

## ***Defying Expectations***

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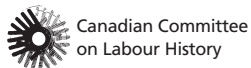
Defying Expectations: The Case of UFCW Local 401

*Jason Foster*

# ***Defying Expectations***

***The Case of UFCW Local 401***

Jason Foster



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# ***Defying Expectations***



# Introduction

In October 2005, I spent a day walking the Lakeside Packers picket line. The beef-processing plant was in the midst of an ugly first-contract strike. During my tenure as a staff member for the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL), I had walked my fair share of picket lines. In my experience, they are mostly the same: workers milling about, chatting idly among themselves, stopping vehicles and pedestrians to explain the dispute, and occasionally rallying to stop strikebreakers from crossing the line. In the world of modern labour relations, the angry energy once associated with strikes has largely been drowned in a sea of legal restrictions. Laws governing picket lines, intrusive video surveillance (practiced by both sides), and labour board injunctions generally serve to keep expressions of outrage and protest in check. More the stuff of monotony than excitement, the modern picket line resembles its early-twentieth-century ancestor only in the presence of picket signs.

However, the Lakeside strike was no ordinary strike. The plant is located in Brooks, a sleepy southern Alberta town previously known for cattle and oil well servicing and deeply entrenched in Alberta's conservative rural culture. The employer, Tyson Foods, was virulently antiunion and had fought hard for two decades to keep the plant union-free. After a previous failed organizing bid, the company had taunted the union by hoisting a banner on its sign beside the Trans-Canada Highway declaring the plant to be "Proudly Union-Free." Then there was the union involved in the strike—United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 401. A grocery store local, representing mostly food-related service sector workers, might seem an odd choice of candidate to take on this Herculean

fight, especially when another Alberta local, UFCW Local 1118, already predominantly organized and represented meat-packing workers. What did grocery workers know about the tough work and brutal conditions of a meat-packing plant?

But what made Lakeside truly different, at least for me, was the workers. In keeping with industry trends, the composition of the workers at the Brooks plant had shifted dramatically, in the wake of an ongoing influx of African and Asian immigrants (see Broadway 2013). Half of the plant's workers hailed from southern Alberta or other rural areas of Canada, while the other half came from Somalia, Ethiopia, Uganda, Sudan, the Philippines, and other far-flung locations.

It was a plant divided and a town in flux. I knew before I arrived in Brooks that the certification, gained by the narrowest of margins, was heavily split along racial lines, with the Canadians by birth largely opposed and the newcomers in favour. I also knew that the latest drive had been sparked by a wildcat protest (an unofficial, unsanctioned walk-out) by a cluster of Somali workers: this time, the union had found a way to win over the newcomers.

I had been told that the strike was not pretty, but that warning hardly prepared me for what I experienced on the picket line. It was a crisp fall day but the sun was shining. Just off the highway, at the main entrance to the plant, clustered hundreds of workers wearing UFCW Local 401 bibs, some standing around fire barrels, others meandering across the road, still others talking in small groups—and almost every single face was black or brown. I had never been on a picket line like this. Until now, the labour movement in Alberta had been pretty “white” (Alberta Federation of Labour 2001).

Amidst the sea of African and Asian newcomers, I spotted a handful of UFCW staffers familiar to me. But even those I didn't know I immediately identified as union staff, not because of the colour of their skin (the line that day included a few workers from Newfoundland), but because they seemed so different in every way from the people for whom they were working. The staffers were a *mélange* of young, energetic grocery store workers and grizzled union vets with years of experience in the labour relations trenches. Neither group seemed to have anything in common with the men and women milling around them.

Then the local president, Doug O'Halloran, drove up to the line. The energy in the crowd rose. O'Halloran, a larger-than-life former meat packer, carried himself with an air of authority tinged with modesty. After some informal greetings, he addressed the crowd. They listened, rapt, cheering and applauding everything he said. I was surprised at the enthusiasm, energy, and, yes, love they expressed for him.

Later that day, the employer tried to push some buses filled with scabs through the line. Things got crazy fast. No polite discussions here. Shouting and jeering, the picketers rocked the buses as they tried to inch their way through the sea of people. The members and staffers acted as one, unified in conviction and action. The energy was electric and vaguely dangerous. A few buses got through, while others gave up and turned away. Soon the swell ebbed and the line calmed down. It was a partial victory, but there were more battles to come.

In the days following my brief visit, the strike escalated, with more violent clashes. The employer built a dozen roads across fields surrounding the plant in order to sneak in workers. In a nightmarish incident, four managers, including the plant CEO, pursued O'Halloran along back roads in a high-speed car chase in an attempt to serve him court papers. The chase culminated in a three-car accident, in which O'Halloran suffered serious injuries.

After twenty-four days, the strike was settled, the tentative agreement narrowly approved: the Lakeside workers had their first agreement and thus solidified the union's place at Lakeside. More than two thousand workers were now dues-paying Local 401 members. It was the largest successful certification in Alberta in more than a decade. The AFL moved on to other challenges, leaving Local 401 with the challenge of unifying a deeply divided workforce.

But for me, the strike lingered. I couldn't shake a series of questions. Just how did they do it? How did UFCW Local 401 successfully organize Lakeside Packers? O'Halloran had a reputation in the labour movement for running a top-down union, and Local 401 was seen as a classic "business union," playing the game the old way. How was such a union able to mobilize the types of workers that the labour movement had generally been *least* able to organize?

When I asked about Lakeside, people would tell me it was O'Halloran's stubbornness that led to the victory, but I didn't buy it. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that something more was going on with Local 401. A pattern of difficult, surprise victories was beginning to emerge. In 2002, the local had held a first-contract strike at the Shaw Conference Centre in Edmonton, which employed a diverse workforce including large numbers of Filipina women. Then Lakeside in 2005. In 2006, they struck Palace Casino in Edmonton, another first-contract dispute and another highly diverse and unlikely workforce.<sup>1</sup>

But the more I examined the local, how it operated and how it was delivering for underrepresented workers, the more confusing it seemed. There were so many contradictions, so many ways in which it was doing what leaders and other activists in the labour movement said they couldn't do. The local was also doing more reaching out and innovating than any other AFL affiliate at the time. The range of industries and occupations it had organized was extensive. Something didn't add up.

Finally, one day, I decided to stop trying to explain away the contradictions and to embrace them instead. Maybe there was something to be learned from Local 401's stubborn refusal to be pigeon-holed and from being open to the idea that unions are not as simple as we have been taught.

At that moment, this book was born.

#### LABOUR RELATIONS IN ALBERTA

The context in which Local 401 was operating makes its success even more remarkable. Alberta is not a particularly hospitable jurisdiction for unions. It has the lowest unionization rate in the country—25 percent, with the private sector rate at 11 percent (Statistics Canada 2017). The number of certification applications to the Alberta Labour Relations Board have been dropping for more than two decades, and those that are filed fail more than 50 percent of the time—a success rate far below other jurisdictions (Foster 2012, 207). Organizing activity is low and is mostly clustered in the public and quasi-public sector.

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1 A timeline of significant events in the history of Local 401 is provided in appendix A. For a list of companies who employ workers represented by the local, see appendix B.

This low rate of union activity reflects the fact that Alberta, at the time of the case study, had some of the most antiunion labour laws in Canada. A North American study found that Alberta ranked fifty-first out of sixty-three jurisdictions for labour protections (Block, Roberts, and Clarke 2003, 99), below most US states. Even though labour relations in Alberta were governed by the same system of union representation and collective bargaining (commonly called the Wagner model) that was enshrined in legislation throughout English Canada during the postwar period, the province had removed many of the provisions that assist unions in organizing and representing workers. For example, until 2017, when amendments to the labour code were made, Alberta's Labour Relations Code had no provisions for card-check certification (whereby a certification vote is not required if the union can demonstrate majority support), first-contract arbitration, or limits to the use of replacement workers. The code, which had been in place for twenty years, also placed extensive restrictions on the right to strike, banned secondary picketing (picketing in locations other than the workplace), and tightly regulated picket line activity. The code even lacked a mandatory Rand formula provision requiring workers in a unionized workplace to pay union dues even if they choose not to join the union.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, the code provided employers considerable latitude to communicate with workers during certification votes. In addition, Alberta Labour Relations Board procedures and practices led to long delays between certification applications and votes (giving employers more time to persuade workers), slow decisions in unfair labour practices complaints, and soft penalties against employers for Labour Relations Code infractions. Many of these shortcomings were addressed in a 2017 amendment by the NDP government, the effects of which, at the time of writing, cannot yet be fully determined.

At the heart of this situation is the fact that, until 2015, Alberta was governed for eighty years by conservative governments with strong links

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2 Although the Labour Relations Code was never formally amended, in a November 2009 ruling, made in response to a complaint filed by UFCW Local 401 against Old Dutch Foods, the Alberta Labour Relations Board found the code to be unconstitutional for failing to include a mandatory provision for union security, such as a Rand formula dues check-off. More will be said about this ruling in chapter 3.

to industry, leading to legislation detrimental to union activity. Parties and groups that were friendlier to union issues generally found themselves marginalized in political debate in Alberta. The election, in May 2015, of an NDP government in the province was thus cause for optimism among supporters of labour rights, providing a window of opportunity for changes to existing labour laws. In addition, only a few months before the NDP came to power in Alberta, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that all workers have the right to strike and that provinces must bring their labour laws into compliance with this decision.<sup>3</sup>

These are, however, relatively recent developments. Although unions in every jurisdiction have faced challenges in organizing workers, the situation in Alberta has long been especially hostile to union activity. This historically difficult atmosphere provides an important part of the context for understanding the UFCW Local 401 experience.

#### RETHINKING UNIONS

UFCW Local 401 makes for an engaging, informative case study. Its recent history has all the makings of a good story—dramatic events, strong personalities, unexpected heroes, complex motivations. But there is a more important reason for telling the story of UFCW Local 401. Much of what Local 401 has accomplished in the past two decades—innovative organizing tactics, active engagement with difficult-to-organize workers, and a willingness to take on employers—can provide useful information on how to make unions more effective in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, closely examining the complexities of Local 401 grants us an opportunity to rethink our common understandings about how unions operate. The apparent contradictions within Local 401's structures and actions contain important insights into the nature of unionism in the twenty-first century.

Mainstream thinking about unions, among both practitioners and scholars, includes some widely accepted notions about what unions do, how they operate, and to what degree they can differ from one another.

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3 The “right to strike” decision was handed down on 30 January 2015, in *Saskatchewan Federation of Labour v. Saskatchewan*, 2015 SCC 4, [2015] 1 SCR 245. In it, the Supreme Court found unconstitutional a Saskatchewan law that prohibited certain public sector workers from striking on the grounds that they perform “essential services.”



These notions form the conceptual backdrop against which we generally study unions. In recent decades, many of these notions have been informed by the framework of regulations and procedures through which the Wagner model of unionism—with its emphasis on collective bargaining in good faith and on mechanisms such as grievances, arbitration, and the right to strike—was legally elaborated and institutionalized in the post-World War II period. Widely held axioms about union behaviour are useful in that they order and help us interpret what we observe. However, in an era of globalization and neoliberalism, it is critical to ask whether those accepted notions still reflect reality. This book proposes to explore that question.

### Questioning the Divide

The first step toward rethinking prevalent notions is re-examining how we conceptualize unions and their activities. Unions obviously come in many sizes and forms and have varying purposes, with the result that union behaviour covers a wide range of possibilities. As always, in order to make sense of this individual profusion, we create categories. We apply a label so that we can identify the basic type of union with which we are dealing. This union is “militant,” while this one is “collaborationist.” One might be seen as “activist,” and another as “bread and butter.” This labelling has a long history: consider “yellow dog” unions and “syndicalist” unions from the early twentieth century. The problem is, of course, that labels can obscure more than they explain.

Two of the most powerful descriptors in the contemporary Canadian labour movement are “business union” and “social union.” These labels evoke certain images and lock in familiar frames of reference. Business unions are perceived as focusing almost exclusively on representing the interests of union members, chiefly through collective bargaining, while social unions broaden their agenda to include broader political and social change (Godard 2011, 172–173). Pradeep Kumar and Gregor Murray (2006, 82) offer an elegant articulation of the difference between the two as “the defence of the worker as wage earner as opposed to the worker as citizen.” This dichotomy has shaped much of the contemporary theorizing around unions and has served as a fundamental framework for the study of industrial relations (Hyman 1975). A flip through any contemporary

Canadian industrial relations textbook will reveal the extent to which industrial relations scholars continue to invoke the business/social binary to characterize forms of union behaviour (see, for example, Godard 2011; McQuarrie 2015). The terms are also in common use within the labour movement.

Researchers have begun to understand the business/social union divide as more of a continuum than a duality (see, for example, Kumar and Murray 2006; Ross 2007), suggesting that unions can display elements of both. While this view recognizes that the “business” union and the “social” union are ideal types, it still relies on a fundamental distinction between the two that allows unions to be situated at particular points along the spectrum. Certain actions are assumed to be characteristic of social unions and others of business unions, and, while a union’s actions can be weighted more in one direction or the other, the analysis nonetheless rests on the same conceptual opposition.

The case of Local 401 illustrates the limitations of the two dominant conceptualizations, as do a number of other relatively recent cases. For example, in October 2007, the Canadian Auto Workers (now Unifor), long considered a bastion of social unionism, signed an employer-friendly “Framework of Fairness” with Magna International, in which the union agreed to relinquish many of the traditional principles of labour organizing, including the right of workers to strike, to be represented by shop stewards, and to lodge grievances (Rosenfeld 2007). The deal, which was widely criticized, was difficult to understand within a social unionism frame. Conversely, UFCW Canada, widely seen as a business union, has nonetheless spent years attempting to defend the rights of farm workers in Canada with little prospect of ever collecting any union dues from them (UFCW Canada and Agricultural Workers Alliance 2011), an action that clearly runs counter to the business union model.

This book challenges the use of the traditional business/social union framework to describe unionism today. Current forms of union action are responses to the specific challenges faced by contemporary unions, and these actions may or may not fit neatly into the categories we conventionally assign to unions. It is time to rethink how we understand unions and their actions. UFCW Local 401 presents us with an interesting test case for this exploration.

## Unions in Motion

How we study and understand unions is changing. Historically, researchers painstakingly analyzed formal union structures to glean insights into how unions operate. Library shelves are full of books on the topic (among them Webb and Webb 1920; Hoxie 1923; Turner 1962; and Crouch 1982). Labour scholars have a long tradition of highlighting the role of actors and exploring how members and leaders of unions have shaped the labour movement (see, for example, Heron 1996; Morton 2007; Finkel 2012). Scholars have also turned their attention to how external forces—in particular, neoliberalism—are shaping labour’s destiny (Panitch and Swartz 2003; Robinson 2000; MacDonald 2014, for example). Unions are, of course, constituted by the interaction of structure, actors, and external forces. Actors are key to understanding what unions do, but their actions are bounded, defined, and propelled by the framework within which unions operate, as well as by the external world acting upon unions.

In recent years, labour scholars have recognized this reality and have produced a body of research that attempts to integrate the three elements of structure, actors, and external forces. Seeing unions as organizations in motion, they seek to understand how and why unions change or stay the same. With the goal of understanding union renewal (or revitalization), these scholars explore how unions respond to their external world, how individuals within unions react to challenges, and how structures and other stable aspects of the organization encourage or inhibit change. Their aims are to diagnose how traditional union practices and structures are contributing to the struggles of twenty-first century unions and to reveal specific strategies to revitalize and strengthen unions. Union renewal is framed both as a general response to the crisis of unionism in the face of neoliberalism and globalization and as a specific set of actions:

Union renewal is the term used to describe the process of change, underway or desired, to “put new life and vigour” in the labour movement to rebuild its organizational and institutional strength. It refers to a variety of actions/initiatives taken or needed by labour organizations to strengthen themselves in the face of their declining role and influence in the workplace and society. (Kumar and Schenk 2006b, 30)

Ostensibly, renewal entails the use of diverse approaches that have proved successful in increasing union effectiveness.

The union renewal research has begun to integrate our understanding of unions as organizations with both structure and dynamics, experiencing both change and stability. Researching the interaction of elements is more complex than simply drawing conclusions from an analysis of structure, and union renewal work has therefore painted a more complex picture of the lives of unions. And yet our understanding of the factors that lead to revitalization remains incomplete. In particular, we need to examine more closely the internal dynamics of unions that either facilitate or inhibit renewal. Even when they operate in the same context and with similar structures, some unions chart a course for revitalization, while others do not. The process of revitalization thus appears to be contingent on factors that remain, for the most part, unexplored in union renewal research.

Here, the case of UFCW Local 401 proves to be helpful. Local 401 has changed significantly over the past twenty years, yet existing models do not easily explain this revitalization. A closer look at the evolution of the local, over an extended period of time, may reveal factors that contributed to its transformation but that have thus far gone unrecognized. The question then becomes, how might we best explore the inner workings of a union?

#### THE POWER OF NARRATIVE

Although we have a great deal of knowledge about the structure of unions and the actions they undertake, our understanding of what motivates unions to do what they do is less well developed. In particular, we have relatively little insight into how union actors make sense of what they do—how they impart coherence to their own behaviour. I would argue that, in order to grasp the internal dynamics at work in a union, we need to turn our attention to the role of narratives.

Narratives are, of course, a form of storytelling but they are more than that. Narratives possess an inner logic, a degree of internal coherence that imbues a story with greater meaning and significance. Through the creation of narratives, we impose order on experience: we render it interpretable and thereby produce meaning. The construction of a narrative

thus entails choices about what to tell and how to tell it: a narrative is one way (among many) of parsing the world. We can therefore probe its meaning and ask what interests it serves. Moreover, narratives are not inert: they shape our behaviour in two ways. By weaving the strands of our experience together to create coherence, they provide a conceptual basis on which we can make decisions about how to move forward. At the same time, the construction of narratives helps us to define our self-identity, and that story of who we are will in turn influence our decisions about how to behave.

Like members of other organizations, actors within unions are constantly involved in the construction of narratives. Leaders construct narratives for their members, the public, and themselves that explain why the union acts as it does and even what kind of union it is. These narratives can shape future actions. The effects of narrative on union behaviour, however, remains largely uncharted territory. By identifying and analyzing the narratives produced with UFCW Local 401, and by remaining alert to shifts in these narrative over time, I aim to unravel some of the connections between the stories that unions tell about themselves and the actions they take.

In what follows, I tell the story of UFCW Local 401 as it has unfolded over the past twenty years, with a view to explaining how and why the union changed. In so doing, I hope to shed new light on the processes of union revitalization. But I also seek to understand the role that narratives played in the transformation of the local and, in particular, how they functioned to create coherence out of apparent contradiction and complexity. While Local 401 will be the protagonist in this account, as with all good stories, the real message is about something bigger. This book is about both the struggles of unions to make sense of the changing world around them and their efforts on behalf of working people. When we step back to analyze Local 401's actions, we also glean insights into union actions more generally. Although the details may be specific to Local 401, the challenges, dilemmas, and contradictions are shared by all unions today.



# *PART I*

**The Evolution of Local 401, 1997–2017**





# 1 | Facing New Challenges

## From Safeway to Shaw

On 10 June 1997, eighty-three hundred UFCW Local 401 members who worked across Alberta for the grocery chain Canada Safeway glumly returned to work after a seventy-four-day strike. It was the union's first strike in more than two decades and it had not gone well. Despite two and a half months on the picket line, workers earned a deal little better than the employer's offer at the eleventh hour before the strike. In short, the strike had failed and members were angry.

The story of the Safeway strike provides a key road marker in the evolution of UFCW Local 401. The local, like many unions, was unprepared for the changes that rocked the grocery industry in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The industry had long offered quality, stable jobs for its workers in Canada and the United States. It had also bred a cozy, cooperative relationship between management and the unions representing the workers (Tannock 2001, 15). Employers did not resist unionization and offered decent wages and working conditions, and in return, unions did not adopt militant or confrontational positions. Many bargaining units in Canada were achieved via voluntary recognitions rather than normal organizing efforts. Voluntary recognitions are certifications negotiated privately between the employer and the union without involving labour board processes, including a membership vote. They are controversial in the labour movement, since they are often used by employers to prevent more militant union organizing (Taylor, McGray, and Watt-Malcolm 2007;

Merit Contractors Association 2006), and they signal a desire by the union to pursue a less confrontational relationship with the employer (Tufts and Thomas 2014).

