, of foregoing sick pay, of having to choose between paying the rent or feeding one’s children, and struggling to afford basics like paying for children’s books and school field trips. HEU’s private sector members were actively involved in publicizing the campaign’s basic moral message – that “work should lift you out of poverty, not keep you there.” Private sector members wore bright green T-shirts and colourful buttons with the campaign’s motto at every union event. They collected 15,000 signatures at their workplaces and other community locations, including during the Gay and Lesbian Pride Festival on Robson Street, and personally delivered their signed petitions to B.C. Premier

Gordon Campbell demanding "government action on living wages and clean, safe hospitals."³³

Community outreach was a central component of the union's living wage campaign. Priti Shah, an independent consultant, was hired by HEU to work as the community outreach coordinator for the campaign. With fifteen years' experience working at numerous community organizations such as Orientation Adjustment Services for Immigrant Society (OASIS), MOSAIC, and Immigrant Services Society (ISS), Priti brought a wealth of experience and knowledge about community organizing. She organized public presentations to a variety of audiences including fellow union members in the facilities sector, other unionists at the BC Nurses Union, the BC Government Employees Union and the BC Federation of Labour, members of women's groups, neighbourhood houses and community organizations, school board members, local politicians and senior executives at each regional health authority. Leaders of First Call BC, an anti-poverty consortium that was spearheading the community end of the living wage campaign, gave public presentations alongside workers. However, the participation of workers themselves in the public presentations was a key part of the moral force of the campaign. Priti worked intensely with rank-and-file private sector members to ensure that members' voices helped "take the living wage out into the community" (Interview PS917, 2008).

While the goal of the union's campaign - developing stronger community connections - was clear, the campaign's actual strategy for doing so was described by union staff as "fluid," "organic," and "evolving." A staff member in the Communications Department explained having difficulty with the unstructured nature of the campaign, given her responsibility in producing coherent

33 HEU Press Release, April 29, 2009 http://www.heu.org/~DOCUMENTS/2009_NewsReleases/NR%2004-24-09%20CampbellPetitionDelivery.pdf (accessed November 22, 2010)

public messaging. She explained that she did not always have the sense that they “were on the right track” or “what the end product [was] going to be like” (Interview B608, 2008). Jennifer Whiteside, the HEU Research Analyst in charge of facilitating rank-and-file participation in the living wage campaign, agreed with this characterization, though she viewed the campaign’s member-led focus as one of the most valuable aspects of the campaign:

“Even though we didn’t really have a vision of what this would look like in the organization or how it would unfold, I think it was, at least it was really clear to me that it needed to be member-driven. Members needed to be the face of it and the union needed to really practice what it holds as a principle of member engagement, of being democratic and member-led” (Interview JW929, 2008).

Jennifer emphasized that although the union is sometimes “much less democratic in how it operates than it appears to be,” the living wage campaign was an opportunity to “really build [and] invest in members” (ibid). This emphasis was not only consistent with Jennifer’s personal politics as a feminist and social justice activist, but it was consistent with HEU’s history as a strong, participatory, and democratic rank-and-file union. HEU prided itself on being a membership-driven organization and Joey Hartmann, a union servicing representative at the time, described the living wage campaign as “an opportunity to go back to what [HEU] always [was]...mentoring and leadership development and all that stuff” (Interview JH1001, 2008).

To promote member participation, HEU established a Living Wage Working Group. This group recruited rank-and-file members from the private sector who may not have been “formal leaders” in recognized community organizations but “had other kinds of leadership qualities,” such as experience as a shop steward or strike leader and a history of activism prior to immigration (Interview JW929, 2008). Jennifer selected a small number of working

group members through an application and phone interview process. Selected members, who were referred to as living wage activists, then began a fairly intensive process of education and training under the direction of Priti Shah. The formulation of a living wage calculation by CCPA researchers was crucial for creating a legitimate figure for what a living wage in Vancouver should be. However, the term itself had no prior history in Vancouver. Priti explained that she even had to start from the beginning: "I didn't even know what the term [living wage] meant when I started...but I personally got very excited... We'd been talking for years about the need for people to be well paid, but now there was a label for it." To "come to a place" where HEU members could have meaningful dialogues with the community about the importance of a living wage, Priti explained that initial meetings focused on what a living wage meant and why the broader public should care about the issue. "We didn't have any fixed scripts or strategy," Priti explained. "Even though we heard about what England did, we had to do something different. We just didn't have any history of unions working with NGO's or immigrant agencies or faith groups in BC" (Interview PS917, 2008).