In the 1980s, the rise of global markets and a new breed of competitor that aggressively sought out cost reductions and passed savings on to consumers destabilized the entire grocery industry (Hurd 2008, 1–2). Demands for concessions from employers, intensified union avoidance efforts by nonunion chains, and the introduction of labour-saving technologies such as electronic scanners (Hurd 1993) caught grocery unions unprepared. One long-time observer of UFCW framed it this way:

[UFCW] lived on voluntary recognitions. If the grocery stores grew, we grew. Voluntarily recognized, there wasn't a lot of fights, not a lot of battles. You didn't need to have a fight. You just got them. . . . So as a president, your job was to hire—we used to call them baggage carriers, who typed your letters, and you just floated on the membership rising. You didn't have to fight, no organizing, you didn't have to be smart, didn't have to think. Then all of a sudden that fell apart. The whole grocery industry changed . . . [and] we have a whole bunch of bag carriers, so we weren't fighting, we weren't socially minded, we weren't out there. (knowledgeable outsider [KO], 38)<sup>1</sup>

The Canada Safeway strike was Local 401's first-hand experience with the new realities of the grocery industry. The outcome revealed the type of challenge to which the local would have to rise if it were to survive. It also laid bare—to others, if not the leadership itself—the fact that Local 401's structures, leadership style, and stunted democratic processes were significant barriers to engaging in the kind of reform needed to respond to the new challenges. The 1997 Safeway strike can also be seen, in hindsight, as the last traditional strike run by Local 401.

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1 Information about interviews is provided in appendix C. For the most part, interviews are cited by the category to which the interviewee belonged, followed by the interview number. Because the identity of the three union officials whom I interviewed—president, secretary-treasurer, and executive director of labour relations—is a matter of public record, comments made by these three are cited simply by the person's surname, provided either in the text itself or within parentheses.

## THE SAFEWAY STRIKE OF 1997

The first Alberta store of Canada Safeway was organized in Edmonton in 1953 by the Retail Clerks International Union, a precursor to the United Food and Commercial Workers union (formed via a merger in 1979). The unit was numbered Local 401 and over the next couple of decades it organized Safeway stores in northern Alberta. In 1984, it became a province-wide local by merging with the southern Alberta local. The only known strike between Local 401 and Canada Safeway before 1997 took place in 1974 and lasted five days.

The seeds of the 1997 strike were sown in 1990, when Safeway settled a four-year deal with UFCW Local 401 that, essentially, continued previous patterns of bargaining, with decent pay increases and improvements in contract language. The newly appointed Local 401 president, Doug O'Halloran, was uneasy about the length of the deal. "They wanted four years of labour peace," he recalled years later. "We tried to convince them not to negotiate a four-year agreement, because the unknowns were out there. They brought the deal. They put a lot of money on the table" (ALHI interview, 2005). The apparent stability was short lived. As a long-time Local 401 activist remembered, "In July they're back knocking at the door to see if they can reopen it. They kept coming back. Eventually we went in and . . . started the process. That was the end result sort of thing. It was a bad deal. But, again, they were putting so much pressure on it, as a union we couldn't do anything else" (Connolly, ALHI interview, 2001). O'Halloran described the dilemma the union was in:

Some six months after the deal was signed, they're crying poverty, they need to renegotiate. They tried to get us to the bargaining table. We wouldn't agree to go to the bargaining table. In 1992, they started making some serious demands. In January of 1993, they said, if you don't give us these, we're getting out of the province by February 28th. I called in a negotiating committee . . . and said, What should we do? Should we talk with them, should we not talk with them? The consensus was that we should sit down with the company and see what they had to say. (ALHI interview, 2005)

At the time, Safeway cited cost disadvantages compared to its main competitors, Save-On-Foods (Pattison Group) and Superstore (Loblaws), with whom the corporation was fighting a province-wide price war.

Safeway workers earned five to six dollars an hour more than equivalent workers at the other companies. Safeway pointed to the fact that Save-On and Superstore were faster to adopt the models of cost containment, including increased use of part-timers and higher turnover, putting Safeway at a disadvantage. However, the situation was also in part attributable to the actions of Local 401 itself, which represented workers at the low-cost Superstore. The local had signed a voluntary recognition with the company in the mid-1980s, agreeing to lower base rates, longer periods for wage step-up, and more part-time workers. The local's willingness to agree to lower conditions at Superstore and inability to bargain parity between the two companies put wages between the two sets of workers into competition, leading to Safeway's complaints. Complicating matters further was the fact that Save-On-Foods was represented by the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC), a union widely regarded as collaboration-oriented and employer-friendly (Tufts and Thomas 2014, 72–76) and which had negotiated agreements favourable to the employer.

The local agreed, in the reopened negotiations, to rollbacks of \$40 million in 1993, including a cut of two dollars an hour to the average wage. The agreement also included a one-time buyout package, which more than four thousand employees took advantage of. Safeway used the buyout to replace mostly full-time, long-term employees with ten thousand part-time, lower-cost workers (King 1993). The concessions were widely criticized in the labour movement and Local 401 members were angry. Despite the criticism, O'Halloran defended the deal. "The labour movement was absolutely upset with us because of having agreed to these concessions," he said. "But we made the decision based upon, Do we want to keep this company in business or do we want to put them out of business? We were convinced that they would leave the province, and if they left Alberta, they would leave Canada" (ALHI interview, 2005).

As much as the wage rollbacks hurt, it was allowing Safeway to replace full-time with part-time workers that is now seen as having had the most enduring effect on the company and the industry. "The major cave-in at Safeway was allowing the employer virtually unlimited use of part-time workers," said one observer. "What had been very well-paid full-time jobs, if you look at them now, are not-very-well-paid part-time jobs" (KO, 13). Especially problematic was the pairing of the growth in part-time

employees with the local's rare and controversial flat-rate dues structure. At the time, Local 401 required all members to pay \$9.25 per week (in addition to a \$25 initiation fee), regardless of income or hours worked (UFCW Local 401 2007, 11). Ironically, the union's membership revenue increased through Safeway's adoption of part-time workers even though its members, in general, were worse off. This perceived injustice sparked much anger at the union leadership from both members and the broader labour movement.

In the two years following the concessions, Safeway's profits quickly rebounded and the company's market position improved. Yet when the contract again reopened in 1996, Safeway came to the table with another round of rollbacks. Anger at the union turned to the employer. Long-time UFCW activist Jim Connolly, commented about the union, "Because they'd been decimated and promised so much when they gave up so much to help the company who had come pleading, they were in trouble" (ALHI interview, 2001). The strike came as a surprise to the leadership as much as to the employer. "It's the first time people came together," a union member recalled. "They were really tired of the situation. The way people were treated, it finally got to a point where people were fed up. I think he [O'Halloran] was surprised when Safeway [workers] went on strike 'cause he didn't think people were ever motivated enough to do it" (member, 4). For his part, O'Halloran was reluctant to strike, calling it a "last resort" (Stewart 1997).

The workers walked out on 26 March 1997 at seventy-four of seventy-seven Safeway locations in the province: two had voted against striking and one was under a different collective agreement (Kent 1997a). From the first days, the logistics of running a province-wide strike proved overwhelming to local staff and leadership. One staffer described the strike as "a gong show" (staff, 24). The strike was beset with communication breakdowns, confusion, and a lack of clarity regarding the members' settlement needs. The staff were stretched to handle dozens of store locations each. "It is pretty stressful, seventy-five days on a picket line," recalled Secretary-Treasurer Theresa McLaren. "I know myself: I was in Red Deer and I got one weekend off the entire three months." In addition, the union leadership was aware that the union could not really afford a long battle, which was costing it more than \$1 million per week in

strike pay (Kent 1997a). "A lot of presidents would be nervous at taking eighty-five hundred or nine thousand workers on strike," said a union staff member. "Particularly back in 1997, when that was the lion's share of our membership. . . . We didn't know how long it was going to be and it felt like it was going to be a long one. We were going to go broke" (staff, 2).

After seventy-four days, the workers accepted a mediator's recommendation that looked very similar to the one presented by the company in the hours before the strike. The deal made no gains on recovering lost wages from the 1993 rollbacks and offered a basic floor for minimum hours for part-time workers. Notably, the bargaining committee remained neutral on the deal, reportedly succumbing to a threat from Safeway that the employer would revoke its support if the committee recommended rejection (Kent 1997b). Neutral recommendations are often perceived as a lack of leadership on the part of a bargaining committee, which is expected to offer direction to the membership based on what the leadership is thinking.

The aftermath of the strike was mixed. While many thought that O'Halloran had made the best bargain possible, a larger group, including many members, felt betrayed. As one union member explained, "They figure that Doug O'Halloran let them down in 1993 and again in 1997" (deli worker, quoted in Geddes and Jaimet 1997, A1). A veteran Safeway worker, though, saw some positive long-term consequences: "We could have settled earlier. We didn't get anything more by staying out. But I think they also set a tone for future negotiations. We got a better working relationship with Safeway after that. Because they took us more seriously" (member, 4). However, the same member sensed "a feeling in the stores from people who were on strike. I hear it all the time, I am not going on strike again."

The Safeway strike, and its controversial ending, left an indelible mark on UFCW Local 401 and its leadership. But it also sparked a period of transformation within the local, setting into motion some significant changes in how the union organized and represented workers. Although many of the local's dynamics have remained constant over the years, subtle adjustments in the two decades since the strike have had a large impact on the union's approach. A close look at the local's structure, leadership, and internal processes will set the foundation for an examination of those changes.

## LOCAL 401'S STRUCTURES AND LEADERSHIP

The structure and processes of union locals are influenced by a number of factors. First formal structures and rules conform to the constitution of the local's national or international union. The decisions made about executive composition, decision-making processes, and the formal authority structure within a local shape how union business takes place. Second, the specific approaches of individuals who fill leadership positions within a local affect its personality. Third, because unions are officially democratic organizations, members and their wishes, expressed collectively, shape the direction of the local. Fourth, informal processes and dynamics emerge from the interactions of the first three influences, creating a picture of union life within a local that is constantly changing.

Like other locals, then, the dynamics found within UFCW Local 401 are an amalgam of various inputs, responses, and consequences. While all such dynamics are always in flux, we can identify key tendencies that come to define a particular local. A glimpse into the internal world of Local 401—its formal structures, leadership styles, and the interaction of those factors with members' responses—will provide important context for understanding the changes undertaken over the past twenty years.

### A Top-Down Structure

UFCW Local 401 operates under a set of bylaws that closely conform to the terms and conditions laid out in the constitution of UFCW Canada. The constitution and bylaws set forth all the legal parameters of the organization's objectives and jurisdiction and outline membership eligibility, rights, and obligations, as well as the processes for amending bylaws. Furthermore, the bylaws specify the officers and executive committee of the local along with their responsibilities and areas of authority. Finally, they lay out the processes for elections, general meetings, and other events.

UFCW is an international union with headquarters in Washington, DC. As is common for unions operating in both Canada and the United States, UFCW International has a semi-autonomous Canadian arm—UFCW Canada, based in Toronto. The international constitution does not provide UFCW Canada with direct authority over Canadian members, but instead requires UFCW International leaders to “consult with the [UFCW Canada] National Director . . . and consider any recommendations of the

International Officers in Canada prior to carrying out their respective authority on matters directly affecting the membership in Canada" (UFCW Canada 2008, 5). In practice, the international union leaves matters within Canada to the authority of UFCW Canada unless those interests conflict with the international organization. This arrangement has allowed for some independent action on the part of UFCW Canada.

While UFCW Canada is a separate entity for legal purposes, its self-determination is informal. UFCW Canada's constitution is almost identical in wording to that of UFCW International, and UFCW Canada holds no authority to amend its constitution independently of the international union. Similarly, UFCW Local 401's bylaws adopt, for almost every section, the exact wording found in UFCW Canada's constitution. The local cannot amend its bylaws without the approval of the international president.

The UFCW International constitution centralizes decision making, establishing a clear hierarchy between locals and the international officers, with the latter given final authority. It also provides the international Executive Committee with sweeping powers to take over locals that are deemed to be "working against the best interests of the International Union" (UFCW Canada 2008, 8); this authority is commonly referred to as "trusteeship."

In large part, Local 401's bylaws reflect the centralized and authoritative tendencies of the international constitution. The local's bylaws establish twenty-one local officers, who constitute the Local Union Executive Board (LUEB): president, secretary-treasurer, recorder, and eighteen vice-presidents. The vice-presidents are identified geographically, representing different regions of the province (UFCW Local 401 2009, 9). The president and secretary-treasurer are full-time officers, while all other positions have no ongoing remuneration and are booked off to attend meetings and events.

The Local 401 bylaws grant extensive authority to the president, referring to the position as "the chief executive officer of the Local Union" and mandating "general supervision over the affairs of the Local Union" (UFCW Local 401 2009, 10). In addition to traditional authorities, including chairing meetings and interpreting bylaws, the president is awarded the power to appoint all committees, to hire and supervise all union staff, and to determine the compensation levels of staff. As well, the president "shall



have the authority to appoint stewards, or to determine that stewards in designated locations be elected by the affected membership, and shall have the authority to remove stewards in either instance" (10). Furthermore, the president is given the authority to "disburse the Local Union's funds and . . . disbursements shall be authorized *or ratified by* the Local Union Executive Board" (10, emphasis added). It is noteworthy that the bylaws allow for post hoc approval of spending by the president.

In contrast to the two pages of powers and duties of the president, the roles of the secretary-treasurer and vice-president are defined jointly in a single sentence: they "shall assist the President in the discharge of the President's duties" (12). The role of the LUEB is paradoxical. The bylaws explicitly indicate that the LUEB "shall have full and complete charge of all business of the Local Union not otherwise delegated to a specific officer or officers, or reserved to the membership" (13), suggesting a rather sweeping scope of authority. However, read in tandem with the description of presidential authority, the LUEB's mandate appears to contain little of consequence.

Unlike the considerable space allotted to the leadership positions, the bylaws are sparse when addressing the issue of general membership meetings. They require that such meetings occur quarterly, at times and places determined by the LUEB, that adequate notice of meetings be provided, and that quorum be set at seven members. A special meeting can be called upon petition by 10 percent of the membership, and "informational meetings" can be held at the discretion of the officers. Aside from a requirement that a financial report be provided to the membership "not less than once a year" (12), there are no mandatory items or topics to be discussed at general membership meetings and no predetermined procedures.

We can see, then, that the formal structures of UFCW Local 401 suggest a highly centralized organization that vests a high degree of control and authority in the position of president. Like most unions, nominal control over the local rests with the membership through general membership meetings and the election of officers; however, most key decisions and actions rest with the president and others, as delegated. Also, the high degree of similarity between the local bylaws and the international constitution indicate that Local 401's formal structures and processes have

been largely determined by UFCW International and reflect the outlook of the international body.

### The Leadership Team

The current leadership team consists of President Doug O'Halloran, Secretary-Treasurer Theresa McLaren, and Executive Director of Labour Relations Tom Hesse. While there are other long-serving staff members and activists within the local, close observation of the union shows this trio as constituting the central leadership.

O'Halloran first became president in 1989, when the previous president resigned in mid-term. As O'Halloran admitted, he was virtually hand-picked by the national director:

So the Canadian director asks me to go to Toronto. I go and he says to me, I'll recommend to the Executive Board that you become president. I was like, well I don't want to become president, I am too young. He says, it is like this, the ship only comes in past the break-water once, and if you don't take it now you will probably never be president. So, I basically said no and he said no problem but I think you can do it. As long as you don't steal or lie to membership, I will get you out of everything else. So I finally agreed, became president in '89 and have been president ever since.

At the time, O'Halloran was an international representative working for UFCW Canada. It was common practice in UFCW Canada to elevate staff to positions of elected leadership. One ex-UFCW staffer who is very familiar with the internal operations of UFCW Canada in the 1980s said that locals usually had little say over who became their president. The attitude was that "we were in charge—the national and international office" (KO, 33).

As an international representative, O'Halloran was deeply embedded in UFCW Canada's culture, which has been described as an "old boys' club" by labour movement activists. "Back in those days . . . United Food and Commercial Workers, it was a man's man arena. Drinking at lunch time? Yeah. Almost mandatory. And not just having a beer at lunch, you would have three or four. . . . It was really critical if you wanted to succeed with the guys" (KO, 33). In one famous incident, reported by Kim Moody (1988, 203–4) in his treatise on the decline of US business unionism, O'Halloran participated in a violent raid of a recalcitrant local. As one

observer described it, "The Vancouver Safeway local rejected a concession agreement the union wanted them to take and were basically talking about breaking away. The international put them under trusteeship, broke down their office doors, terrorized the secretaries, seized all the books and assets, and kicked the existing executive out of office" (KO, 13). O'Halloran subsequently ran the trustee union for three years, immediately prior to being appointed president of Local 401. This connection indicates that at the time of his appointment, he was an integral part of its closed circle and its heavy-handed practices.

O'Halloran quickly took advantage of the centralized structure of the local, taking firm control. In the almost thirty years he has been president, UFCW Local 401 has become almost universally regarded in the Alberta labour movement as "Doug's local," so ubiquitous is the awareness that every important decision in the local is made by O'Halloran.

In many respects, O'Halloran's tenure as president has conformed to traditional UFCW expectations, but he has, at times, used his authority to chart a new path for the local. While continuing the UFCW practice of top-down leadership, he has added a populist and more militant approach, in both rhetoric and action. A recurring story in O'Halloran's narrative is his rejection of the traditional title given to local leadership. "That was the first thing I changed when I became president," he said. "My business cards said Chief Executive Officer. And I said why is that on there? [I was told] because that is what the presidents in Canada are. They are president and chief executive officer. I says, fuck that, get me new cards." That a twenty-five-year-old story of largely symbolic importance remains a regular feature in O'Halloran's repertoire speaks to the value he places on appearing down-to-earth and on the side of the members.

Some of O'Halloran's deviations from the traditional norm were more substantial. For example, he ended the local's practice of negotiating voluntary recognitions. He described how, early in his presidency, he cancelled a voluntary recognition negotiated just before his appointment:

When I first became president in '89, 401 had negotiated a contract here with Superstore for a warehouse. At that time, Safeway had a Cadillac warehouse plan, which they still do. I find out we have got this deal we are going to vote [on], and it was a substandard contract. So I go to Gibb [the outgoing president] and say, you know,

you gotta get me out of this deal because I am not going to agree to it. He says, you know, the people are already signed up and have UFCW cards and stuff. I said to him, I know you are the president but I can't agree to that deal. So he phones up the company and the company says, sure, no problem. They go and tear up our cards, invite the Teamsters in the next day, they sign the cards. And that warehouse today is a million square feet, out by the airport, still a shitty deal, so you always wonder, you know, should you have these high of principles or shouldn't you?

In another instance, O'Halloran bucked UFCW Canada in his refusal to accept a nationally negotiated voluntary recognition. In 2007, Loblaws' (Superstore) discount arm, No Frills, expanded to western Canada. UFCW Canada negotiated a voluntary recognition and initial agreement with the company that provided lower wages than other Loblaws and Superstore locations. Local 401 was the only local in the country to refuse the arrangement.

The company went to our national union and said, look, we are prepared to give you a contract but this is what it has to be. So we are the only province that didn't take those workers because the contract was the shits. So I said to UFCW National, you know we are not interested. . . . It would have gotten us three thousand more members, which would really help financially, but I made the decision in good conscience. We could not . . . put our Superstore members or our Safeway members under a deal where another company has six dollars an hour labour advantage. And so we, um, we walked away from it. Subsequently, they are nonunion today. (O'Halloran)

O'Halloran has been re-elected seven times by the membership, facing an opponent for the position only twice. In both cases, he won fairly easily.

Theresa McLaren was appointed secretary-treasurer in 2002, after the retirement of her long-time predecessor and based upon a recommendation by O'Halloran. McLaren had been a staff representative for the local since 1994 and a member since 1978. She, too, has embraced the centralized power dynamics within the local and has kept a firm eye on financial matters and internal staff relations. She has run, unopposed, for re-election four times. There have only been two secretary-treasurers during O'Halloran's tenure.

The third member of the leadership team is Tom Hesse. While he is a hired staff member rather than an elected official, the role he plays in the union identifies him as part of leadership. Multiple interviewees identified Hesse as a key leadership figure. As one staff member put it,

It is [because of] the leadership—and a lot of it goes to Doug, a lot of it goes to Tom, and a lot of it goes to Theresa—that we are able to make it work in taking on these fights and these disputes while still being able to manage the membership of the union. I have seen the three of them, who are truly our leadership, take on those roles, take on those challenges, and make it possible. (staff, 24)

Unlike other staff members, Hesse is not assigned bargaining units or particular functions. He describes himself as a troubleshooter:

I have been director of organizing, director of advocacy, I did arbitrations. I am now a project manager. I lead major negotiations and organizing drives. I manage big projects. I am a troubleshooter and, well, my job is what I would call vertically integrated collective bargaining. I will write the communications, meet with the members, I'll do the proposal meetings, I'll sit at the bargaining table, I'll design the ad campaign, I will speak with the media. It will be this ball of representation.

Hesse was a representative for Local 401 in the 1980s before becoming an international representative. He returned to the local in his current position, executive director of labour relations, in 2001. In this role, he is positioned to establish the strategic direction of the local and manage all significant issues and campaigns.

As a staff member, Hesse is not directly accountable to the membership, but he often fills high-profile leadership roles within the local, such as leading bargaining, selling tentative agreements, and acting as a media spokesperson. His eloquent, more intellectual approach contrasts with O'Halloran's down-to-earth style. Hesse is a somewhat divisive figure among Local 401 members: some think of him positively as the "brains" behind the local, while others feel that he oversteps his authority.

The three leaders are widely seen by the members as the key decision-makers. In particular, Doug is perceived as having firm control of the local. "Doug runs it," said one member. "I think that is pretty much end of story. Doug runs it. I believe he has great foresight and

understanding with how to be almost as ruthless as companies" (member, 16). Many described the dynamic bluntly: "It is Doug's local" (staff, 9). The current leaders rose to their positions through nondemocratic means—all three of them from staff positions, either in the local or nationally. O'Halloran and Hesse had no significant links to the local at the time of their original appointment; O'Halloran and McLaren gained democratic legitimacy only after serving in their positions for a period of time and through the use of significant incumbent advantages.

### The Leadership Style

As can be gleaned from the profile of the individuals involved, the leadership style within Local 401 is heavily influenced by the personalities of the three leaders, especially that of the president. The mixture of top-down authority and down-to-earth populism makes for a complex, somewhat paradoxical form of leadership.

The type of leadership displayed in Local 401 is not uncommon. The so-called strong leader is the norm in the labour movement, reflecting traditional male dominance over union life (Frager 1983). Nor is the authoritative leader only a feature of business unionism. The accounts of, for example, Buzz Hargrove (1998), of the Canadian Auto Workers, or even Jean-Claude Parrot (2005), of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, suggest that the "top dog" leader approach is widespread across different types of unions. However, the president plays such a central role in Local 401 that his leadership practice is an important point of inquiry. President Doug O'Halloran is without doubt the dominant figure in the local, supported by McLaren and Hesse.

O'Halloran executes his position with a combination of stern authority, rugged populism, and a focus on members' needs—as he defines them. Members, staff, and outsiders commented on his firm hand on all aspects of the local. Referring to a particular arbitration case, an observer noted, "Doug pretty much dominated that. . . . Let's be clear. I am not going to pussyfoot. . . . Doug dominates any situation he is involved in" (KO, 20). A member of the local confirmed that perception: "I think Doug very much wants to be in charge, and he does need to be. . . . I know the executive feels bullied sometimes. The only time I ever really saw them challenge him was when he wanted Chris [his son] to take over" (member, 4). Staff

members also clearly saw him in the same way: “Most of the time he can be a consensus leader; some of the time he can be a dictatorial leader,” said one staffer (staff, 27), and another commented, “Someone comes to us and Doug says, alright we’re taking this on. Okay, that decision has been made” (staff, 24).

There is also, however, a strong perception that Doug is open, accessible, and puts the interests of his members first, as the following comments show:

I think Doug has always been a members’ president. (staff, 9)

Very people oriented. Very workers oriented. He wants the best for the workers. He doesn’t like seeing the company take advantage of the workers. He’s that kind of leader. He is also very friendly, understanding. (member, 7)

Doug will literally put himself in front of a bus . . . [or] between the bus and his member. (staff, 2)

Doug has been very clear . . . [that] it is always about the membership. So when the national office says, you guys need to do this, and we know for a fact our membership doesn’t want that, we’re not going to betray our membership. (member, 6)

Members and staffers also sense a common touch in his approach:

He is very down to earth and he never—he treats us all on an equal level. It doesn’t matter what your job description is, as a member, there is no levels. I mean somebody—[there] may be a plant manager and there may be someone who is a casual maintenance worker, and he’ll talk to both at the same level and . . . give you the same consideration. (member, 36)

Doug’s around, my members know who he is. . . . He goes to Calgary—he can’t go into a Safeway store, he can’t go into a Coop, they know him. He goes into Superstore, they surround him. They know him. (staff, 22)

Nobody has ever walked a picket line and not had him there. And that’s where I think his strength in leadership and the loyalty that comes from the membership comes from. There have been a lot of picket lines in a lot of places where, when push came to shove, nobody else is at the front of that line. (staff, 24)

He is our president but he doesn't act like one of those big people.  
... He is just like ordinary person. (member, 17)

These reports are supported by my own direct observation. At a stewards' conference, Doug played up his connection to the members, contrasting himself with the employer and reminding the attendees, "I am no better than you." He made himself available and accessible, appearing to have an easy, friendly manner when interacting with members.

O'Halloran's leadership style is somewhat paradoxical. In one corner is the controlling, domineering authoritarian: "He comes across as a bully" (member, 4). In the other is a caring, down-to-earth fighter: "He'll give anyone the shirt off his back. . . That is just the man I have always experienced him as. I have never experienced anything ungenune with Doug" (member, 16). Some interviewees described these two sides in the same breath:

I've seen Doug be so analytical in a professional way and I have seen him in situations where he has spoken to people in such a compassionate way. And then I have seen him do things where he should be charged, in terms of harassment, bullying, or you know what I mean. (KO, 20)

Doug is a big bully; Doug is a big pussycat. (KO, 38)

So he gets the reputation as being an "it's my way or the highway" kind of guy. And that is who he is. He believes what he is doing is right. I think he could be convinced if something he was doing was wrong, but you would have to prove it to him. But it is very difficult. (staff, 9)

There is a certain amount of intimidation around Doug because he is such a formidable character. So there are people who are afraid to talk to him even though they shouldn't be, because he's not scary. (member, 3)

For his part, O'Halloran engages in the paradox himself. At one point, he downplayed the degree of control he wields: "The thing about Doug being top-down I think is a misconception, because they see me out on the front line and stuff. But if they came and talked to our staff and talked to our members, they would realize it is just part of the group." However,



he also admits to playing a heavy hand when needed. When asked about his leadership style, O'Halloran replied:

You know, wacko. I don't think I am a good administrator. I don't think I run the organization well as a business, but . . . the deal I have with the staff is, Let's reach conclusions through compromise and if we can't reach a conclusion, then I will make the decision. Nine times out of ten we arrive at things by consensus, and the one time we don't, I am like a fucking bulldozer. . . . I always make it worse than it should be, so that next time, "Oh fuck, why do we want that lunatic telling us what to do? Let's come to a consensus."

O'Halloran emphasizes his willingness to listen, to debate, and to come to decisions collectively, but the onus is on others to move Doug—not an easy thing—rather than the other way around. "He will listen, if you push hard enough," said one local member. "So he is very single minded. Put it that way. He has his vision and this is how it is going to happen until he has enough opposition and then maybe he'll veer, maybe he won't. But he is willing to listen" (member, 4).

It should be noted that O'Halloran's somewhat stark approach to leadership is not uncommon in the labour movement. Unions in Canada often produce "heroic" leaders, which is a very male approach to leadership (Briskin 2011, 514–17). Unions' rigid structures and cultures of confrontation lead to "strong man" approaches to leadership (Kaminski and Yakura 2008, 461–63), reinforced by men's historical dominance over union life (Frager 1983). This form of leadership, emphasizing outcome over process, tends to restrict member participation and internal democracy (Foley 2009, 3–7). So-called heroic leaders are often able to create an atmosphere of devotion among the membership through their charismatic style.

O'Halloran's traits only partially explain the nature of Local 401's leadership, which adheres to a particular notion of what leaders are expected to do for their locals. This was articulated most clearly by Hesse:

I would say, firstly, I think you need leadership. You need someone to make strong, compelling leadership decisions. To practice labour relations now, you can't bring nine thousand members into a meeting every day to make decisions. Corporations turn on a dime. Their leadership is monolithic, highly centralized. In order to be effective,

you have to make quick decisions sometimes. . . . I don't think it means you are top down. I think that it means you are doing what you need to do to represent your members and that is what leadership is about. So when you have more aggressive capital, they are coming at you every single second, they are able to make decisions that turn on a dime. It is rapidly evolving circumstances, thousands of workers involved. . . . You have to make a decision, you have to decide what is right, how to be true to the members. I think contemporary labour relations creates a higher responsibility on leaders to think hard all the time about whether they are doing the right thing or not, because I don't think you have the luxury of all these daily checks and balances.

These comments are illuminating for a number of reasons. First, Hesse articulates a very specific concept of leadership, one that incorporates a strong figure who works in the best interests of, but not necessarily under the direction of, the membership. Second, this type of leadership is necessitated by external forces—capital and the nature of modern labour relations. Third, democracy is framed as an idealized process that is not tenable today. Things are simply moving too fast. Fourth, to not act decisively is a failure of leadership and a failure to the members.

This notion of leadership is bolstered by the leaders' view of their membership. The Local 401 leaders argue that most of their members do not have the time or desire to become actively engaged with the local. Once again, Hesse stated it the most directly:

When you have part-time workers, you may end up with a structure that—in order to give them meaningful representation, you are going to have to make some decisions that they neither have the time nor the interest in making themselves. A part-time worker often will think about looking at another job rather than attend ten union meetings. If I walked up to the average part-time worker and said, "You have to commit to ten union meetings over the next ten Tuesday nights, okay? And we are going to talk and have dialogue and you are going to tell me your issues and we are going to bargain what you need, I need that kind of interaction with you. Or you can just trust me to try and bargain as best as I can the following benefits, including part time," they will just hand it over to you. . . . Many of our members would happily surrender that bottom-up approach if we deliver the right product. . . . People still view it

themselves as stop-gap employment, some of them. They don't aspire to retire at Superstore or at Safeway. So if they don't have a long-term interest in their employment, how do they get a long-term interest in the union, right?

The perceived lack of interest in union involvement also arises from the demographic composition of the membership. "These are all groups of people who have, historically in the workforce, been underrepresented and been marginalized and not been given their due," noted one staffer. "I mean young workers make crap wages. New Canadians tend to end up in very menial, low-paid jobs. They're scared to speak up" (staff, 2).

### **Informal Processes**

Structure and leadership style interact to create informal practices within unions. For example, while bylaws might stipulate how often general membership meetings occur and which core items are on the agenda, how those meetings function is largely a consequence of structure interacting with other internal dynamics. The variance between formal structures and informal process is particularly noteworthy in Local 401. The internal life of the local tends toward both relaxed informality and rigid adherence to hierarchy, as is seen through a variety of aspects of the local, from meetings and other member events, to the role of staff, to the representation structure of stewards.

The core of any union's internal democracy is the general membership meeting. At such meetings, members have direct access to the local's leadership and can weigh in on relevant issues and vote on key decisions. In addition, the leadership provides reports to the membership on various aspects of the union's business. Yet, in the case of most unions in Canada, these meetings are sparsely attended and fail to act as a significant forum for accountability (Camfield 2011, 45-47), and this is true for UFCW Local 401. But even if they are not well-attended, they still serve as moments of direct engagement between members and leadership and provide a glimpse into the internal workings of the union.

The bylaws stipulate that general membership meetings occur quarterly and are to be chaired by the president. In practice, however, Local 401's meetings diverge significantly from these requirements. The local holds multiple general meetings in twelve different cities around the

province, as well as in each of the six remote work camps north of Fort McMurray, where UFCW represents kitchen, front desk, and housekeeping staff (all of whom live onsite). Most locations hold meetings every second month, but some do so more sporadically. A calendar published in the local's magazine listed thirty-four separate general membership meetings over a four-month period (UFCW Local 401 2014, 38–39).

With so many meetings, the local has developed a practice of delegating the task of chairing them. It is more common to see the secretary-treasurer or some other staff representative, rather than the president, chairing the meetings. Attendance is predictably quite sparse and the business portion of the meeting surprisingly short—always under an hour in length. However, members tend to linger around afterward, often for longer than the meeting itself, to chat in small groups or ask questions of the staff and leadership. The meetings are run in a formulaic, routinized, manner that discourages active debate. Reports are rarely followed by questions from the floor. In contrast, the informal visiting after the meeting is relaxed, casual, and familiar. Members actively engage with leadership, posing questions and raising issues.

The contrast between formal and informal aspects of the general membership meetings is striking. A meeting I attended in Edmonton on 28 January 2014 (one of seven I observed) is illustrative of how GMs are handled within the local. The proceedings adhered strictly to the agenda, and reports were often quite detailed—and yet the overall tone of the meeting was quite casual, even lackadaisical, as if the business at hand was of relatively little interest or importance. There was very little discussion or debate and both the chair and the members were anxious wrap it up as quickly as possible. As a result, the meeting felt like a formality, something to be gotten out of the way rather than an occasion for the exercise of democracy and proof of accountability. The significance of this odd sense of bifurcation lies not in the lack of active engagement at the meeting itself but in how these meetings have evolved to serve a function different from the one for which they were designed. The informal dynamics are more important to the ongoing functioning of the local than is the formal business, which is quickly dispensed with. In short, the general meetings are not the location of either decision making or processes of accountability.

Other member events have a similar feel. In member conferences, meetings at union offices, and committee meetings, it seems that the

“real” business is being done elsewhere, with the event serving as a formality. Yet informal interactions at breaks, in the hallway, and following adjournment are relaxed and open, with members speaking freely both to one another and to staff and union leaders. While Local 401, with its halfhearted member engagement in formal proceedings, is hardly an ideal example of democracy in action, its informal interactions are marked by a certain vitality.

Staff fill a central role in the day-to-day operation of the union. Although the local has an extensive network of shop stewards, most of whom are appointed by the president, the steward role has traditionally been a limited one. For most bargaining units, staff, rather than stewards, file and process grievances; the steward’s function is reduced to calling the staff rep when a problem arises. Staffers lead bargaining, with selected rank-and-file appointees on the bargaining committee. Effective union representation of members relies heavily on the skills of the specific staff member assigned to a bargaining unit.

Not surprisingly, centralized authority extends to the staff’s relationship with the leadership. Staff members report having a direct, personal, intense relationship with O’Halloran. “He can be a tough boss, he can,” said one staffer. “As bosses go, he can be the nicest guy in the world, and he can be your worst enemy” (staff, 27). Another commented on the high expectations that O’Halloran places on the staff: “Like anyone who is full-time staff in the union, we are basically on call twenty-four hours a day. . . . Our reps are overworked, they are beyond capacity, and the more we grow, the worse it’s going to get” (staff, 9).

Recruitment of staff members has also followed a centralized, informal process, creating an internal dynamic that affects both the hiring of staff and the ambitions of activists. “Remember who we hire as reps,” noted a staffer. “We don’t hire outside, we hire from within” (staff, 2). Following the 1997 Safeway strike, the local developed a formalized system of “relief reps”—rank-and-file members who were selected (upon recommendation of staff) to fill in for permanent staff on leave. This decision was one of the first reforms made following the failed strike. The relief rep performs most or all of the duties of the staff member, depending on the length of the leave. The system is perceived as “a training ground” for future staff (member, 4). As relief reps demonstrate their ability, they are given longer and more complicated assignments, from several months to more than

two years. The process is intentional and its evaluation function explicit. "Some relief reps will be great relief reps, but you know they won't make the full-time thing. You try them out just to see," said McLaren. She went on to describe a particular rep who didn't pass the test: "He is a very smart guy but he has some serious attitude issues, right? I mean if you are arguing . . . with me, and not getting along with the members, you are not lasting very long. We are not going to use them. But you didn't know that until you tried him." Significantly, what is assessed is not only the rep's ability to perform the duties but also how well he or she fits into the local's culture.

The informal processes found in Local 401 serve to strengthen the centralized control of the leadership by minimizing formal avenues for dissent and replacing them with informal outlets. However, one should not underestimate the ability of informal openness to produce its own form of accountability. The internal life of Local 401 is one of paradox and contradiction.

### A Local Not Built to Fight

At the time of the 1997 Safeway strike, the top-down leadership, the lack of rank-and-file activism, and the anemic formal processes for communication and accountability all contributed to ineffectiveness in waging a province-wide strike. Local 401 did not have the capacity for battle at that time, and the results showed. The local had not built sufficient trust within its membership to weather the difficulties and sustain the fight, and the leadership had insufficient zeal to stay the course as things got challenging. In short, the structures and internal dynamics within the local were not built to fight.

Notably, most of the dynamics described above persist in the local today. The local has undergone very little structural reform, and the same leadership team presides over it. Yet within that structure, the local has shifted ground and found a way to represent its members more effectively and to reach out to new members—often to those who are hard to organize.

The shift happened intentionally and over a long period of time. Following the 1997 failure, the local began to alter its approach while retaining the autocratic structures under which it had long operated.

After implementing the relief rep system, more reforms followed, one at a time, slowly shifting how Local 401 conducted business and shaping the union's future. The shift can be seen in the changes to how the union approached labour disputes in the years following Safeway.

#### THE 2002 SHAW CONFERENCE CENTRE STRIKE

Five years after the Safeway strike, UFCW Local 401 took three hundred staff at the Shaw Conference Centre in Edmonton on strike. Three aspects of the strike make it worth noting. First, it was a first-contract strike—something Local 401 had never before undertaken. Second, the Shaw workers looked very different from those at Safeway. Most were immigrant women and young workers employed in food catering, a rarely unionized industry. Organizing a conference centre was not unusual for a UFCW local, but Local 401 had little history in low-unionized sectors. Third, as the strike continued, subtle changes became evident both in how the local ran the strike and in its resolve to earn a victory.

The Shaw Conference Centre, owned by the City of Edmonton and operated by its economic development arm, had been resistant to unionization. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) had tried twice, and failed, to organize the workers. When interested workers approached CUPE for a third time, the union said no and turned to Local 401. As O'Halloran recalled, "CUPE came to us and said look, these people really need to be unionized, but we can't take the fight on; it is not a fight we can win. So I say, okay. I send our organizers in, sign up the people, and get into the battle that subsequently led to a seven-month strike." Months of negotiations failed to come close to an agreement, with the employer refusing to accept even basic union provisions such as Rand formula automatic dues deduction and seniority recognition (O'Donnell 2002a).

The workers walked out on 2 May 2002. Reported numbers vary, but a majority of the three hundred workers at the centre chose to cross the picket line and continue working. Local 401 officials report that they had about forty active picketers and an equal number who opted to neither work nor picket. On many days, more Local 401 staff were walking the picket line than strikers. Under such conditions, many expected the strike to fail and Local 401 to walk away, especially with so few members at stake.

Instead, as the strike lengthened, the union became more determined to win and ramped up its efforts. Many of its actions marked a departure from the approach used in the Safeway strike a few years before. Most notable was the union's decision to increase strike pay. During the Safeway strike, the union had paid picketers \$100 plus \$15 per dependent per week (Kent 1997a), which is average for strike pay in Canada (Alarie and Sudak 2006, 440). The local's experience of the weakening of resolve during the two-and-a-half-month Safeway strike caused O'Halloran to change the approach to picket pay. For Shaw and every strike since, strikers have been provided with pay close to a living wage. "Back in the old days you got \$100 or maybe \$200," said O'Halloran. "You cannot ask anyone to go on strike now for that kind of money. You have to give them near what they're making in order to go out. Our strike pay now is \$8 an hour for the first two weeks, and then it increases to \$10 an hour after that" (ALHI interview, 2005). The union tops up the hourly rate with \$25 per week for each dependent, and strikers can claim up to twelve hours a day, six days a week (Poole 2005a). An active picketer can earn as much as \$600 to \$700 a week, which can be more than a part-timer's regular wage. At Shaw, while the number of picketers was small, the increased picket pay reduced financial pressures, allowing more of them to remain on the picket line and preventing the strike from breaking down.