Creating a space for immigrant women and women of colour to begin a dialogue with their co-workers and fellow union members about the significance of the living wage concept strongly influenced the campaign's focus and direction. The first activity of the living wage working group was a brief member survey that asked private sector workers "what a living wage meant to them." Initially, Jennifer was hesitant and unsure how "collecting a bunch of data" would further the campaign's goals. However, as she witnessed the emotional undercurrents of this process, especially among the living wage activists, she soon realized the value of publicly sharing stories for developing

the confidence and leadership of disempowered immigrant women. Jennifer explained:

“What I started to realize is wow, ok, this is a tool that is incredibly helpful for them to engage with other members, to build their own confidence about speaking about the issue and we don't have to necessarily do anything about it, with this survey, because its serving this really critical purpose” (Interview JW929, 2008).

Stories about the hardships and personal costs of working low-wage jobs became the new moral force of the union's bargaining campaign. Private sector workers' identity was recast in terms of social and economic disadvantage. Lila Murao, who began working half-time as the campaign's outreach worker in the union, recalled how moved she felt when she saw the pain and suffering of private sector workers displayed on colourful post-it notes during a large union meeting. She explained:

“I remember being at that conference and our members from Compass and Aramark and Sodexo, people were filling up those coloured post-it notes. And they were putting it up on the board and that is the visual of our information sheet, so you knew [what the] living wage was about, you know, being able to live decently, whatever that means. Not having to work two jobs, being able to enjoy some wonderful things in life. Not suffering so much and I remember people getting up and putting the post-it notes, so I think I got to know more about what a living wage meant to people.” (Interview LM825, 2008).

The post-it notes display was photographed and reproduced in a variety of public campaign materials, providing a striking visual reminder of the pervasiveness of working poverty among private sector health care workers and its deleterious effects on workers and their families.

Telling personal stories about the injustice and indignity of poverty wages became the primary activity of living wage working group members. Priti

trained immigrant women to construct coherent and compelling stories about the experience of working for private sector companies and the difficulties of “making ends meet” on low wages. Although many of the working group members felt uncomfortable about speaking publicly about their experiences, the opportunity to practice in a safe space slowly developed their confidence. One member of the living wage working group who played more of a support role recalled:

“We spent tons of time practicing presentations in the working group. And refining, you know, and having people practice telling stories, you know. I mean, many of those folks, really had to go outside their comfort zones and I think it was really hard but really validating for them in the end” (Interview JW929, 2008).

The experience of going outside one’s “comfort zone” had a transformative effect – both on the immigrant women and on the audience. As living wage leaders shared and circulated their experiences, their stories generated an emotional charge, resulting in expected tears and more intimate personal connections.

Aurora first moved to Vancouver in 1991 as a live-in caregiver, after working for seven years as a nanny in Singapore, and began working for Aramark in the housekeeping department of a Vancouver hospital in 2004. She was an active member of the living wage working group and the chairperson of her local and had done so many presentations by the time I interviewed her that she remarked she could no longer count. When I asked if she found the presentations tiring, she explained that they were emotionally uplifting not draining:

“When I see the surprise in their eyes and they cry, I cry. It’s not my intention to do that, but when you pull out the stories - and it’s very hard for us, I mean, to express it, because sometimes I was very emotional – I’m so happy to be appreciated” (Interview FG3, 2009).

A crucial part of the public presentations, for Aurora, was the opportunity to be affirmed and validated in the eyes of others, especially by those who may have previously turned a blind eye to it.

Two other Filipina women who initially moved to Vancouver as live-in caregivers and then obtained jobs as low-paid health care support services workers at Vancouver General Hospital also highlighted the emotional ripple effect of their stories on others.³⁴ In response to my question, “what kinds of things have been the most meaningful for you in participating in the living wage working group,” the conversation unfolded as follows:

Chona: When we do some presentations [and] we tell them our stories of what's happening to us right now, you can see the feelings of these people. Some doesn't believe that this is happening. That we, as workers in the hospital are getting this treatment, the workload, the health and safety issues, and the money too. Because they think that if you're working in the hospital you're getting more pay right? But they never expect that we are getting this [kind of treatment.]