The Shaw strike also saw the nascent attempts by the local to build trust with immigrant workers, who are often skeptical of unionization. Shaw Centre had a somewhat divided workforce, with students and other young workers dominating the banquet staff while older immigrant women staffed the housekeeping units. Union organizers concentrated on housekeeping staff, recognizing that they were a more stable workforce with much lower turnover than banquet units. This emphasis forced organizers to listen to the predominantly Southeast Asian women and understand how they organized and advocated for themselves.

The union also expanded its strike repertoire. During the strike, the organizers actively turned their attention to pressuring Edmonton City Council, which oversaw the economic development unit, a tactic the local had not previously employed. They organized rallies outside City Hall and letter-writing campaigns, and they openly applauded councillors who spoke out in support of the strikers (Ward 2002) and chided those



who remained silent. This tactic included a public shouting match with the mayor (O'Donnell 2002b).

In both Safeway and Shaw, the union took out ads, but during the Shaw strike, the ads had a more assertive tone. In the earlier strike, the ads had asked consumers to boycott the stores, but during Shaw, the ads drew attention to working conditions and humanized the strikers by highlighting their work and their aspirations. The Shaw ads used striking workers, rather than actors, as models, making the workers the face of the campaign.

Because the site of the strike was a conference centre, picket lines were regularly obstructing members of the public attending events such as conventions, graduations, and charity dinners. The union, in a somewhat uneven strategy, selected targets for picketing. They removed picket lines for graduations but kept them up for other events, creating some confusion and providing the employer with the opportunity to claim that the centre was operating as usual (Chambers and Thorne 2002).

During the seven-month strike, the union withstood two decertification applications and a hostile attempt by Civic Service Union 52, the union representing other City of Edmonton inside workers, to raid the members in a bid to end the strike. The turning point of the strike was Grey Cup week. Edmonton was the host for that year's Canadian Football League championship game, and many high-profile events were being held at the Shaw Centre. The union vowed to picket all events except the game itself, which would occur at the city-owned Commonwealth Stadium a few kilometres away. Local 401 and the Alberta Federation of Labour jointly planned a large rally to block the entrance to the centre during the Grey Cup Gala, an important dinner event two days before the game. The pressure led to a week of tense negotiations and a settlement an hour before the slated rally began. Although it did agree to a two-year wage freeze, the union achieved most of its bargaining goals, including Rand formula automatic dues deduction, union rights to visit workers on site, seniority provisions, and benefits for part-time workers (O'Donnell 2002c). The strike officially ended on 25 November, one day after the Grey Cup game.

In many respects, the Shaw Conference Centre dispute was an ordinary, if somewhat protracted, strike. Many of the tactics employed by Local

401, including targeting third parties, are standard for labour in Canada. All unions must navigate a variety of tribulations when running a strike. However, the strike differed from the Safeway strike in more than its outcome. Local 401 was organizing workers in an industry it had never attempted to work with before. It adopted slightly different strategies than it had used before. It had learned a few lessons from the Safeway strike.

At the time, observers might have interpreted Shaw as just another strike with a fortunate outcome. Seen in the context of what was to come, however, the Shaw Conference Centre action might be best seen as a transitional moment for Local 401. On 26 November 2002, the local's organizers could savour their victory after a hard fight, but they would have little time to rest: the next, much larger battle was coming very soon. And it would occur in the most unlikely of circumstances.

## 2 | Victory at Lakeside

Brooks, Alberta, may be one of the most unlikely sites for a major union organizing victory. This small city of thirteen thousand in the heart of southern Alberta is a typical prairie town in its reliance on two industries—agriculture and oil and gas. It is also home to one of the largest beef-processing plants in Canada, Lakeside Packers (now called JBS Food Canada), which sits next to the Trans-Canada Highway just west of town. In the mid-2000s, Lakeside was a lynchpin of the local economy in Brooks, employing more than two thousand workers. It was also nonunion.

This chapter tells the story of the fight to organize workers at Lakeside Packers. The organizing drive and subsequent successful first-contract strike constitute an important victory in recent labour history. The strike was significant both for its size—it was the largest private sector certification in Alberta in decades—and for the national profile it gained through the violence and extreme tension it sparked. It is most significant, however, because of who participated in the strike. At the time of the strike, Lakeside was a racially divided workplace. Half of its workers were immigrants from Africa and Southeast Asia, and the other half were Canadian-born. But it was the immigrant workers at Local 401 who were the catalysts and anchors for the certification and the strike, a group of workers that unions often struggle to organize and mobilize (Hunt and Rayside 2000). Although unions have attempted to adapt to a more diverse workforce, one with changed and changing demographics, they have also been reluctant to alter the structures and processes that alienate newcomers, many of whom are often unfamiliar with North American forms of unionism. The Lakeside Packers strike thus represents not only

a significant victory for unions and immigrant workers but also a critical moment in the local's transformation.

Although O'Halloran had begun his working career in a Lethbridge meat-packing plant, Local 401 had little experience with meat-packing and seemed an unlikely protagonist in the Lakeside story. The fact that the local organized the plant may be a historical accident. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, UFCW Canada had embarked on a strategy of merging locals to create large, multiunit, composite locals covering broad sectors. A political decision was made to amalgamate all Alberta locals into two province-wide locals. The dominant membership of Local 401 was to be workers in grocery and related industries, while Local 1118 was to represent predominantly meat-processing workers. However, one local that merged into 401, Local 740-P, had at one time represented workers at Lakeside. That anomaly gave Local 401 jurisdiction over the plant, while Local 1118 represented all the other unionized meat-processing plants in the province.

Local 401's previous attempts to organize Lakeside, using its traditional organizing methods, had met with failure. Changed circumstances in 2004 and 2005 created an opportunity for the local, but capitalizing on that opening would require different strategies, the most important of which involved embracing the leadership of immigrant workers at the plant. The ensuing drive and strike proved to be one of the largest and most significant battles that Local 401 had ever fought. It also charted a new course for the local that would become clear in the years to follow.

#### HISTORY OF LAKESIDE PACKERS

Lakeside opened in Brooks in 1966 as a feedlot—a holding area where cattle are fattened up before slaughter. The locally owned company constructed the packing plant across the Trans-Canada Highway from the original feedlot in the early 1970s to support its growing operation (Broadway 2007, 567). Originally, the plant only partially processed carcasses to supply other downstream companies. It was unionized in 1976 by the Canadian Food and Allied Workers, which later merged to become United Food and Commercial Workers. In the context of the meat-packing industry of the time, Lakeside was a small player compared to the large urban plants.

## Changes in the Industry

In the 1980s, the meat-packing industry across the continent underwent a significant shift in an effort to cut labour costs. In what some have called the IBP revolution (Stull and Broadway 2013, 19)—after Iowa Beef Packers, the corporation that catalyzed the change—meat-packing companies relocated plants and reorganized the labour process. The industry moved to rural centres close to livestock producers and began to use an assembly-line approach to the processing of carcasses. These changes lowered costs significantly by reducing or eliminating many elements in the process, including transportation of live animals, and by deskilling the work (Stanley 1994). Work from highly unionized and competitive urban environments was transferred to areas where there was less competition for industrial workers and unionization was lower. Together, these shifts led to significant downward pressure on wages and working conditions in the industry.

The changes also created tensions between employers and unionized workers at the threatened urban plants. The 1980s witnessed a series of strikes and labour strife in those facilities—including in Edmonton, Calgary, Lethbridge, Brandon, Winnipeg, and Kitchener (Forrest 1989)—as employers demanded deep concessions and ultimately closed older plants. In the United States, unionization rates in the industry plummeted (Brueggemann and Brown 2003). In Canada, unions fared somewhat better, finding ways to organize many of the new superplants built in High River, Alberta, and elsewhere. However, unions could not withstand employers' cost pressures, and wages and working conditions deteriorated.

Although Lakeside was relatively well positioned given its rural location, it got swept up in the nation-wide meat-packing strike in 1984, and Lakeside workers struck the plant. In June, in an attempt to force the issue, the company hired replacement workers “at wages 30 percent below the union rate, a cut that ranged between \$3.00 and \$3.80 an hour” (Noel and Gardner 1990, 38). The move broke the union. Only a handful of workers maintained the picket line over the next three years. UFCW finally abandoned the strike in 1987, and Lakeside became officially nonunion.

The plant thrived through the next few years, in part owing to its wage advantage and the convenient supply of cattle. In the early 1990s, however,

economic changes made Lakeside's partial-processing model obsolete. Lacking sufficient capital to upgrade, Lakeside's owners sold the plant to IBP in 1994, who immediately expanded production and increased the number of workers. By 2005, more than two thousand workers were employed at the plant.

IBP and its successor, Tyson Foods, which purchased IBP in 2001 (Tyson Foods 2009), adopted a staunch antiunion approach, defeating repeated organizing attempts and even at one point displaying a large banner that read "Proudly Union-Free" on the plant's sign beside the highway. In defeating unionizing attempts, the company deployed a variety of tactics, including regularly reminding workers that the previous union had decertified. "They said, if you join this union, you're going to be back on strike," O'Halloran recalled. "If you join this union, you'll lose some benefits. This is a union that likes to strike. They abandoned you in 1984 and they'll abandon you again when the going gets tough" (ALHI interview, 2005).

UFCW Local 401 had been attempting to organize Lakeside for years. It had become an obsession of O'Halloran's since the local had gained jurisdiction over the plant. "Over the course of the years," he said, "I made a commitment that at some point in time—that plant would be unionized. We spent a lot of money trying to unionize it." The local first launched a drive at Lakeside in 1992, shortly after taking over Local 740-P, and it tried almost annually after that. It even bought a house in Brooks in 1995 to use as an office and devoted significant staff resources, over a number of years, to the project.

However, the campaigns were failures. A staff member remembers the futility of the repeated attempts:

In January of 1999 we came, we signed up people, we got a vote, we were slaughtered. In 2000 we came, we talked to people, we got a vote, we were slaughtered worse. 2001, we did the same thing, [except] we didn't take it to a vote. 2002, same thing. . . . In 2003 [another staff member] and I went back. We talked to a few employees and between the two of us, we said, Is there anything that is going to be different this year? Is anything going to change? Nothing is going to change. We are going to bust our brains. . . . We convinced Doug to give it a rest for a while. (staff, 27)

If the drive got to a vote, the results were rarely close. The company waged aggressive countercampaigns, using tactics that included threats and intimidation. During the 2000 effort, the Alberta Labour Relations Board took the unusual step of ordering a series of board-supervised, mandatory union recruitment meetings in the plant as a remedy for a series of employer breaches of the Labour Relations Code. The meetings were disrupted by shouts, taunts, and projectiles thrown at speakers by pro-employer workers (Duckworth, ALHI interview, 2007). The meetings did not change the result of the vote.

Also working against the union was the high rate of turnover at the plant. "You had to go out and get your percentage, 40 percent, to get to the board," a staffer recounted. "Well, we would get our 40 percent, and by the time the vote came, of the 40 percent, half of them weren't there anymore. So now you gotta go do it again, so we never had the numbers" (staff, 22).

Between 1992 and 2002, little had changed in Local 401's attempts to unionize Lakeside, and the prospects of a different result this time seemed unlikely. In 2003, the BSE crisis (mad cow disease) hit Canada, destabilizing the beef industry and making prospects even more remote. However, in 2004, the changing dynamics in the plant due to the new immigrant workers would have a sudden and unexpected impact.

### Recruitment of Immigrant Workers

Beginning in the late 1990s and accelerating in the early 2000s, Lakeside struggled to recruit enough locals to work at the plant. Troubles with recruitment, common in the industry at the time, were attributable to the deterioration of wages and working conditions over the previous twenty years (Stull and Broadway 2013, 19). Fewer local residents were prepared to work in packing plants when other options were available. Across North America, plants were changing their recruitment strategies to attract recent immigrants and refugees (Champlin and Hake 2006), with particular targets being workers from sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Southeast Asia (Broadway 2013, 47).

Lakeside expanded its recruitment zone, beginning with Atlantic Canada. However, soon these workers too, like the Albertans, were seeking better employment elsewhere, and Lakeside began actively recruiting recent newcomers to Canada. Reflecting industry trends, they targeted

workers from sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Southeast Asia, such as the Philippines. A disproportionate number of the new recruits had arrived in Canada as refugees, mainly from Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia. By 2004, half of the Lakeside workforce was comprised of immigrants (Broadway 2007, 569).

The influx of African and Asian immigrants altered the dynamics in the plant. First, a clear racial divide appeared, with tensions between groups. Immigrant workers were given the worst jobs, and there were accusations that they were paid less than Canadian-born workers for the same work. Conflict also arose between immigrant groups, as one staffer noted: "The Ethiopians, they don't like the Sudanese, or the North Sudanese don't like the South. . . . So they were very separate in that sense" (staff, 22).

Second, the immigrants, with reduced employment opportunity compared to locals, tended to stay longer, and many were more reliant on the employer than nonimmigrants were, often living in trailers on the plant site. "The immigrants had nowhere to go," a union staff member recalled. "They couldn't leave. They had them by the short and curlies" (staff, 22). The reduced turnover among this population increased the potential for union certification, but the union had few connections in those communities and many newcomers were suspicious of the organization. As a result, the shifting demographics did not initially benefit its organizing efforts.

#### ORGANIZING LAKESIDE

Still, Local 401 made no headway in organizing Lakeside. In 2003, when the union pressed pause on its annual efforts, it was with the intention to stay out of Lakeside for a couple of years and focus on other priorities. Some staffers even mused that O'Halloran had finally given up on the plant. But a year later, an incident at the plant shifted the union's fortunes and, sooner than expected, Local 401 returned to Brooks with renewed vigour.

#### Wildcat Protest and Organizing Drive

On 28 April 2004, a group of about two hundred Lakeside workers, mostly Sudanese, staged a wildcat (that is, unauthorized) protest in support of a



group of immigrant workers who had been fired by the employer. They gathered outside the plant gates and marched to the mayor's office to show their displeasure (Canadian Press 2004). The workers had been fired for coming to the defence of a Sudanese worker fired after an altercation with another worker. One of the protesters described how the situation escalated:

One black guy, Sudanese from Africa, has a problem with a white guy. This white guy sprayed 180 degree hot water on this guy's chest. They didn't fire the white guy who sprayed the hot water, they fired the black guy. So the following morning, we were telling our friends, today we're not going to work until the company find a solution to it, or they also fire the white guy. The news goes around and we all gather outside. . . . So the following day, the company call us. They named ten of our members to represent all those black guys, they want to discuss with them. We selected ten people. . . . They go in, discuss with management. The management told them . . . go back to your jobs or we'll fire you. Those guys said no. Then they fired those ten guys. (Anonymous, ALHI interview, 2005)

Additional workers got involved and Lakeside eventually fired sixty people. This second round of firings led to the wildcat walkout. Wildcat strikes are high-risk actions for workers, who face significant reprisal from the employer; this makes the willingness of these immigrant workers to stage such a walkout particularly noteworthy.

The firings were the spark, but the immigrant workers had a long list of grievances that fuelled their anger at the employer, including health and safety issues, employer bullying, and inconsistencies around wage rates and hours (Inkster 2007). There were also allegations of racism in the plant. As O'Halloran noted, "Most of the supervisors, most of the people in a position of authority—safety committees, quality control, individuals who make sure the product is being processed properly—were all white people. Very seldom did a person from an ethnic community get promoted into a higher position" (ALHI interview, 2005).

Following the protest, their concerns unresolved, the group approached UFCW Local 401. Union rep Archie Duckworth remembers that day: "The Sudanese community came and asked us to come back in and try to organize the plant" (ALHI interview, 2007). The union took a different approach this time. "Doug went to Brooks and had a meeting with the Sudanese

community,” said a staffer. “Doug said, if you think this time it is going to be different, it is going to have to be driven by the employees. And it was different from that point on” (staff, 27). Having learned from past mistakes, the union implemented a series of new strategies. In previous Lakeside campaigns, the union had sent down dozens of union staffers and activist releases from around the province to knock on doors and make cold calls in order to find Lakeside employees. In the 2004 drive, the union only assigned a couple of key organizers, whose job it was to build the campaign from the inside: “We had a big inside committee in 2004. We had people that were on the inside, they could tell us what was going on” (staff, 27). They learned how to build trust among the various ethnic communities. McLaren remembers the intense involvement of the lead organizer: “Archie would bring the groups together. If it was at the office, if they were having a gathering or meeting, he would be invited. He would go. If they had a wedding, he would go. . . . If it was a group of Yugoslavians, he would bring them in and they would have a feast. . . . He got involved in every single community.”

The union also cultivated the local leaders within each ethnic group and followed their advice about how to approach that particular community and build support. Staff members attribute the success of the drive to the role played by these organic leaders. “As much as I would like to give credit to our organizers, and they deserve a lot of credit, I think that [following the direction of community leaders] was the biggest thing that happened. . . . We were intelligent enough to figure out it was the only way it was going to happen” (staff, 22).

The union produced multilingual communications to reflect the twenty-six languages and dialects spoken at the plant. Inside committee members were trained to facilitate peer-to-peer organizing. Union staff worked to make the house in Brooks, which anchored the drive, a safe and supportive gathering space where members could come and socialize, talk about their experiences at work, and debrief organizing activities. Traditional methods were still used, but in concert with newer approaches. “We still had to go from door to door,” said Duckworth. “But this time it was a little different because we had a high population of the Sudanese. They helped us and were instrumental in helping us organize” (ALHI interview, 2007).

The employer did not take the drive lightly and fought back. “It was a campaign that was vicious within the plant,” Duckworth recalled. “They fired people. We had many labour charges at the board. It took us three months to organize” (ALHI interview, 2007). The employer told workers that they would have trouble with Immigration Canada if they voted for the union. They threatened to cancel benefits and planned raises (Hurman 2004). But by August, the union had more than 40 percent of employees signed up, and on 5 August, it filed for a certification vote. During the three weeks between the application and the vote, the employer’s efforts to thwart the campaign intensified. On 27 August, the vote was held. The union won by a slim margin of 48 votes, 905 to 857 (51% of votes cast). The result was challenged by the employer but was ultimately upheld. With a victory—albeit by a razor-thin margin—the union asked itself, “What do we do now? We had a certificate, but we still had an antiunion employer” (Duckworth, ALHI interview, 2005).

### Negotiations and Strike

Initial negotiations did not go well. It became clear that the employer’s strategy was to play out the clock until a decertification application could be filed. A couple years later, O’Halloran remembered it well:

We start negotiations in November, and the company will only agree to two sets of bargaining per month for two days. . . . We’re telling the company, look, we’re available any day you have. We’ll take whatever day you’ve got. They would only give us four days. So we went to the labour board and argued that the company was bargaining in bad faith, they weren’t giving us enough days to negotiate. What we believed was they were simply going to string us out to the open period of when they could be decertified. . . . The company cancels a couple of dates. We’re getting into the spring, and negotiations are going no place. . . . They wouldn’t agree to a union shop, they wouldn’t agree to shop steward language, they wouldn’t agree to union visitation. . . . So in March we filed another bargaining in bad faith charge. So we have a whole lot of charges. (ALHI interview, 2007)

As is often the case, the drawn-out negotiations were affecting worker morale: “A lot of our members were losing hope for the union. What is

the union still negotiating, what are they doing?" (Anonymous, ALHI interview, 2005).

During negotiations, the employer was also encouraging a decertification campaign:

They were trying to make little backroom deals with people, saying, okay if you get so many people to decert, we'll give you this. There was rumours going around that for every decert that certain people got, they were paying them \$10 a head. . . . Then they would sit in the cafeteria with these things and tell people, this is for the union, sign this. Actually it was to sign off on the union. But because they saw the word *union* and that's all they understood, they would sign them. They had no clue what they were signing. (Anonymous, ALHI interview, 2005)

In the spring, the union ramped up its communications strategy, placing ads in newspapers and sending a letter to the Alberta Beef Producers predicting that labour unrest at Lakeside would "undermine your award-winning 'I Love Alberta Beef' campaign" and destabilize an industry rocked by the BSE crisis (Waugh 2005). The union also developed and implemented an internal communication strategy for the membership. The material played up the diversity of the workers and provided strong strategic messaging. For example, the local launched a newsletter for members called *Many Faces . . . One Voice!* featuring a series of photos of diverse members on the masthead.