Interviewer: Were you surprised to see people's faces?

Chona: Yeah.

Interviewer: What surprised you about them?

34 Both women were former school teachers in the Philippines – one in elementary, one in high school. At one point the former elementary school teacher who cleaned hospital floors and beds and toilets at VGH talked about the humiliation and loss of dignity she felt when thinking about the costs of immigrating. Both were also former nannies – one through Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP); one following her employer from Hong Kong who relocated to Vancouver and wanted to bring her caretaker with her. After obtaining their “open permits,” both worked for several years in low-wage fast food jobs. The employment trajectory for Orchid looked as follows: after working in Hong Kong as a nanny for five and a half years and then a nanny in Vancouver for 3 years on “employer permit,” she began at McDonald's on an “open permit,” which she explained was “you know just to have some experience.” There was some hope that she was actually moving up job ladder – she got a job in shipping and receiving for 13 years, but she quit in 2003 after being passed up for promotion by a white woman with only 3 years' experience. The next year she started working for Sodexo for \$8 an hour.

Chona: That they cannot believe that this is happening to workers. Although there are some whose faces are just sort of flat, you know, but most wherever we go for presentation, some of them are even teary-eyed...There's a few of them who even come to you and say, 'It's really sad to hear your story.' Some of them hear it but do not hear it from us who are doing it. They think that it's just kind of a story kind of thing. When they hear it from workers, they say it really gives more impact.

Orchid immediately agreed with Chona's comments, adding:

Orchid: Yeah, my experience in the working group [is similar]. When you do the presentations, what you're saying comes from your heart and your experience. So whatever you said that comes from your heart, you kind of sometimes want to cry. When you can hear the reaction from the audience, they cry too. And you can feel. And then when you come back to work and you hear the experience from the workers, I feel happy that I give hope to my co-workers...We are doing this not only for us, but for all the workers [to know they] have some support behind them, that there is a group that is working hard for this living wage, for the changes.

Highlighting the personal hardships of supporting oneself on poverty wages created a different source of social connection between private sector workers and white public sector members. Rather than seeing private sector workers solely as "scabs" and "racial others" who "stole" jobs from native Canadian workers, they are recast as hard working immigrants who also experience tremendous social and economic hardships. Orchid explained:

Orchid: Yeah, I noticed that when I do a presentation and when I told them [white public sector union members] that I'm working 7 days a week and that I'm working 2 jobs, they say, 'You're here every day? You never get day off?' I say, 'I have day off, but it's only half-day. I have two different places in my two jobs.' So some of them asking me, 'Why are you doing that?' I said, 'Well if I were to stay with one job, I could not survive. Living in Vancouver, you know, it's quite hard. The bread, you know, the milk. The food, everything is very high here. You cannot survive with just one job. That's why I really need to, you know, I need to work two jobs in order to

survive, that's why I said my coworkers are working two or three jobs. We really need a living wage. We want to have a longer life. Working two jobs is very tiring and you get home at twelve. It's not easy.'

Circulating stories about the everyday struggles that private sector workers faced trying to "make ends meet" on poverty wages created a new source of connection between HEU's white public sector members and predominantly women of colour private sector members – one that was based less on racial-ethnic antagonism and more on class-based affinities. Previously, public sector members were not willing to really listen, according to one union staff member. They were more concerned about how to recover their 15% reduction in wages. However, by creating direct pathways of "member-to-member" communication, one union staff member explained that she could see public sector members begin to put their own discontent into context:

"I think people [public sector union members] are listening more, you know? And I think that has increased people's knowledge. I talked to a woman last week who went to one of the regional meetings in Victoria and she heard our members speaking for only 10 minutes and she said she really understood and she got really choked up. Despite the 15% rollback, it's still a livable wage, the benefits are still half decent. But when you're making 13 dollars an hour and you get six sick days a year and you have to pay 50% of your health benefits, it's not great. It's not great. So for our facilities members - and I can't say it's a great portion of facilities, it's the members that want to hear and want to go to the meetings; it's the members that might know somebody personally that work for the companies. But I think there is better understanding. I think people get it a bit more and I think that's because of this campaign." (Interview LM825, 2008)

Another union staff member, who was a former organizer during HEU's private sector member recruitment drive and was currently working as a union servicing representative, agreed with this assessment. He emphasized that

there was still a long way to go towards convincing some of HEU's higher-paid public sector members that the living wage campaign was important, especially when they would not be directly affected, but he was hopeful that the living wage working group's efforts of going into different HEU locals would begin to challenge the racial-ethnic antagonism polarizing the membership (Interview N822, 2008).

The power of hearing first person public presentations was repeatedly emphasized in my interviews. When workers were able to embody injustice and provide "living proof" of the difficulties of surviving on "poverty wages," they were able to generate affective and emotional currents that could transform feelings of indifference and hostility into feelings of support and solidarity. The emotional resonance of such stories did not necessarily originate from the actual veracity of the story itself; rather, it derived from the image of immigrant women of colour as a distinct political subject – one that could both embody and overcome injustice. Kerry Keller, a union bargaining representative and the only white, Canadian-born male I interviewed, put it frankly when he stated:

"I've been around a few of the living wage campaign presentations... [and] most of the women are women of colour, you know single moms and stuff like that. And when they talk, it's really powerful. It's better than you know Judy Darcy getting up there and talking about it, it comes across as way more powerful and when I'd seen it a few times, I thought wow, this has some potential to do something, to make some significant change" (Interview K924, 2008)

I followed up by asking, "In your opinion, why does it seem more powerful to hear directly from the women themselves instead of Judy Darcy who is incredibly dynamic and charismatic?" Kerry responded:

"Yes, yes. But it's not her story. It's *their* story. And everybody wants to hear people's stories. And yes it's powerful when Judy does it, you bet you it is, and you know I've been moved when she does, definitely. But when I hear a single mother talking, saying you know didn't know which bill she's going to pay this month and you know telling her child you know we're not going to be able to have dinner tonight or whatever, it hits home and you know I've seen tears in people's eyes that would normally never have that" (ibid).

The ability to bear witness to the personal transformation of disempowered immigrant women into confident union leaders created a new emotional dynamic within the union. Positive feelings of pride, respect, and jubilation replaced formerly negative feelings of bitterness, resentment, and frustration. I repeatedly heard stories that praised immigrant women workers in the private sector for having the courage to "speak out." I also heard words such as "amazing" and "incredible" used to describe private sector workers who spoke with confidence and passion about the need to secure a living wage. While this characterization often invoked a more insidious racial stereotype of Asian immigrant women as passive and subordinate, it also mirrored the trajectory of many feminist leaders within the union who experienced similar kinds of personal transformation. Leaders such as Judy Darcy, Sue Fisher, and Marcy Cohen repeatedly emphasized the "deep rewards" they received from watching union members become empowered and speak out against injustice, especially women who were unlikely to do so because of their social position as limited-English speaking immigrant women of colour.

For Lila Murao, witnessing this process not only elicited feelings of "awe" and "respect," it also underscored the connections between workers' stories and her own family history of discrimination. She explained:

"I think it was the organizing through the organizing process over the last three or four years of, you know, the new of our members from Compass

and Sodexo and Aramark, you just can't forget some faces. You don't ever forget the stories. For me, I think a lot of the workers' faces remind me of my mother. Even though my mother was born here, the struggles of working two jobs to keep your family going, even though my father was a fisherman, you know fishing was always seasonal work. So when I see our members that are a part of the living wage, I think of that generation. So it means a lot to me to be able to say, you know, the living wage is not something new, right? The living wage has been something that we've been looking for that last 40 or 50 years. So for people to work two and three jobs, it's always, to me, I remember when I was a kid my mother used to work two or three jobs, or two jobs anyways. You know, you work in the fish cannery and clean somebody's house. That's not that different than our members now who work two or three jobs. So I have this great emotional tie to them. And just the hardships that they go through and I love the people I work with, I really do. Because everybody has a story to tell; I think that's what it is for me" (Interview LM825, 2008).