In June, the union felt it couldn't risk losing support by negotiating any longer and held a strike vote, garnering 70 percent support. On 20 July, the workers went out on strike. However, the same day, the provincial government intervened by appointing a one-person Disputes Inquiry Board (DIB), an action that, under the Alberta Labour Relations Code, prohibited strike action for two months. The union decided to comply with the order to cease strike action. O'Halloran described both the rationale for the decision to comply and the anger of members:

The fine for individuals is \$1,000 a day, and union officials \$10,000 a day. With having 2,400 people, it would've been millions of dollars, the fines over the course of a week. So we decided to listen and obey the law, and we're on a microphone trying to tell people, you have to go to work. People are screaming at us that we're a

useless union, that we backed down, and why should they support us? (ALHI interview, 2005)

The effect among the immigrants in the plant was particularly negative, and the union had to spend weeks winning back the lost trust.

In late September, the workers voted, with a margin of 90 percent, to accept the DIB's recommendation, even though it offered much less than the union was looking for. "It was a bare bones collective agreement," said Duckworth, "which was okay for us because we knew we weren't going to get anything better out of the employer" (ALHI interview, 2005). But the next day, Lakeside rejected the DIB's report, saying the "recommendations, covering such things as overtime, vacation pay and seniority, would result in unacceptable labour cost increases" (Myers 2005).

Despite a modified offer from the employer and the emergence of an antiunion splinter group (Concerned Lakeside Employees for Everyone's Rights), which filed a revocation application (Canadian Press 2005), the workers finally went on strike on 12 October, more than a year after achieving certification. The first few days of the strike were tense, violent, and dramatic.

On the first day, about eight hundred workers showed up on the picket line, with an equal number assembled across the highway to cross the line. The number of strikers was enhanced by Local 401's decision a few years earlier to provide significant strike pay. As in the Shaw strike, this reduced the pressure on these low-wage workers to cross the line because of financial constraints. Still, the racial divide between the two groups on each side of the highway was palpable, since most of the strikers were immigrants while most of the strikebreakers were not. A number of altercations occurred on the first day. Windows of buses trying to cross the line were smashed. By the end of the day, the Labour Relations Board had issued picketing restrictions (Poole and Myers 2005). The second day was marred by a few strikebreakers assaulting three picketers who were blocking their exit from the plant (Hutchinson and Poole 2005).

On 14 October, the third day of the strike, events turned bizarre. As mentioned earlier, plant managers, in an attempt to serve court papers to O'Halloran, chased his car through back roads near the plant. The chase ended in a three-car accident, with O'Halloran's vehicle crashing into the ditch. O'Halloran sustained permanent injuries that have left him reliant

on a motorized scooter. The Local 401 lead organizer, Archie Duckworth, described the events:

I was doing an interview with CBC at the time. . . . One of the company management came up and served me while I was doing the interview on TV. President O'Halloran took off, he didn't want to be served. He took the rest of the day off. He was driving around the back roads. Management had walkie talkies, you'd think they were the secret service or something. They were out looking for President O'Halloran all over. Eventually, he was sighted and all these people, including the [former] owner of the plant, including top management, were after him to serve him notice, and a car chase ensued. . . . They literally drove him off the road into a bad accident and Doug was seriously hurt, just so they could serve him a piece of paper. . . . Someone went up, and he was lying on the ground, and said, consider yourself served, and walked away. (ALHI interview, 2007)

Two plant managers, including the former owner of Lakeside, and O'Halloran were charged with dangerous driving and other violations. The case never went to court, since all charges were dropped following resolution of the strike.

The accident had a profound effect on the strikers and served to galvanize them. The first days of the strike left an indelible mark on the workers, one of whom described it in detail:

The first three days were probably the best and the worst. My first experience of actually being on strike. The first day, the bosses were being stopped. It was like, wow, this is cool. You're getting overwhelmed and stuff. Then the second day, when they came across the cornfields on the buses, you were like, that tells you how much they really care about their team members' safety, when they're willing [to] bounce them across the cornfield to bring them into the plant. . . . Next thing I hear, a bunch of supervisors gets off a bus and start beating picketers. . . . Then the next day comes, the buses are stopped, production don't go. Then that night, they were trying to give Doug papers. . . . They run him off the road. I don't know about you, but to me that's attempted murder. . . . [I thought,] will they stop at nothing to make sure this union is out? (Grandy, ALHI interview, 2005)

The twenty-four-day strike was punctuated by numerous incidents and tactical moves and countermoves by both the union and the employer. Federal meat inspectors briefly refused to cross the line, shuttering the plant. The employer built more than a dozen gravel roads across the fields surrounding the plant to get buses into the plant. The union responded by assigning picket teams to cover the back roads. Multiple charges were laid for picket line violence, including an assault on a female RCMP officer.

The dispute spilled beyond the picket line. The union engaged in an active communications battle, creating provocative ads and flyers. One flyer took aim at Alberta's centennial year celebrations with an ad asking "Is this an Alberta worth celebrating?" and profiling an African worker along with a description of his working conditions. The accompanying website, [albertashame2005.com](http://albertashame2005.com), attempted to prod the provincial government into intervening. Another ad linked the strike to the BSE crisis.

After three weeks, negotiations resumed for the first time during the strike. In those talks, Lakeside made a sudden shift in its position. Throughout the negotiations, the company had steadfastly refused to accept any language that would provide union security (union shop provisions, for example), a clear grievance process, or union access to the site. A change in tone was sparked by the arrival of members of Tyson's US senior management team. By 1 November, the two sides had a tentative agreement that offered a \$1.90 raise over four years. The deal offered workers less than the DIB recommendation but provided Rand formula mandatory dues check-off and other union rights (Poole 2005b). On 4 November, sixteen hundred workers voted on the agreement, with 56 percent voting to ratify. Striking workers returned to work on 7 November.

It was not considered a great deal from the union's perspective, but it granted security for the union. "We got a collective agreement," said Duckworth. "Not a good collective agreement. . . . Don't forget we weren't negotiating in a position of strength" (ALHI interview, 2005). O'Halloran admitted that the agreement was substandard: "I was hoping for a higher outcome, but it has been a long battle over many years. . . . The plant is unionized and we're very proud of that" (quoted in Fernandez 2005). In many respects, the ratification vote was more a vote about the presence of a union in the plant than the actual terms of the agreement, since

antiunion employees turned out to vote the deal down in order to undermine the union presence.

When workers returned to work, tensions were high, both between strikers and strikebreakers and between the union and the employer. Over time, the relationship became less acrimonious, a process that was aided by Tyson selling the plant to XL Foods in 2009 (who then sold it to JBS Food Canada in 2013). “The first two months after the strike, we had three hundred grievances a month,” recalled O’Halloran, adding that two years later, “we have twenty-six outstanding grievances, which is unbelievable” (ALHI interview, 2005). Today, the plant remains ethnically and racially diverse, with a growing proportion of temporary migrant workers in addition to immigrants. The union successfully negotiated a new agreement in 2009 and again in 2013.

#### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LAKESIDE STRIKE

The organizing of Lakeside Packers was the largest private sector certification in Alberta in more than twenty years. Two key variables shifted at Lakeside between the organizing failures of the 1990s and the bitter but successful strike of 2005. The first was the influx of African and Asian newcomers into the plant. Their arrival initiated a series of new dynamics that opened the door to unionization. Second, Local 401 altered its strategies in the 2004 organizing drive and the 2005 strike, learning from past mistakes and adopting some innovative organizing approaches. These two variables combined to create an unusual and significant labour victory.

The catalyst for the Lakeside organizing drive was the spontaneous wildcat protest by about two hundred immigrant workers. Their immediate concerns were over health and safety and unfair dismissals, but the root cause was a deep sense of injustice and indignity at their treatment by the employer. Many of those workers were already employed at Lakeside during previous organizing drives but did not take up the call of the union. What changed was the workers awakening to their powerlessness when they failed to have their grievances addressed by the employer. Lakeside’s heavy-handed response was a turning point. Workers interviewed for this study spoke about the sense of futility in trying to create change at Lakeside. Suddenly the union, for many of them an alien form of organization, became the only possible solution.



UFCW Local 401's actions at Lakeside in 2004 occurred among workers who have been difficult for unions to organize. African and Asian immigrants have little experience with North American unionism. This lack of familiarity, and possible distrust, makes newcomers harder to organize. Local union staffers described how much of their energy during the organizing drive was spent explaining what unions are and how they function (staff, 2). However, a lack of experience with unions is not the same as lacking experience in collective action and solidarity. Many of the workers were leaders in their communities before coming to Canada and had no trouble fighting for issues they cared about. They were not afraid of conflict or standing up for their rights. Many had arrived from war-torn countries where conflict was a daily reality. The workers understood solidarity; it simply manifested itself in different forms.

Some of that solidarity was cultural or national in nature. "Of course they back all of their fellow countrymen," noted one staffer. "From the perspective of the Sudanese, that is their thing. They stood behind their coworkers. They didn't like the way their coworkers were treated, were fired" (staff, 26). A sense of ethnic or cultural solidarity is natural and not uncommon among newcomers to a country or region. However, the particular social dynamics in Brooks added to the already strong unity among the immigrants. Michael Broadway's (2007) study of the social impacts of the influx of newcomers to Brooks found a high degree of social dislocation, social stratification, and marginalization among the immigrant population. The less-than-welcoming reception the newcomers received from the existing population contributed to the creation of strong bonds within newcomer community groups.

Those strong bonds became a powerful feature of activism when the immigrants' focus turned to workplace injustices. The pre-existing connections, including the presence of informal leaders within ethnic groups at the plant, translated into effective union organizing networks. The work became not about teaching the workers about the importance of solidarity but about the workers themselves connecting social solidarity with workplace solidarity.

Also contributing to the effectiveness of immigrant activism was the immigrants' lack of historical association with Lakeside. Many of the locals at the plant had lived in the region for many years, and the

old grudges and bitterness from the 1984 strike and failed organizing attempts lingered. The employer could exploit those memories in its effort to thwart unionization. Such tactics were less effective with the immigrant workers, since they had no personal experience of or association with the past. In this respect, their lack of familiarity with unionism served as an advantage.

Immigrant activism was not just the catalyst that led to the successful certification and strike; it was the backbone of the campaign. Not only did immigrant workers dominate the ranks of union activists, but their social solidarity fuelled their determination to win the labour struggle. They were able to transfer their loyalty for one another to the union, as long as the union was able to demonstrate that the loyalty was well placed. This speaks to the role of Local 401 in the strike. Had the local approached the situation in Brooks in the same manner as it had in other locations or in previous attempts at Lakeside, it is possible the wildcat protest and ensuing struggle would have sputtered. However, Local 401 opted to try new tactics that were appropriate to the unique situation in Lakeside at the time.

The campaign contained a number of traditional organizing approaches—paid organizers, one-on-one contact, leaflets explaining the benefits of the union, and so on. However, the organizers adapted these tools to fit the workers they were trying to woo. While they tried a number of strategies, a few stand out as being important to the success of the campaign. First, they did not duck the workplace's diversity. While their rhetoric spoke about being colour-blind, their actions demonstrated that they knew very well that they were talking to a heterogeneous audience and that, strategically, they needed the immigrant workers as a counterbalance to the long-standing locals. Particularly key here was their decision to respect the leaders of the various communities and to allow those leaders to choose the approach they felt was appropriate to their community. In short, union organizers chose to follow as much as to lead. Simultaneously, they fostered and developed leadership skills among the community leaders to facilitate peer-to-peer organizing within the union.

Second, multilingual communications was an important first step in building connection. In practical terms, it facilitated the delivery of the union's message. Symbolically, it demonstrated a commitment to respect

each ethnic group and recognize its value. A leaflet written in someone's first language is a foot in the door for a union organizer.

Third, the local extended its work beyond the workplace. Organizers attended social and community functions. They created a safe gathering space for activists and members to socialize, debrief, and connect. These types of broader social activities may seem superfluous to the task of organizing a workplace, but, whether consciously or not, Local 401 was engaged in an act of translating social solidarity to workplace solidarity. In the context of organizing, creating spaces that transcend and strengthen both forms of solidarity are very important.

Fourth, the members, and not the union, were the core of the drive and the face of the union to nonmembers. This dynamic emerged in part because of the leadership taken by the immigrant workers in the early stages of the campaign and in part because the union leadership facilitated that approach. One of the reasons why previous drives had failed was their use of dozens of nonresident organizers, which allowed the employer to accurately describe union organizers as outsiders imposing themselves on the Lakeside "family." That cannot be said when the organizer is also a coworker who stands three stations down. The use of inside committees and grassroots, peer-to-peer organizing is not new. Yet in the experience of both Lakeside and Local 401, this was innovative. It took on new forms because of how it was taken up by the immigrant activists and integrated into pre-existing forms of solidarity and collective action.

Finally, the role of the unusually high strike pay cannot be underestimated. Under normal conditions, the financial toll on picketers, especially those in low-income occupations, can be severe and can increase pressures to cross the line, abandon the strike for other employment, or vote against striking in the first place. By offering strike pay that allowed strikers to pay bills over a period of three or four weeks, the union successfully reduced one of the great risks to strikes within divided workplaces.

The Lakeside organizing drive and strike looked remarkably different than the 1997 Safeway strike. Some of the elements introduced during the Shaw action in 2002 were developed and implemented more assertively. New tactics were adopted for the first time. More importantly, Local 401 leaders and staff became more cognizant of both the challenges of and the need to address race and ethnicity. The Sudanese workers who approached

the local did so out of desperation. There were many moments, such as when the DIB was appointed, when the trust of immigrant workers was strained, yet union organizers found a way to maintain and strengthen the relationship. They did so by following the natural leaders found in the communities. Handing leadership over to the rank-and-file has not traditionally been a part of Local 401's repertoire, and it suggests a maturation in the leaders' understanding of the work required to build relationships with hard-to-organize workers.

The learnings from the strike appear to have taken root in the plant, at least to a certain degree. In the years since the strike, the union has, of course, worked hard to unify the bargaining unit and reduce divisions, especially those of race, and according to most reports, it has been partially successful. It has implemented some ongoing strategies that reflect the unique nature of the workplace and workforce. While it has maintained the traditional staff rep structure, with two full-time staff members servicing the plant (one of whom was a worker at the plant), the local union office in Brooks runs very differently from other union offices. It serves as a drop-in centre for workers from various communities, thus acting more as a community centre than a union hall. The office manager is a former Lakeside worker who speaks five languages, which the staff reps emphasize is crucial to the perception of the office as a safe place.

The union has attempted to become involved in the various ethnic communities in Brooks, making sure that it is seen as not just the workplace agent but as a community agent. It has also continued the practice of ensuring that community leaders are also union leaders. "Two-thirds of our immigrant population are Muslim," said a staffer, adding that two community leaders serve as president and cochair of the bargaining unit. "The Filipino community, which is rapidly becoming the largest community group we represent, their community leaders are chief shop stewards and shop stewards" (staff, 22).

Lakeside marks a significant turning point in the evolution of Local 401. It stands out, over the two decades since Safeway, as the moment of shift, when some of the newer approaches took hold and the local appeared to take seriously the question of diversity, organizing new types of workers and changing tactics to meet twenty-first-century realities. Of course, the reality was not nearly this dramatic, since the kind

of evolution witnessed in Local 401 occurs slowly. In this case, it began before Lakeside and continued long after it. But isolating Lakeside in this analysis allows us to separate the events and innovations and then reintegrate them within the overall patterns and dynamics found in Local 401 during the period of study. The high-profile nature of Lakeside exposed evolving practices previously hidden in the midst of the day-to-day chaos of running a union. In some respects, Lakeside can be understood as a microcosm of the change occurring within UFCW Local 401 over the past twenty years.

Finally, it should be noted that the innovations and adaptations made at Lakeside did not result from the creation of a grand design. The local's leadership did not map out a brand new approach for organizing and representing before launching the drive. The changes were ad hoc, arising out of the necessity to respond to changing circumstances. They were informed by past failures, but they were not an attempt to come up with a new organizing model. The process was more organic than that. One might say the innovations were more improvised than scripted.

The openness of Local 401 leaders and organizers to trying something new at Lakeside was fed by a decade of failure at Brooks and an evolving awareness of what was needed to fight twenty-first-century labour battles. Rather than walk away from a difficult fight, they forced themselves to take a fresh look at how to tackle the issues. Their decision to do so made a big difference in the outcome. It also marked a turning point for the local and how it went about its business.



## 3 | From Strength to Strength

### A Paradoxical Path

The mood was upbeat on 8 October 2013 as eighty-seven hundred workers at the Real Canadian Superstore grocery chain went back to work after a brief but highly successful province-wide three-day strike. The workers—a *mélange* of immigrant women, young workers, and long-serving middle-aged men—had reason to feel buoyant. They had just successfully stared down a large corporation demanding concessions and forced it to retreat.

The contrast with Local 401's other province-wide grocery strike sixteen years earlier, the 1997 Safeway strike, is stark. Similar numbers of workers in the same industry were dealing with similar issues, but the results were dramatically different. Whereas the Safeway strike dragged slowly to a disappointing outcome, Superstore workers were able to bask in a swift and decisive victory. What had changed? While the dynamics of any labour dispute is unique and the outcomes cannot be attributed to any single factor, the union local that struck Superstore was clearly not the same one that had faltered in the Safeway strike almost a generation earlier. By 2013, Local 401 was battle-tested and better equipped to mobilize thousands of workers across the province. In many respects, the Superstore victory can be seen as a culmination of sixteen years of slow evolution in Local 401.

In this chapter, I examine the years following the Lakeside strike, a period marked by multiple labour disputes and a significant demographic

shift in the local's membership. I explore the contours of the local's ongoing evolution; look closely at some of the disputes, with particular attention to the 2013 Superstore strike; and investigate the dual trends of change and continuity within the local.

#### AN ERA OF MILITANCY

Between 2000 and 2014, no union in Alberta went on strike as often as UFCW Local 401. In that period, the local went on strike or was locked out no less than ten times. Workplaces represented by the local lost 215,000 person-days to labour disputes—almost a quarter of all days lost to strikes and lockouts in the province, despite Local 401 representing only about 7 percent of all unionized workers in Alberta (Alberta Labour 2017).

An inventory of the disputes reveals a wide range of industries and contexts (see table 1). Two (Lakeside and Superstore) were unusually large, and three (Shaw, Palace Casino, and Old Dutch) lasted months before resolution. Three of the disputes were first-contract strikes (Shaw, Lakeside, and Palace), and most involved employers outside the local's traditional grocery retail industry. Most of the strikes also involved nontraditional workforces marked by high numbers of immigrants, young workers, and women. Some of the more significant disputes are recounted briefly below.

In addition to its strike activity, Local 401 used an active and aggressive organizing strategy. Between 2009 and 2014, the local filed thirty-eight certification applications, second only to Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, the province's largest union (with sixty-nine).<sup>1</sup> Not all applications were successful, but over the past decade, the local has successfully organized workers in a wide range of industries and occupations.

On a global scale, Local 401's achievements may seem modest. In an Alberta context, however, with a labour movement reeling from the country's most antiunion labour laws, years of Conservative governments,

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<sup>1</sup> Here, I am omitting the 231 applications filed by the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC), which, as mentioned earlier, is widely known to be an employer-friendly union. Its applications for certification tend to be encouraged by the employer, and then, once certified, it negotiates substandard contracts. As a result, its applications for certification often go unopposed by the employer and cannot be said to reflect true organizing activity.



public sector austerity, and an economy dominated by powerful energy corporations (Foster 2012), Local 401 has been one of the most militant and active unions in the province. Furthermore, it achieved its gains in industries that are traditionally difficult for unions to organize.

Lakeside, with its headline-grabbing tension, was the local's highest-profile dispute. It was also a key turning point for the union. In the years that followed, Local 401 engaged in numerous disputes, employing tactics learned at Lakeside and developing new ones. Many of these actions are noteworthy either for the tactics employed or for who was involved. Of particular interest are the Palace Casino and Old Dutch Foods strikes in 2007 and 2009, respectively.