The opportunity to share stories about similar but not identical experiences of subordination and discrimination underscores what George Lipsitz (1990) describes as "families of resemblance" among individuals and groups from different socioeconomic and ethnocultural backgrounds. Not every private sector worker directly experienced the hardships of working two or three low-wage jobs while taking care of their children and supporting family members abroad; regardless, the living wage campaign provided a readily available script for a range of individuals – from private sector workers to HEU staff employees and leaders to its public sector members – to identify with the collective injury and act in concert with others to restore a higher basic moral standard for disadvantaged workers. Thus, by participating in a broader effort to promote social and economic justice, union members and staff were able to diffuse mounting feelings of antagonism within the union and promote more positive feelings of unity and solidarity.

DISCUSSION

Bill 29 sparked a sequence of actions that resulted in the “biggest mass firings of women workers in the history of the Canadian labour movement,” according to the HEU, the largest health care union in BC. Rather than accept the provincial government’s decision to reclassify and devalue low-status jobs in the health care sector, HEU leaders mobilized members and other unions and labour organizations to oppose government-sponsored privatization. Unsuccessful in its efforts, HEU leaders quickly redirected their efforts towards reorganizing newly privatized workers. This decision sparked a series of important shifts in the union. First, it expanded HEU’s boundaries to include private sector workers. Second, it diversified the union’s membership to include immigrants and workers of colour employed on the bottom rungs of Vancouver’s urban service economy, socially and economically disadvantaged workers who often had limited English language skills and minimal prior experience with unions. Third, it innovated the union’s conventional bargaining approach to include a movement-oriented public shaming campaign aimed at pressuring multinational contracting companies to pay vulnerable workers “living” not “poverty” wages.

HEU’s adoption of new and innovative strategies to organize more vulnerable sectors of the low-paid workforce mirrors recent trends found in the union revitalization literature (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998; Voss and Sherman 2000; Turner and Hurd 2001; Clawson 2003; Lopez 2004; Milkman and Voss 2004; Voss and Fantasia 2004; Murray 2004; Yates 2004; Turner 2005; Levesque and Murray 2006). Like other unions, especially in the U.S., that confronted steep declines in union membership and increasingly anti-union employers, HEU took concrete steps to revitalize and change. A core group of leaders with

progressive and feminist politics were crucial in seeking out and implementing creative approaches to organizing, but the intentions and political will of a few key leaders alone do not fully explain why HEU's reorganizing and bargaining campaigns for private sector members took on such an intense and highly-charged emotional character.

To explain why HEU adopted an innovative yet risky and cost-intensive approach, my research findings highlight the significance of emotional volatility and polarization within the union as a pivotal factor of change. HEU's living wage campaign created a ready-made script with which to justify the union's shifting priorities and changing strategies. Highlighting the economic hardship and suffering of socially and economically disadvantaged workers provided a passionate moral justification for allocating valuable union time and resources toward low-paid private sector workers. HEU's moral arguments were not only deployed to shame multinational firms at the bargaining table, but they were also aimed at mitigating growing internal divisions and conflicts among members, particularly the feelings of racial-ethnic hostility and chauvinism expressed by some of HEU's higher-paid and predominantly white union members in public sector jobs

While the emphasis on basic values such as dignity and fairness appealed to what Stephanie Luce describes as 'lowest common denominator moral politics', appeals to universal held moral beliefs failed to resonate with an increasingly discontent and disaffected membership. Public sector members held lingering feelings of resentment and disappointment towards union leaders that seemed to prioritize the interests of a small group of private sector workers over the interests of the vast majority of dues-paying public sector members. Rather than direct their blame entirely against union, some public sector members targeted their anger and resentment towards private sector workers. The

perceived willingness of some of HEU's public sector members in crossing union picket lines during bargaining negotiations for private sector members contributed to the growing sense that HEU represented two separate and unequal unions.