**TABLE 1. UFCW LOCAL 401 LABOUR DISPUTES, 2000–14**

<b>Dates</b>	<b>Employer</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Number of workers affected</b>
27 March– 17 April 2000 (22 days)	Canbra Foods (now Richardson Oilseed)	Food production	170
2 May– 25 November 2002 (175 days)	Shaw Conference Centre (Economic Development Edmonton)	Catering/ tourism	300
12 October– 4 November 2005 (24 days)	Lakeside Packers (Tyson Foods, now JBS Food Canada)	Meat packing	2,400
9 September 2006– 10 July 2007 (303 days)	Palace Casino	Gaming	300
29 March– 11 December 2009 (256 days)	Old Dutch Foods	Food production	170
7–14 September 2009 (8 days)	McDonald's Consolidated and Lucerne Foods (Safeway)	Grocery (warehouse)	360

Dates	Employer	Industry	Number of workers affected
28 June– 1 September 2010 (66 days)	McKesson Canada	Health care (warehouse)	210
16 April–30 June 2011 (76 days)	Gate Gourmet Canada	Catering	55
30 September– 27 November 2011 (59 days)	Sobeys Forest Lawn	Grocery	130
6–8 October 2013 (3 days)	Superstore	Grocery	8,700

## Palace Casino

The 303-day strike at Palace Casino in Edmonton lacked the violent altercations that had marked Lakeside, but it was a significant dispute in its own right. Palace Casino, located in the sprawling West Edmonton Mall, is owned by BC-based Gateway Casino and Entertainment, which runs a chain of casinos in the western provinces. The staff at Palace Casino—dealers, servers, kitchen staff, and custodial workers—were predominantly women, many of them young and born outside Canada. Wages in casinos are typically low and are sometimes supplemented by tips. At the time of the strike, wages for dealers ranged between nine and twelve dollars an hour (Finlayson 2006). Much of the work is part-time and unpredictable. However, as one union staffer put it, there is a great deal of professional pride among casino workers: “They consider themselves to be almost like a trade—they’re professionals. . . . These are people who deal with tens of thousands of dollars every shift. . . . There’s this elevated status: ‘You know I work in the gaming industry.’ Even though the wages are crap. And there is a real pride among the workers in the gaming industry” (staff, 2).

Workers at the casino had been represented for about ten years by a staff association. However, difficult financial circumstances in the association and the employer’s increased reluctance to bargain led the association membership in 2003 to seek out formal union certification.

The workers approached a number of unions, but the unions, fearing the fight was too difficult, rejected them. One example was the response of the Canadian Union of Public Employees: “CUPE looked at it and made the decision that we don’t want to take you because there is no way we can get an agreement without taking a prolonged strike. You could see it coming. The employer was not going to deal with these employees” (staff, 9). According to union staff and the Palace workers interviewed, other unions approached included Canadian Auto Workers (CAW, now Unifor) and Teamsters. Eventually, Local 401 agreed to take on the certification, making them the official bargaining agent, even though they knew it would be a difficult challenge.

While the staff association had negotiated an agreement with the employer, it lacked most of the basic features of a formal collective agreement, including grievance process, dues check-off, and union rights clauses. Lacking those rudimentary tools, the union made no headway with the employer. “The next three years we fought with the employer,” recalled O’Halloran. “They wouldn’t let us in to service the place. . . . It was a war for three years” (ALHI interview, 2005). Long before the agreement expired, Local 401 knew it would take a strike to get formal union recognition. Due to the inadequate nature of the contract drawn up by the staff association, the ensuing strike was, for all intents and purposes, a first-contract strike and was treated as such by the local. It did not charge dues and it prioritized internal organizing by identifying union supporters, persuading those skeptical of the union, and mobilizing activists. Union staffers indicated that they designed their efforts as a three-year strike-preparation campaign. Early on, the local expanded the scope of the conflict to the broader gambling industry, extending blame for low wages to provincial government policy. As an *Edmonton Sun* reporter noted at the time, “The union also wants to turn the strike into a debate over the way the province runs casinos” (Bhardwaj 2006).

The strike began on 9 September 2006. The main issues outstanding at the start of the strike were wages, safety conditions, and the key union representation rights of dues check-off, an on-site union office, the right of the union to access members in the workplace, and a grievance policy. A majority of members picketed or stayed away, although a significant number of strikebreakers, combined with management, allowed the

casino to continue operating in a reduced capacity. As O'Halloran noted, the casino's location inside a shopping mall posed a serious challenge for picketing:

Because it's in West Edmonton Mall, we had two people against us: we had the mall and we had the Palace Casino. The mall had us before the [Labour Relations] Board. As a matter of fact, the strike commenced Saturday morning, and we were at the board at 7 o'clock Saturday night with them complaining about our picketing. We were able to negotiate down the road, after a week or so, that we could have twenty people inside the mall, thirty outside entrance nine, and as many as we wanted back by the poker door, where you come in and out of the poker room. (ALHI interview, 2005)

Crossing the line by customers was also an ongoing issue for the strike. The union set up a video camera by the casino's main entrance, with a sign warning that photos of crossers would be posted on a website ([www.casinocabs.ca](http://www.casinocabs.ca)). Initially, the union claimed that this tactic was intended to prompt customers to stop, giving picketers an opportunity to talk with them and dissuade them from crossing, although it did threaten to post photos of customers who were "really obnoxious" and "caused problems" (O'Halloran quoted in "Gamblers' Mugs," 2006). Ultimately, the union never posted photos on the website, although it did use some in leaflets and on posters.

The tactic sparked significant controversy. The employer protested, and several customers filed complaints with the province's privacy commissioner, who ruled that the union's act of taking photos and videos of individuals and threatening to post them contravened Alberta's Personal Information Protection Act (PIPA). The union fought the order to desist and won, with the Court of Appeal deciding that this application of PIPA violated the union's constitutional right to freedom of expression, guaranteed under section 2(b) of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This decision was subsequently appealed by the Alberta government to the Supreme Court, which ruled on the case in 2013, siding with Local 401 over the privacy commissioner.<sup>2</sup> The decision is seen as having

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2 *Alberta (Information and Privacy Commissioner) v. United Food and Commercial Workers, Local 401*, 2013 SCC 62, [2013] 3 SCR 733, <https://scc-csc.lexum.com/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/13334/index.do>.

strengthened union rights in Canada in that it found that a union's right to free speech during a labour dispute takes precedence over privacy legislation (Simons 2013).

In the first few weeks of the strike, the action was fairly low key, but bargaining was going nowhere. The union began ramping up its communications strategy. Leaflets, websites, and ads began highlighting issues such as security and health and safety, introducing "West Edmonton Mouse" to Edmontonians to bring to their attention an alleged mouse infestation in the casino. The local eventually expanded the scope of its attack, turning the focus on the nature of the gaming industry itself. Its leaflets shone a light on the "dark side" of gambling and the game industry, with one in particular linking problems in the industry with the workers' grievances. It is worth quoting at length:

So why are we here? It's time to consider the truth about casinos. It's time to speak out. Gambling is entertainment for some. But entertainment can become a serious addiction. Lives are ruined. At a casino you could be sitting next to someone that has become irrational and suicidal. Casinos play on our weaknesses. They encourage greed. One major Alberta religious leader recently called them exploitive. . . . The Alberta government claims to care about family values. But the government continues to let the casino industry grow in its present form. The government agency responsible for casinos refuses to even consider worker grievances. Many charities now refuse to accept casino money—at least they know what hypocrisy is!

The provocative campaign was designed to link the employer to ethical questions linked to the broader industry as well as to goad the Alberta government into the dispute, but it largely failed to achieve those goals.

Little shifted with the dispute until January 2007, when the employer applied for a Labour Board-supervised vote on its latest offer. The offer provided a bump in the wage increases and offered a signing bonus, but it excluded any union rights. The employer calculated that after four months on the picket line and now suffering through the depths of an Edmonton winter, the workers would take the sweetened pay package at the expense of longer-term effectiveness of union representation. The workers voted down the offer by a slim margin of 58 percent (O'Donnell 2007), and the strike continued through the winter.

The strike was settled on 10 July 2007, when the employer finally relented on union rights issues. The workers earned significant pay increases and signing bonuses and gained core union rights clauses to ensure representation going forward. No dramatic turn of event led to the shift, nor did the communications strategy appear to have an impact. More likely, the fact that the number of picketers did not drop appreciably over the ten-month strike sent a signal to the employer that the workers were not going to cave. Thus, it appears that an important factor in the dispute's resolution was the unusually high strike pay afforded the picketers, who, in many cases, earned as much picketing as they did at work.

In many respects, the Palace Casino strike was an ordinary, if somewhat drawn out, dispute. Aggressive communications were less effective than traditional picketing (albeit with enhanced pay), which won the day, despite the fact that these were workers who were not experienced with union activism and who came from demographic groups that are generally difficult to organize. That Local 401 first mobilized these women, newcomers, and youth to strike and then kept them on the picket line for ten months speaks to the effectiveness of its organizing strategies.

### Old Dutch Foods

In 2007, Local 401 inherited the bargaining unit at the Calgary potato chip plant owned by Old Dutch Foods, a Minnesota-based snack food manufacturer, following a merger with Local 373A, a relatively small local that had represented workers at Old Dutch Foods since 1971. As in many food-production facilities, the workforce was highly diverse, encompassing many ethnic groups and roughly equal numbers of men and women. The workers at the plant whom I interviewed reported that the various sections within the facility were racially and ethnically segregated, with different groups dominating particular functions. In addition, language barriers existed among the groups, with the result that employees often didn't know, or even understand, one another. "We were just shut-off little departments of the company," one worker said (member, 36).

One of the long-standing features of the collective agreement at Old Dutch was a provision that created an open shop, making membership and the payment of union dues voluntary. While a majority of workers at the plant had joined the union, a significant minority refused, creating

tensions within the plant and weakening the position of the union. Local 373A had attempted, on numerous occasions, to bargain a Rand formula mandatory dues check-off, but Old Dutch had refused. At the time, Alberta was one of four provincial jurisdictions in Canada (the others being Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island) whose labour code lacked basic provisions for union security, in the form of a mandatory dues check-off, thereby requiring unions to negotiate it (Alberta Labour Relations Board 2009, para. 32).

When bargaining opened in 2008 for a new agreement, one of Local 401's priorities was to achieve some form of closed shop or Rand formula provision. This position proved to be the key point of conflict between the union and the employer, with Old Dutch maintaining its staunch opposition to mandatory dues check-off. Bargaining over the course of nine months failed to resolve the matter. On 29 March 2009, the employer locked out its workers. (For a detailed overview of the dispute, see Alberta Labour Relations Board 2009, paras. 6–25.)

Since inheriting the bargaining unit, Local 401 had been actively organizing within the plant to increase the union membership and to build leaders among the various departments and ethnic groups. At the time of the lockout, 80 percent of the workers were union members (Gignac 2009), but strong tensions still existed between members and nonmembers. The picket line was a central site of the tension, since a significant minority, that included nonmembers and a portion of union members, crossed the line to continue working. Strikebreaking was encouraged by the employer in the lead-up to the lockout. Management “ran the shop,” said one union member. “They asked everybody within a week [of the lockout] if we would be willing to cross” (member, 36).

Strikers recall conflict building slowly over the months the picket line was active:

At first they were kind of laid back. They would walk and block [traffic] but they wouldn't really get out there vocally. And then a couple months into it, then you started seeing it come out of them. These people are crossing our picket line, they are taking our work from us. . . . We battled some nasty nights and nasty days of weather, but in the end, they realized what we were standing there for. (member, 32)

Over the months, the picket line held and the dispute lapsed into a form of stalemate. Once again, the generous picket pay contributed to the stability of the picket line: “They paid our medical. We almost had the same wages we had when we were in there, and that was unheard of at that time” (member, 36). The pay not only shored up workers economically; it also contributed to building union loyalty. “Whatever they ask from us,” said one member, “I would be more than willing, just because [of] what they did for us during that picket line” (member, 36).

Ultimately, the Old Dutch dispute was resolved through legal channels, rather than on the picket line. In July 2009, the Local 401 filed an unfair labour practice complaint against the employer for failure to bargain in good faith. Included in this complaint was a constitutional challenge, in which the union argued that the absence from the Labour Relations Code of a minimum provision for union security, such as a mandatory Rand formula dues check-off, weakened the union’s ability to represent its members effectively in collective bargaining and therefore infringed on the fundamental right to freedom of association laid out in section 2(d) of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Previous attempts to compel Rand, both at Old Dutch and in other cases, had failed. However, the union’s argument was bolstered by the Supreme Court’s decision, two years earlier, in *Health Services and Support v. British Columbia*, in which the court ruled that the right of union members to engage in collective bargaining was protected under section 2(d) of the Charter—a decision that upheld union membership as a form of association.<sup>3</sup>

In November 2009, the Alberta Labour Relations Board ruled in favour of the union’s complaint. The board decided that Old Dutch’s refusal to negotiate a union security clause in the collective agreement constituted a failure to bargain in good faith and that the Alberta Labour Relations Code was unconstitutional for failing to include mandatory provisions for union security such as a Rand formula dues check-off (see Alberta Labour Relations Board 2009, esp. paras. 66–69). The weight of the board’s decision, which ordered the employer back to the table with a proposal on the union security issue, motivated Old Dutch to retract its opposition

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3 *Health Services and Support – Facilities Subsector Bargaining Assn. v. British Columbia*, 2007 SCC 27, [2007] 2 SCR 391, <https://scc-csc.lexum.com/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/2366/index.do>.



to Rand, and the parties settled an agreement a month later that included a Rand formula dues check-off.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the legal victory and successful agreement, challenges related to the diversity of the workforce did not disappear. The union replicated its approach at Lakeside with the Old Dutch workers. A staffer recalled the linguistic challenges: “When we did our ratification vote at Old Dutch, we had to bring in six different translators, just to be able to get them to understand the collective agreement” (staff, 9). In addition, tensions between picketers and strikebreakers persisted. As one member put it, “Now we have to work with these guys who crossed the picket line—who kept us out there probably months longer than we needed to be” (member, 36).

The Old Dutch dispute once again saw Local 401 applying lessons learned at Lakeside to mobilize diverse groups of workers and to solidify their resolve, shored up by adequate picket pay, to have their demands met. Most significantly, the workers remained on the picket line for eight and a half months over a matter of union principle rather than bread-and-butter issues such as wages or safety. The individual workers stood to gain little from holding firm on Rand, but the union was successful in persuading these workers that a stronger union means a better workplace down the road.

## Other Disputes

Between 2009 and the 2013 Superstore strike, Local 401 engaged in four other labour disputes that garnered less attention in the media and the labour movement. Some were smaller successful strikes that ran in a fairly traditional manner, while others failed. In September 2009,

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4 Alberta’s attorney general subsequently requested a judicial review of the decision: see Court of Queen’s Bench of Alberta, *Alberta (Attorney General) v. United Food and Commercial Workers Union, Local No. 401*, 2010 ABQB 455. The judge struck down one technical aspect of the ruling but confirmed the core of the decision. To date, the matter has not been pursued further in the courts, nor was the Labour Relations Code formally amended in the immediate wake of the November 2009 ruling. Labour lawyers in Alberta simply acted as if a Rand formula requirement is written into the Labour Relations Code. Labour Code amendments passed in 2017 finally enshrined Rand formula provisions as a requirement in all collective agreements.

workers at McDonald's Consolidated and Lucerne Foods in Edmonton, the wholly owned warehousing and ice cream divisions of Canada Safeway grocery chain, rejected a deal recommended by the bargaining committee. A few days later, the employer locked the workers out. President O'Halloran's reaction to the rejection and lockout reveals much about his approach to situations when his authority is questioned. Publicly, he called the strike a mistake and predicted that it would be long (Canadian Press 2009). In private, he berated and threatened the membership for their decision but pledged his support. A staffer described the tense interaction between O'Halloran and the members at the tentative agreement-ratification meeting:

Doug O'Halloran got up at that meeting and said, If you vote to go on strike, you will not only potentially be out for a very long time, I think you are just going to rot out there. There is a big potential that Safeway's going to just sell the Edmonton warehouse and move all their operations to Calgary. And he was very forthright with them. He knew it was unpopular, he was very unpopular for saying that, he got beaten up a lot for saying that. The members said, You'll do what we fucking tell you. They voted it down. He said, We're going on strike. Ultimately this is a democracy—you cast your ballot, we're gonna go on strike, let's go on strike. Come on, let's go. It almost felt like the father with the teenage son or daughter that just won't listen no matter what you say. He's like, alright let's go. He was very vocal and he got shit on heavily at that meeting. Yelled at. Screamed at. He takes it, he lets them vent, but then he says, You can say whatever you want to me. I don't give a shit what you think of me, but I'm telling you as your president, my job is to say you are going to be out forever and you have the potential of losing your job entirely if you go on strike. (staff, 2)

Within a week of walking out, members had changed their minds and agreed to take a deal that looked identical to the one they had rejected a few days earlier.

The 2011 Sobeys Forest Lawn grocery store strike in Calgary was also a failure, with the members giving in to concession demands after almost two months on strike. The union leadership blamed the members for the loss, as is evident from McLaren's comment: "We wouldn't have lost it if the members had of stayed strong, because the community supported it.

We would have won it.” A more relevant factor may be that it was a single store certification, so the workers lacked the weight of a province-wide action that would impact the employer at multiple sites.

More successful were the 2010 strike at McKesson Canada, a health supplies warehouse, and the 2011 strike at Gate Gourmet, an airline catering company. Both disputes were fought over traditional issues of wages and specific workplace grievances. What is noteworthy about these two strikes is the demographic makeup of the workforces. McKesson is staffed heavily by Filipinos and also has a high proportion of young workers. Gate Gourmet employs mostly South Asian women. However, there is no evidence that the union chose (or needed) to employ some of the innovative tactics used during previous disputes, and these strikes appear to have played out in largely traditional ways.

No union wins every strike and the lack of innovative tactics in these lower-profile disputes does not necessarily nullify the significance of the approaches employed at Lakeside, Palace, and Old Dutch. Union practices are often uneven, and without a fuller understanding of the specific contexts of these smaller strikes, it is difficult to ascertain if other practices would have been more successful. What these strikes do highlight is the presence of an essential pragmatism among the Local 401 leaders. They approach each situation not from a programmatic, predetermined action plan but from an in-the-moment, problem-solving perspective. The leaders of Local 401 act from instinct to determine what actions are needed and what tactics might work. They are, of course, not always right, but more often than not, they appear to find a successful approach.

#### CHANGING DYNAMICS, STATIC STRUCTURES

Before recounting the events of Local 401’s most recent significant strike, it is important to discuss the changes that have taken place within the local since the Safeway strike of 1997. During this period, the union began to take politics more seriously and shifted its vision of the union role in social change. In addition, the influx of new types of members and the move toward a more mobilized rank-and-file shifted dynamics. During the course of these changes, however, the rigid, stable power structure of the local has remained static.

## Changes to Internal Dynamics

The formal structures of Local 401 have not changed: the president continues to wield extensive authority over the operations of the local and the democratic bodies continue to play a minor role. General membership meetings are frequent, yet sparsely attended, and they rarely include addressing significant issues or making meaningful decisions about the direction of the local. Local 401 remains steadfastly “Doug’s local.” Yet, within this stable structure, the leaders have made significant changes to shift the direction and focus of the local. As discussed earlier, they have expanded their organizing targets, adopting innovative strategies to reach out to new groups of workers. Their decision to increase strike pay facilitated their use of a more militant approach with employers. The relief rep system formalized a training process for up-and-coming activists. Aggressive and provocative communications strategies expanded the scope of the local’s grievances to broader social and political issues.

In the past six or seven years, the process of shifting internal dynamics has continued. First, through most of its history, the key servicing functions in Local 401 were performed by hired staff. The role of shop stewards was limited. The staff rep managed even the early stages of grievances, with the steward’s role restricted, for the most part, to acting as a first point of contact. This pattern was particularly true in the grocery stores and retail. In food-production plants (most of whom Local 401 inherited through merger), stewards were more involved in workplace issues, but these constituted a minority of the local’s bargaining units. As a result of this stunted steward network, the staff rep was a crucial actor in the affairs of the union, which in turn enhanced the influence of the president as the staff’s boss.

Beginning around 2010, the union began an extensive project of expanding the shop steward network and increasing the role of shop steward in handling grievances and enforcing collective agreements. Large training workshops with new activists have focused on building the necessary skills for on-the-floor advocacy for members. This new focus on the role of stewards dovetails with an increased emphasis on generating and mobilizing new activists. Over the past decade, staff reps have been explicitly mandated with identifying, mentoring, and encouraging

new activists—in particular, young workers. While this may not sound especially radical, for Local 401 it represents a marked shift in approach.

To reflect its shifting priorities, the local has also made a few changes to its committee structures, including a concerted attempt to revitalize the local's long-running youth committee, which has languished in inactivity. In 2013, a new committee, the Community Action Network Committee, was created with the mandate of reaching out to the broader community, including different ethnic and cultural groups, nonprofit organizations, and engaging in local community issues. Its goal is to increase the union's profile and participation on community issues, to "get involved in people's communities so that they know we are there [to help]" (McLaren). The effectiveness of this committee has not yet been determined.

The local has adopted a pragmatic approach to embracing diversity and mobilizing groups that are often marginalized. The changing demographics of the grocery industry brought more newcomers, women, people of colour, and youth into the local's ranks. As we have seen, the decisions to organize workplaces with higher proportions of immigrants, women, and youth were reactive and idiosyncratic rather than part of a coherent strategy to reach out to those groups of workers. However, once confronted with the reality of a diverse membership and potential membership, the local engaged in a process of learning how to effectively represent such a membership, and much of this learning came from mistakes. One staffer stressed the importance of adaptability in working with a diverse membership:

I think it is a one-on-one, a case-by-case, it's a feel your way around, what works, what doesn't, . . . particularly if you're on strike as much as we are, taking on different people that we are. You have to be very light on your feet, very agile. . . . Okay that didn't work I'm not going to do that again, I am going to do this. Or this person's not that person, so I am going to deal with them differently. (staff, 2)

Initiatives such as multilingual communications, outreach to cultural social networks, and peer-to-peer organizing arose to solve practical barriers faced by the local. For example, the union started working to incorporate cultural leaders actively in the workings of the local after observing dynamics among particular cultural groups. "So if you want to organize a place or even get a strike vote," said McLaren, "I will use the

Filipinos for example—if you got a strong Filipino who really believes in the union, that one person can turn an entire group of Filipinos to understanding . . . why you gotta take these steps, do what you gotta do, right?” Hesse explained the local’s approach as doing whatever needs to be done:

For example, we organized the Baccarat Casino, largely an Asian workforce. So how’s a white German Polish guy organize an Asian workforce? Well, we interacted with the workers, found people of that ethnicity who were of a similar mindset to us, immediately employed them . . . as organizers, instantly. They just started doing house calls with us. . . . [We] translated documents into simplified Chinese. . . . So that is recognizing your demographic and reaching out to that demographic.

The local’s definition of diversity, however, seems somewhat narrow. The local’s staffers and leaders see the process as one of building “cultural sensitivity” (staff, 27) rather than equity. They measure their progress in terms of numbers: “When I became president,” said O’Halloran, “we maybe had two people on staff who were female—on the executive board, maybe three, four. Now 50 percent of the executive board is women, 50 percent of the staff are women.” What appears to be lacking is self-reflection about how sensitivity to the diversity of membership might require changes to the union’s structures and processes. While the union’s leaders have recognized the need for inclusivity and have taken steps to reach out to a broad range of workers, they have done nothing to alter the basic structures and processes of the union so as to allow for greater democracy. They have essentially asked new workers to accommodate to a white-dominated, patriarchal world.

### Increased Focus on Politics

UFCW Local 401’s approach to broader political and social issues has also evolved over the period of study. While the local has long been an affiliate of the Canadian Labour Congress, the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL), and local district labour councils, its political and broader community involvement has increased.

In the 1980s, Local 401 was seen as a conservative union with the Alberta labour movement, since it regularly took sides against more activist-oriented leaders at the AFL, district councils, and other labour

organizations. In the early 1990s, the local ceased paying dues to the AFL for a number of months in protest of its left-leaning actions at the time. Over time, though, Local 401's commitment to the house of labour has increased. By the early 2000s, it was taking a lead role on many AFL committees and projects.

While it was a nominal supporter of the NDP for many years, occasionally releasing staffers to work election campaigns and providing token financial support, the local did not formally affiliate with the party until 2008. Since that time, it has taken a more active role with the party, sitting on the provincial executive, having a larger presence at party events, and substantially increasing financial donations (until the 2015 ban on corporate and union donations). The president has used his stature to wield influence on key party matters such as the nomination and election of the provincial leader. Support for the NDP is not generally considered radical political action, but we need to recognize the context in which this support occurred. For decades, the NDP was a small third party with few prospects of electoral victory. More pragmatic unions supported the Liberals or, inexplicably, the governing Conservatives. While this changed dramatically in the 2015 provincial election, with the NDP winning a surprise majority government, before that unexpected shift, no union that supported the NDP had visions of access to power.

Early in the period under review, much of the local's external energy was spent on charitable causes such as the Leukemia Foundation. Although it continues that support, it has recently begun to engage with groups and causes that have a more political focus. The local has, for example, supported a variety of campaigns launched by Friends of Medicare to defend public health care. Since 2011, it has offered sustaining support to the Parkland Institute, a left-wing research institute affiliated with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. In 2012, it joined Public Interest Alberta, a provincial advocacy group working on a variety of public policy issues, including seniors, privatization, homecare, and education. Over the past decade, Local 401 has become a strong supporter of gay pride events in Edmonton and Calgary, sponsoring events and participating in the respective pride marches. In 2014, it formed a partnership with Migrante Alberta, a grassroots organization mobilizing and advocating for temporary foreign workers in the province.

The local remains reluctant to engage actively with direct or radical political efforts, preferring financial donations and association with established left-wing organizations. It also continues to place a greater emphasis on electoral politics than on extraparliamentary organizing, although that is shifting with its recent relationship with Migrante Alberta. On the whole, however, over the past decade, Local 401 has become more vocal politically and more supportive of left-wing political organizations.

#### THE 2013 SUPERSTORE STRIKE

UFCW Local 401 has undergone many significant changes in the past twenty years, even while it has maintained its overall structure and approach to leadership. Change is most evident in its handling of strikes. Thus, the most appropriate place to end the story of Local 401's transformation is with its highly successful 2013 Superstore strike. Here, the new UFCW is clearly on display and stands in marked contrast to the failed 1997 Safeway strike.

In the 1980s, the grocery giant Loblaws was responsible for one of the first volleys in the transformation of the grocery industry in Canada by launching the Real Canadian Superstore discount chain in Western Canada. Superstores were large, warehouse-like, no-frills stores that attempted to keep prices to a minimum. When launching the new stores, Loblaws negotiated voluntary recognition agreements with UFCW locals in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, with Local 401 being the Alberta local. Beginning with those deals and continuing to the present day, wages and working conditions for Superstore workers have lagged behind those at more established employers such as Safeway and Sobeys.

As recounted earlier, shortly after taking over Local 401, Doug O'Halloran reversed the union's long-standing position on voluntary recognitions and achieved formal certification for all Superstore locations in the province. While this made the union status more secure, it did not substantially increase the workers' bargaining position with the employer. Working conditions continued to lag behind the local's other grocery bargaining units. The workforce at Superstore also differed from that of the traditional grocery chains. Since the work at Superstore is more part-time and has fewer benefits, turnover is significantly higher. The majority of workers come from two groups: youth and immigrant women



of a diversity of ages. The combination of high turnover and employment of groups traditionally more reluctant to join unions has made union mobilization more difficult at Superstore over the years. Adding to the challenge was that by 2013, 80 percent of Superstore staff were part-time, working fewer than twenty hours a week (Stephenson 2013).

Relations with the parent company had long been difficult, since Loblaws was highly motivated to keep labour costs down, a tendency amplified with the entry into the market of other low-cost retailers such as Walmart and Costco. However, the union had been ineffective at sufficiently mobilizing its members to create counterpressure. In 2008, the union brought the workers to the brink of a strike across the province, only to give in within minutes of the strike deadline, accepting a sub-standard deal that included many concessions. Union staff attribute the last-minute retreat to not trusting, despite a strong strike mandate, that the members would actually go out and stay on strike (staff, 2). Many rank-and-file members were unhappy with the retreat, as demonstrated by one member's comments:

I didn't agree with the settlement. . . . I was worried about the roving night crew that they had, that would go from store to store to store. There was no language for them in the agreement. I was upset. . . . I actually did well off that strike, as I was only forty hours away from going to that new top rate, and so I got a giant raise. So I did well for myself, but I was still not happy for all those others coming to me asking, what happened? What happened? (member, 16)

When bargaining opened in 2012 for the next contract, the situation was different. In the intervening years, Local 401 had ramped up its internal organizing, attempting to find a deeper pool of activists prepared to take on a fight. It had adopted some of the strategies learned at Lakeside and elsewhere, identifying informal leaders in various ethnic groups and among young workers. Even before entering bargaining, the local's leadership knew it would be a difficult round. "We started a year in advance at Superstore," said Hesse. "We told people we would be on strike in September and we got them interested."

The situation was also different because the employer adopted a regional bargaining strategy, asking for the same set of concessions from the Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba locals. Loblaws argued that

the concessions were necessary to create “a sustainable business model needed to support our colleagues and serve our customers” (Gandia and Wood 2013). The employer was seeking reduced hours for part-timers; more flexibility in scheduling; and significant changes in work processes, job descriptions, and scheduling. Initially, bargaining took place in parallel across the three provinces, but this would break down as the process entered its final stages.

Local 401 designed an intricate four-stage campaign that integrated internal organizing among members with internal and external communications strategies, launching it months before the strike. Under the slogan “Bargaining Strong Together!” stage one began before bargaining was opened and focused on educating members and soliciting their views on the proposals. Postcards sowed the soil for the coming conflict by providing basic information, including what a union contract was, the role of proposals, and how members could get involved. Buttons were distributed to inform members of the coming negotiations.

In the spring of 2013, stage two began with the launch of the external communications, which demonized the employer. A website named *greedygalen.com* after the company owner, Galen Weston, linked Loblaws to the Bangladesh factory fire that had killed almost eleven hundred workers just weeks before, since the factory was one of the places where Joe Fresh, a Loblaws clothing line, was produced (Shaw 2015). While this message was officially external communications, it was also aimed at Superstore workers, in particular those with connections in Bangladesh, to stir up anger and send the message that the union cared about social justice.

In stage three, the focus returned to the members and the lead-up to the strike vote in August. A series of eleven handouts was produced and distributed, with each one highlighting a Superstore worker, including a photo and a blurb about the individual and why he or she was voting for a strike. The handouts demonstrated the wide range of backgrounds of the workers, especially the age and ethnic diversity, and represented different store departments. Local 401 had employed this strategy in the past to draw a divergent workforce together, allowing workers to see themselves and their issues being represented, and to personalize the

union. The ensuing strike vote garnered 97 percent support in Edmonton and Calgary and 93 percent in the rest of the province.

Notably, the campaign replicated the multilingual and diversity-oriented communications strategy that had proved effective at Lakeside. A union member commented on the potency of this strategy:

They translated a whole bunch of the documents into different languages, like Tagalog, . . . Chinese, Punjabi, and they had these to hand out to members so the members could actually participate more. Also in their posters, in their leafleting and those sort of things, they would use women, they would kind of get their target category. One of the posters that made a big impact was actually of an East Indian woman, and it was one we were to hand out during the actual strike, and it said something to the effect of, I am a person. And it hit home. People would actually say, from the East Indian crowd, say, you know, that's one of us on there. (member, 3)

Multiple interviewees pointed to the effectiveness of the internal communications at building awareness, educating, and mobilizing.

Stage four returned attention to pressuring the employer. O'Halloran described one set of ads during this stage of the campaign:

We ran a full-page ad in every major newspaper, which cost \$450,000. And people say that was a waste of money, but, you know, we didn't run it for the average citizen, we ran it for Galen's friends. We ran it in all the business sections of the papers. . . . It didn't attack him directly, but it really called into question his morals and his conscience. You know, you are out here with President's Choice charity and all these things, but if you get the concessions you are looking for, your workers are going to have to go to charities to survive. It was targeted at other businesses, his buddies that play polo and stuff would phone him up and say, Galen, what the fuck you doing? And as it turns out, [of] everything we did, that made them the maddest.

A second set of ads focused on potential customers, advising them of the impending strike and asking consumers to boycott Superstore if it occurred. These ads also profiled pictures of a diverse range of Superstore workers.

A second component of the fourth stage was a day of action—a new tactic for Local 401. Called Fairness Day, the local took a page from retail

workers in the United States and organized a flash mob in an Edmonton store. One staff recounts the events: “We did the flash mob in the west end Superstore. We went in with probably five thousand purple balloons.” The balloons the employees carried read “Greedy Galen” on one side and “It’s About Fairness” on the other. “We basically handed them to kids and they walked around the store, and we walked in with literally thousands and thousands of helium balloons and let them go inside the store. Basically to create the feeling of, look, here is a group of retail workers who are actually standing up to their employer and saying, we are not going to take this anymore (staff, 9).”

The action sparked an angry reaction from the employer’s lead negotiator. Undeterred, O’Halloran informed him that they planned to do similar stunts every day until a settlement was reached. This latter statement, O’Halloran admitted later, was a bluff, since they had no other actions planned. “Companies bluff all the time,” he said. “It was in keeping with what we have done in other situations. With the media, with getting out front. And, you know, explaining what the real issues were—that it wasn’t necessarily a case about money. It was about dignity.”

As the campaign prepared and mobilized workers to strike, negotiations continued. At the beginning of October, days before the planned strike action, the Saskatchewan and Manitoba locals flipped and agreed to the concessions in exchange for a promise by Loblaws to increase the money in a national benefit fund. Following this development, the pressure for Local 401 to settle became quite strong, since the top-up to the fund was contingent on Alberta also accepting the agreement. Staff and members reported that UFCW Canada leaned heavily on O’Halloran to take the deal, warning him to not scuttle the top-up and threatening to take over bargaining. “I have seen many, many conflicts between Doug and the national office,” said one staffer. Yet, in the case of Superstore, they said, they found the situation “to be disturbing, actually—just [that] that sort of pressure would be put on Doug” (staff, 27).

Local 401 forged ahead despite the threats from its own union. Members walked out at midnight on Sunday, 6 October 2013. Membership response was very strong, with almost no strikebreakers crossing the line. McLaren recalled that first strike day:

I was going to tour every store in Calgary. So I started at four o'clock in the morning, headed to Airdrie and worked my way all the way down south. Airdrie was pretty early, so there were not many people. It was four in the morning. But when I hit Westwinds, up here [in northeast Calgary], like it was amazing, huge. It was a sea of people, of picketers, at least two hundred out there on the sidewalk.

The diversity of Superstore's workforce was evident on the picket line and proved important for persuading customers to boycott the store. One striker talked about how having picketers from different cultural communities made the picket line stronger:

I can't stop a Muslim family from coming in the store. They will look at me and . . . just walk right past me. But then you have some quiet little Muslim girls with the hijab, and they walk up and say, "Please, no, no, no, don't shop here. They treat us terribly." They start talking to them in their language. Huge difference. And not only that, it made them more empowered on their own. . . . It brought a new level of experience that they never had experienced or probably never would without having a union presence. (member, 16)

There can be no knowing if this level of enthusiasm and effectiveness was sustainable, as the walkout immediately sparked a change in tone at the bargaining table. The employer signalled an unwillingness to suffer through a long strike, and by four o'clock Monday morning, twenty-eight hours after the start of the strike, a tentative agreement was signed. The employer had backed down completely on the concessions, and the union won some significant gains, including increased hours for part-timers, benefits for part-timers, and increased rights for stewards. And the national fund top-up remained. On Tuesday, the membership voted overwhelmingly to ratify the agreement, with majorities of 83 percent in Calgary, 85 percent in Edmonton, and 91 percent in the rest of the province (Wright and Crowson 2013).

The union attributes the clear success to its early preparation and to the leadership's sense that the employer did not really want a strike. A staffer observed that O'Halloran appeared confident the employer would back down: "I mean, he may have sensed that the company was not

prepared for a strike” (staff, 27). The dynamics of a strike are never fully knowable, so no one can be sure why the employer capitulated so quickly. Maybe the willingness of the members to actually walk out, something they had not done in the past, surprised an employer expecting a similar pattern of events as had occurred in past disputes. What is clear is that the year, or four years, of preparatory work educating and mobilizing the membership had an effect on the leaders’ confidence that a strike was not only possible but winnable, as well as on the members’ capacity to act in their own interests.

The 2013 Superstore strike may have been Local 401’s most successful action in its history. The results came swiftly and were unequivocal. The success was due to a year of planning, of implementing things learned in previous disputes, and of a growing determination from the members, fuelled by their own anger and ambition: all of this was combined with the good fortune of things the union couldn’t control, such as the employer’s unpreparedness for a strike. O’Halloran knows that it won’t be so easy next time: “We will be more careful next time because they will be more prepared, but that is what it is all about.”

If the story of UFCW Local 401 were to end here, Superstore would be seen as the culmination of the local’s transformation, as well as the ultimate evidence of the success of their efforts. But the story never really ends. The union continues to evolve, as do its members. In the four years since the strike, the union has experienced a period of relative labour peace, but there is no predicting what will happen next. More importantly, the outcomes sometimes matter less than the process, and we have yet to really understand how these changes came to be. How did Local 401 turn itself from a grocery-dominated business union into one of the most militant and diverse locals in Alberta?

The story has already revealed some curious features of Local 401, such as the combination of its centralized structure and its innovative tactics and its unexpected success mobilizing nontraditional workers. Local 401 is an unexpected site for union renewal. Part 2 examines more closely the dynamics behind the events described in part 1 and explores how and why Local 401 developed into the organization it is today. The answers diverge from the usual explanations of union renewal and indicate that something different happened in Local 401.

# *PART II*

**An Analysis of Transformation**





## 4 | Narratives and the Making of Local 401

Over the past two decades, UFCW Local 401 has witnessed changes not only in its membership but also in the strategies pursued by its otherwise very stable leadership. This pattern of flexibility and innovation might initially appear somewhat perplexing, given that the controlling style of leadership and the top-down organizational structures found in Local 401 are not usually associated with militant activism and the embrace of change. After spending many months observing UFCW Local 401 from the vantage point of an insider, however, I began to be aware of an internal logic holding these seemingly contradictory elements together.

One way in which an organization builds internal logic is through the construction of narratives that reveal the nature of the organization and the rationale behind its actions. Narratives can order and make sense of actions and events. In this chapter, I examine the stories that UFCW Local 401 has told about itself and to itself and explore how those stories set into motion a logic that propelled the local forward during the past two decades. These narratives, which provide an internal context for the local's external behaviours, offer rich insights into the evolution of Local 401. Analyzing the narratives created and used by the local draws out insights about the union's trajectory over the past twenty years that traditional methods of observation, which generally focus on unions' actions, fail to capture.

Narratives form an integral part of how humans understand the world around them; we construct narratives to create meaning for ourselves and others. By viewing narratives as an act of construction, we can probe both the meaning of the narrative and the interests it serves (Riessman 1993, 541). Narratives weave together separate moments and occurrences into a single temporal entity with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Humans are natural storytellers, and for both the teller and the listener, the story is an accessible, comfortable, reliable way to communicate information, express feelings, and relate experiences. Narratives add significance to stories by building a coherence to the storyline. There are multiple ways to tell a story, and narratives choose particular pathways to develop a sense of meaning. As a result, narratives possess an internal logic, or consistency, that we can use to define who we are and to organize our current and future action. We tell ourselves stories, and those stories feed into larger narratives that serve an organizing function for our actions. Studying those narratives can thus reveal insights into how people understand their experiences.

Narratives differ from propaganda. Propaganda has an explicit, agenda-ridden purpose: it is consciously designed to persuade. Although narratives may reflect conscious decisions, the meanings they convey emerge organically, through the interaction of our behaviour, interests, self-perceptions, and expectations, and in ways that may be invisible to us. Narratives emerge between the lines, so to speak, often as a consequence of individual and collective action, whereas the production of propaganda is deliberate, an act of creation of which we are fully aware.

Because narrative can give coherence to events and concepts that may appear contradictory and incongruent, we often use them to help us “make sense” of what we see and do (Boje 2010). Importantly, narratives are not about replicating the world with objective accuracy. In the act of creating a narrative, the teller bridges the objective and subjective. As Riessman (2004, 708) eloquently points out,

Narratives do not mirror, they refract the past. Imagination and strategic interests influence how storytellers choose to connect events and make them meaningful for others. Narratives are useful in research precisely because storytellers interpret the past rather than

reproduce it as it was. The “truths” of narrative accounts are not in their faithful representations of a past world, but in the shifting connections they forge among past, present, and future.