It is in this emotionally volatile and divisive organizational context that the personal testimonies and public witnessing of immigrant women's pain and suffering was imbued with a transformative emotional force. Whether or not living wage activists were telling their own stories or that of their co-workers, the scripted nature of the living wage campaign's message created an all-encompassing identity for immigrant women and women of colour workers employed in low-paid private sector jobs. The faces and voices of living wage activists bestowed emotional legitimacy to the living wage campaign's passionate calls against the human and social costs of working poverty, creating an avenue whereby formerly resistant public sector workers could feel a new source of empathy, compassion, and solidarity towards their new private sector counterparts. In other words, by foregrounding the role of feelings and emotions, rather than the moral vocabularies of justice and fairness, HEU's living wage campaign began to heal the emotional rifts and tensions that threatened to divide the union into two parts – one public, one private; and one white, one people of colour.

CONCLUSION

By establishing a visible face to the campaign's constructed narrative of extreme economic and familial hardship, the predominantly immigrant and women of colour leaders in HEU's living wage campaign helped smooth over and redirect emotional strife into more restorative feelings of unity and solidarity within the organization. While these emotionally-charged dynamics were

instrumental in promoting feelings of affinity and solidarity across class and racial-ethnic difference, they did not significantly change the union's organizational structures or decision-making processes, thereby revealing the limits of highly-charged emotional energy in generating more long-term organizational and systematic change.

An example of the limits of HEU's passionate politics could be seen in the 2009 elections for new leaders on the Provincial Executive Committee. This committee was the governing body of the union; it took directives from the membership during annual conventions, but it also possessed the authority to allocate valuable organizational resources towards new decisions and directions made during convention. Empowered by the space created for immigrant women within the union, Avelina Vasquez decided to run for a position on the Provincial Executive. She was an outspoken activist from the living wage working group, the charismatic chair of her local, and a committed rank-and-file member of the private sector bargaining team. Her personal story was also well-known across the union, not only through her public presentations for the living wage campaign, but through her openness and willingness to share her stories with the media and the larger public. She had lived in Singapore for a decade before immigrating to Canada through the live-in caregivers program. After obtaining her open work permit after two years, she found a job as a housekeeper in a Vancouver hospital while working part-time as a domestic housecleaner. She also found a way to bring her son to Vancouver from the Philippines, but she spoke tenderly about the difficulties of parenting after such a long and painful separation. Avelina's leadership in the union was commonly cited as an example of the success of HEU's living wage campaign and the promise that the union's new direction held for the future. Despite this optimism, her election run ended in disappointment, causing some union

leaders to wonder whether change was really possible within the union. While concerned leaders and staff cited several possible reasons for Avelina's failed election run, the fact that the new body of elected representatives to the Provincial Executive were all white and from the public sector revealed the persistence of more exclusionary sentiments.

To understand how racial-ethnic divisions and power hierarchies are reproduced within the union and the broader labour movement, my study points to several new research directions. First, it highlights the need to more fully understand the dynamics of racial and nativist politics within crisis-ridden unions. Although many public sector members began to embrace the value of unionizing more vulnerable workers into their membership ranks, demonstrating that it is possible for higher-paid workers to express solidarity rather than antagonism with lower-paid racialized workers (Bonacich 1972), shared feelings of empathy and compassion were not enough to overcome more systemic racial-ethnic divides within the union. Part of the problem derived from the salience of racial antagonism as an expression of class conflict, but it was also linked to the asymmetrical structures of leadership and decision-making that defined the union's interests and future directions. One union staff member commented that HEU's leadership and staff structure continued to be plagued by gender hierarchies as well as racial-ethnic hierarchies, noting the fact that men were disproportionately overrepresented as paid union staff and leaders in comparison to their membership.

Second, my study highlights the absence of a narrative of racial-ethnic discrimination or immigrant worker's rights in the terrain of union politics in Vancouver. Although the living wage campaign actively acknowledged the racial-ethnic and immigrant characteristics of the campaign, it did not produce a vocabulary that tied social subordination with racial-ethnic subordination. One

reason for this could be the distinct history of social movements in Vancouver and Canada more generally. Unlike the U.S., subordinate groups in Canada were not mobilized as part of a national civil rights movement or immigrant rights movement. Radical left and Marxist workers' struggles and the feminist movement played an important role in creating political vocabularies with which to organize the marginalized and disempowered. However, the absence of a distinct and readily available vocabulary to confront racial-ethnic hierarchies created obstacles for addressing the persistence of seemingly discriminatory practices in the union.

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