It is in this fluid sense of truth where we find our insights into human motivation, behaviour, and reflection. Narratives are simultaneously interpretations of our past, reflections of our present, and predictors of our future.

Not everything is a narrative, of course, and not every narrative helps us understand human behaviour. What constitutes narrative is highly context dependent. A narrative may arise from the words spoken or from the spaces in between those words; the way in which it emerges does not determine its power. The significance of a narrative, whether explicit or implicit, is revealed through an iterative process of listening, reflecting, and understanding. Identifying and contextualizing narratives must occur within the analytical process.

Because narratives are intrinsic to human interaction, they become part of the fabric of human organizations. Narratives construct, for both organizational members and outsiders, a sense of the organization’s identity and of the role of each member in the organization (Czarniawska-Joerges 2004, 3–6). Because the ways in which we explain and make sense of our own actions and experiences as individuals extend to how we explain our organizations (Boje 2001, 4–5), narratives can provide useful insights into the functioning of organizations. Narratives can build an internal logic for disparate events and concepts, weaving them together into a coherent whole. Furthermore, organizational narratives, if they are to create coherence and an internal logic, are not about fabrication or delusion; they are grounded in actual human experience and cannot stretch the bounds of credulity (Boje 2001, 6–7). But neither can we say that narratives are neutral or objective; they are susceptible to the forces of human dynamics, meaning that they are also windows into how organizations (or at least their most powerful members) wish to construct themselves.

In management and organizational studies, narrative analysis has become widely adopted as an effective tool for understanding organizations (Bryman et al. 2011, 419–20). The fact that this tool has been used less frequently in the study of unions speaks more to the prevailing mood of the discipline than it does to the viability of the method. One could

argue that narratives are particularly useful for studying unions. Unions are always acting, for they are institutions of an ongoing and always evolving relationship—the relationship between employers and workers. Because of this constant motion, making sense of how one action relates to another requires creating links between them, which occurs in the act of narrative construction. The meaning of the actions—the whys and hows of strategies, decisions, and events—takes shape through storytelling. As different acts in different points of time become linked, they become imbued with logic. Over time, the logic grows and a self-identity of the union and its members forms. Narrative both creates and reflects the internal logic of the union. Through understanding that logic, we can glean greater insights into how and why unions act in the ways they do.

We must remember, however, that in unions (and organizations in general), not all actors have equal access to the tools of narrative construction. Because leaders possess a disproportionate capacity to shape the union's internal logic, narratives are a powerful vehicle for serving their interests. The link between narratives and internal power dynamics is critical to understanding the functions narratives play within a union. The analysis below—conducted using critical narrative analysis (CNA), as described in Appendix C—not only draws out the significance of the narratives themselves but also surfaces the power dynamics that are inherent in UFCW Local 401.

#### CONSTRUCTION AND REPRODUCTION OF NARRATIVES

There are only so many media available to a narrator to tell his or her story. Obviously, any time a person speaks to another person, the potential exists for the construction or reproduction of narratives. Some media are more effective than others because they reach a greater audience and/or they find the audience in a more receptive space. Before we examine Local 401's narratives, it is important to look briefly at how they are created and maintained—at the mechanisms that are used to relay particular framings and stories to members and outsiders.

There are six primary sites of narrative construction and reproduction in Local 401. The first, and in some ways most obvious, is union literature intended for consumption by union members and/or the public, such as pamphlets, press releases, and posters. Such materials are designed to

deliver clear messages and often do so in a blunt, straightforward manner, one that tends to suppress nuance. The leadership is, of course, well aware that such publications are powerful tools for image making and that they serve as tools for propaganda. Although the purpose of each pamphlet, press release, or poster is to persuade readers to act on a particular issue, taken together these items construct and reproduce a broader narrative about the local's identity and its actions.

As one would expect, courses, workshops, and conferences put on by the union are a second important site of narrative construction. In these settings, the union's leaders and staff have unrestricted access to a group of members for a continuous period of time. The overt goal of such sessions is the dissemination of information and training, and members often receive education that can serve them well in their workplaces and communities. But it would be naïve to think that union courses are simply a means to convey information: they are also opportunities to entrench particular union narratives. Again, the leaders of Local 401 seem quite conscious of the value of education as a means to instill attitudes that the union finds productive and also to feed a broader narrative about the union.

General meetings, ratification meetings, and other similar events constitute a third medium for narrative creation, giving leaders the opportunity to speak to members both formally and informally. Because members attend such meetings in expectation of receiving information, they are often unaware they are listening not merely to a factual report but to a narrative. Moreover, during informal exchanges after the meeting, such narratives can be elaborated and reinforced, both by leaders and by members themselves.

A fourth site of narrative production and, especially, reproduction is the relief representative system described in chapter 1, which the union uses to groom potential staffers. Not only are relief reps explicitly trained to take part in the internal processes of the union, such as grievance procedures and collective bargaining, but they are implicitly taught how to talk about union matters. They are narrators-in-training. Those who embrace the reigning narratives are more likely to be hired, as this will ensure a more consistent delivery of messages by the staff. The relief rep system thus serves to reinforce an homogeneous perspective. By allowing

only those who adopt the accepted narratives to assume positions of power, it prevents alternative narratives from infiltrating the local.

A fifth element in the dissemination of narratives is the union's organizational culture, as it emerges not merely in words but, especially, in modes of behaviour. Local 401 runs in a very relaxed manner. In meetings, even formal items are treated in a casual, almost offhand manner, while informal conversation becomes a key medium for the sharing of information and the circulation of narratives. The union offices are equally relaxed and welcoming. This atmosphere itself tells a story about the union, one that can be all the more powerful because it is largely nonverbal. Actions *do* speak louder than words, and union members constantly, and often unwittingly, absorb messages about the values central to the union through the behaviour of its staff.

Finally, the style of leadership characteristic of an organization is at once a source and a reflection of the narratives that define that organization. As a leader, O'Halloran's style is bold and in many ways domineering. He leaves no doubt about who is in charge, and his words and actions communicate a clear message to members about what leadership is and how power operates. In this respect, he embodies a narrative about UFCW Local 401, namely, that this is a union that means business and is not afraid to express its opinions or take action. This narrative in turn acquires a prescriptive element, in that O'Halloran, as well as the local's other leaders, must behave in ways that align with this narrative and thereby constantly reinforce it. In short, many of the stories that the union tells about itself are given concrete shape in the figure of O'Halloran himself.

These six narrative vehicles interact to create an effective system for constructing and relaying narratives about Local 401 and its membership. We can analyze the messages delivered through these means to identify the narrative fabric of UFCW Local 401's identity.

#### LOCAL 401'S NARRATIVE FAMILIES

Over months of observation and analysis, a number of core stories about UFCW Local 401 emerged. These stories interact to paint a vivid picture of the local and why it acts in the way it does. The narratives identified fell naturally into clusters, or families. Each family answers part of the question "What is Local 401?" but each one comes at it from a

different perspective and addresses a particular component of Local 401's self-identity. The narratives can be grouped into three families: internal narratives, which explain the internal life of the local; external narratives, which tell the story of how Local 401 presents itself to others; and member narratives, which reveal who the members are and what the leadership's role is in the union. Each of these families contains two or three "member" narratives. Since a narrative can serve multiple functions, the various member narratives and their families overlap, but for ease of presentation, the discussion that follows will focus on the primary purpose of each narrative family and its members.

### Internal Narratives

Three different narratives reveal the local's manner of operation and internal principles. These narratives are central to understanding the internal dynamics of Local 401 and feed into and reflect the leaders' and members' sense of how the union operates. These narratives present Local 401 as a member-driven union, a diverse and inclusive union, and a family-like union.

*A Member-Driven Union.* There is a strong sense in Local 401, despite its centralized authority and hierarchical structures, that the actions taken and the decisions made by the leadership are driven, in some fashion, by the membership. "The bottom line's the members," asserted O'Halloran. "If they turn against you, you're fucked. It doesn't matter if you are doing a good job or a bad job or whatever. If they lose faith, you know, you're done." This is a narrative that is even told by those outside the local: "What makes Doug the best president is he is all about the members. . . . Member driven, everything is membership driven" (KO, 38). This focus on being motivated by members' interests was noted by Hesse as a key factor in the union's ability to mobilize and organize its workers, as during the Superstore dispute:

As much as some other unions might say we are top-down, wasn't it fascinating that when it came time to take out nine thousand new Canadians, the majority of them women who had never been on strike in their life, . . . they all got out on the picket line. So if we were so top-down and the decisions were contrived . . . and only belonged to the leadership, disconnected from the members, then

how does that happen? . . . Because there was nine thousand leaders on the picket line, not just Doug O'Halloran.

A nuance in this narrative is that the union is seen as being driven by the members' interests, not necessarily by the members themselves. The leaders still maintain a strong authority to act, but the members have a high degree of faith that they will do so with the members' interests at the centre of their actions.

*A Diverse and Inclusive Union.* The local's leadership and staff boast about being the most diverse local in Alberta in terms of age, gender, and race and ethnicity. Its internal communications—whether new member orientations, posters, or conference brochures—play up the diversity of the membership with multicultural photos that emphasize young female workers of colour. Headlines and slogans stress the membership's diversity: examples include “Many Faces, One Voice” (Lakeside pamphlet) and “Bargaining Strong Together” (Superstore strike slogan). The union is portrayed as a welcoming, inclusive place where race and gender are not sources of conflict:

There was no racism on the [Lakeside] picket line. Everybody was a union member, everybody helped one another, so it wasn't an issue. And we didn't want it to become a race issue. It might've been a race issue in Brooks, but it was not a race issue in the plant. So we downplayed that, and it was good. (O'Halloran, ALHI interview, 2005)

In the union it has all been positive. But I mean, there is definitely prejudice out there. Even at work when we have been in meetings with our management, we were told as soon as we left the room, our head manager said, “Are all lesbians that aggressive?” . . . [But in the union] you could tell they are very focused on human rights . . . They included it and it was fought for, but they want diversity in everything, they definitely are supporting it. (member, 36)

This narrative contains a claim of “colour-blindness” (and gender- and age-blindness), an assertion that these are simply not issues in the local. While the leaders acknowledge that they need to do more around engaging so-called minority members, they argue that the challenge is one of finding the right strategies rather than making the union environment respectful, welcoming, and inclusive, which it already is.



*The Union as Family.* The metaphor of Local 401 as a family recurred time and again in interviews of both members and leaders:

I can do anything for union because my soul is with them. I am closer with them than my family. (member, 17)

I always say we are the happiest dysfunctional work family ever created. (staff, 2)

Once you have gone into that [become active in the local] you've essentially married into the union. . . . Because once you become a part of it, it's your family. (member, 16)

This narrative suggests that the relationships within Local 401 transcend traditional union relations. The metaphor of family implies loyalty, mutuality, love, commitment, and long-term relationships.

The concept of family also evokes a parental relationship, and this was referenced in interviews as well. In particular, O'Halloran was spoken of as a father figure for the union.

He is like a dad. For me he is like a dad that—you're supposed to do this but at the same time he is trying to discipline you—this kind of thing. I see him like that. (member, 1)

I think it is like a relationship between family members. Parents and children. (KO, 20)

We run to the union for help, this man [O'Halloran] is like a father to us, he is a father to us, now who are we going to run to? (Lake-side striker quoted in McGinnis 2005, B1)

The metaphor of father gives O'Halloran authority and status within the union and implies that he is both responsible for the members and "in charge" of them.

## External Narratives

The second family of narratives explains how Local 401 is positioned vis-à-vis other unions. The narratives describe what sets Local 401 apart from other unions: it is a militant union that will organize anyone; it is a union whose leaders are principled "truth-tellers"; and it is more effective, innovative, and assertive than other unions.

*A Militant Union.* Local 401 has a well-developed narrative as a militant union willing to organize any workers who want a union, regardless of how hard the fight. The idea of being willing to take on a fight appears in most of the union's internal communications. In the local's magazine for members, for example, Chris O'Halloran (2013, 16) expresses this stance: "UFCW Local 401 has never backed down from a fight and stands by workers who seek to improve working conditions for themselves and their co-workers." The sense of strength and refusal to back away from a fight applies to both organizing new members and dealing with employers.

In interviews, members expressed pride at being part of a strong union. "It really is a no guff union. They are not going to lie down. They are willing to do whatever it takes to get what the workers are expecting" (member, 36). Even critical outsiders acknowledged that Local 401's actions make it "militant" (KO, 13).

The local's narrative arc includes a tendency to talk big about settlements. O'Halloran at one point referred to a recent contract as a "Cadillac agreement." Hesse went further:

I can show you the best retail food collective agreement in North America at Loblaws. We have it. I can show you contract language that does not exist in collective agreements where people have all sorts of bargaining power, full-time, skilled workers. I can show you language that focuses on social justice issues, stuff we didn't have to bargain, stuff we chose to bargain. . . . I can bring you a bunch of collective agreements and show you the kind of unique things that we pursue.

The members' magazine boasts of a contract that "set a higher standard for all retail workers across the province" (McMeckan and Hesse 2014, 12). Getting results is the narrative flipside to fighting tough battles and is part of framing Local 401 as a militant union.

*A Principled Union.* Local 401 couches its actions under the guise of principles and a willingness to speak truth to power. Its outspokenness relates to its aggressive, provocative approach to labour disputes, and its principles provide a rationale for decisions. The principles are expressed somewhat vaguely, suggesting some sense of commitment to working people. As O'Halloran asserted, "The union should always be there with morals and principles to do the job for the underdog." There is a proud awareness that

the local rubs employers the wrong way. A staffer described the general tone of Local 401 negotiations: “No employer is going to sit there and say that we had a nice conversation with a 401 union rep and we got to an agreement on something. No. Somebody said something offensive, somebody called you names. . . . If you are not willing to stand and fight, you are not working for us” (staff, 24). For those involved in the local, the willingness to be outspoken and aggressive is linked to the notion of acting on higher principles.

*A Union Unlike Others.* Local 401 supplements the storylines above with one of standing apart from other unions by doing more, a sense of superiority that comes from being militant and principled.

It is always 401 that steps up to the plate. Not a whole bunch of unions out there are putting their hands up first, you know what I am saying? (McLaren)

To me that is what sets us apart from some of the others. I mean, Doug is a smart man. He can look at a situation and realize, yeah, this isn't going to be good. But he is still willing to take them on because it is the right thing to do. (staff, 9)

[We are] probably one of the most active locals in Alberta, if not *the* most active local. Bar none. Probably one of the most active locals in Canada. (member, 6)

Accompanying this sense of superiority is a belief that many unions dislike Local 401 because of their “out there” approach:

There are certainly unions out there that don't like us. We're too aggressive, maybe we're a little too forward thinking or we're sticking our nose where it doesn't belong. And I think there're other unions out there [that] have very high praise for us. (member, 6)

I would probably say, whether they like us or not, they would have to say that, like *Star Trek*, we have gone where no man has gone before. And I think we are admired for that, possibly resented in some cases. (McLaren)

Part of this narrative of standing apart is that the opinions of others don't matter because any criticism comes from a resentment of Local 401's achievements. The pride in being militant is complemented with a sense of “us against the world,” which strengthens internal unity.

## Member Narratives

Four narratives create a self-identity for Local 401 members and leaders. The first is that Local 401 represents members who are difficult to mobilize, are somewhat passive, and are looking for a strong leader. Second, Local 401 leaders are very accessible and down-to-earth. Third, the leaders are also strong, and they actively advance their members' interests. And finally, the external forces battling the local are increasingly aggressive, which necessitates fast-acting, centralized, strong leadership.

*Local 401 Members.* Local 401 members are portrayed in the local's narratives as multifaceted and as a relatively challenging group to represent. They are passive, marginalized, and hard to mobilize; they prioritize results over process and trust the leadership to do the right thing. These qualities, according to the narrative, relate to the nature of members' jobs—part-time; short-term; low-wage, necessitating working multiple jobs—and to characteristics of the workers themselves—young, new to the country, relatively less educated. This portrait of the membership is exemplified in the following comments:

The makeup of our membership is lots of part-time, lots of vulnerable people, because there's new Canadians, lots of young workers, very high female percentage of the workforce as well. I mean these are all groups of people who have historically, in the workforce, been underrepresented and been marginalized and not been given their due. . . . They're scared to speak up, so they tend not to get their issues addressed. (staff, 2)

[It's] where East Indian ladies come from. Not educated family, not broad family. Far away, farmer's people mostly you see here. . . . First off, we have fear in the family. Ladies, girls, have no right to say anything. They can't go out, you won't see them drink in the bar with husband. (member, 17)

It's just hard to get young people involved. Young people just quit, most young people quit. (member, 16)

Embedded within this narrative is a message that it is more difficult to engage a membership with these characteristics, so although the union wants to get them involved, there is only so much they can do.

The second aspect of the narrative fills the void created by the lack of activism among members. Members want the leadership to take an active role in representing their interests. As Hesse put it:

When you have part-time workers, you may end up with a structure that, in order to give them meaningful representation, you are going to have to make some decisions that they neither have the time nor the interest in making themselves. . . . I think the member cares about the product. . . . The value of a union to them [is] in two things: What does our collective agreement say? What rights do I have, what wage do I make, what benefits do I have, and does my union enforce it? Are they visible and do they enforce it? That is what people care about. (Hesse)

A picture is thus created of the local responding to the characteristics of its members and what they want.

*Accessible Leadership.* O'Halloran's leadership style can be described as informal, relaxed, accessible, and responsive to the membership, while also firm and in control. Members interviewed for the project said they could call O'Halloran directly with their concerns and that they felt comfortable talking to him:

He is very down to earth, and he treats us all on an equal level. It doesn't matter what your job description is—as a member there are no levels. I mean somebody may be a plant manager and there may be someone who is a casual maintenance worker, and he'll talk to both at the same level and the same time and give you the same consideration. I also like the fact that he is strong and won't be pushed around, and he lets your company know that, yeah, these people are members of my union and we will protect them. So I have always felt comfortable around Doug and Theresa. (member, 36)

These comments also hint at the other side of O'Halloran's style as a leader. Although he was friendly and approachable, he was also tough, and, despite his egalitarian spirit, he was willing to take charge. As Theresa McLaren put it:

I think because he has never been sitting up here [in the office], he's always been accessible to the members. . . . He likes to joke around with members. He doesn't bullshit them. He will tell them the hard

fast truth if he has to. But he is also very caring. I think it just comes out. (McLaren)

The narrative arc suggests that this accessibility has influenced the local in two ways: members have developed a high degree of trust in the centralized authority of the president, and an informal feedback loop has evolved that, as a mechanism of accountability, seems to carry greater weight than the formal structures laid down by bylaws.

*Strong Leadership.* Similarly, the local has developed a narrative of strong leaders actively “taking care” of their members, aggressively pursuing issues on behalf of their members, and making decisions in members’ best interests. The leaders’ virtues include taking action when necessary, sometimes without consultation but always with a clear vision and motivation. Proof that the leaders are doing the right thing rests in the outcomes they achieve. Do they bargain good agreements? Are they successful in certifying? This narrative also points to members’ faith and trust in the leadership as evidence that the leadership is performing its role appropriately. And that trust is based upon getting results: “You can place your trust in the union because they can make things happen” (member, 29). This narrative intertwines closely with the accessible leadership storyline.

*External Forces.* The nature of forces that impose pressure on the local from outside—such as corporations, capitalism, and globalization—figure large in Local 401’s self-narratives. These external forces justify many of its actions and approaches because of the necessity of dealing with large players who have become increasingly aggressive in the past two decades. Staff and leaders view the growing aggressiveness in the local’s communications as paralleling the aggressiveness of employers. Their narratives about their internal processes, like acting quickly through centralized decision-making, are linked to necessities imposed by external forces. In general, their approach of strong, centralized leadership is portrayed as both necessary and, if not virtuous, at least responsive to reality. Hesse said it most clearly:

Employers are at you quickly [snaps fingers]. They move hundreds of millions of dollars around and make quick business decisions. And you’ve got to be able to turn on a dime. Do you call a union meeting every single time you need a decision on a grievance? . . .

CUPE's structure, as it is presented, is much more democratic than ours. Little local unions, lots of local autonomy, the president works in the plant. And some members say to me that was really nice in fairytale times, really nice. But I don't want to count on a coworker to represent me now when labour relations are more complicated. They got an MBA and four lawyers. I don't want that anymore. . . . You need money and resources to take on capital now. In an ideal world, if there is ten plants you should have ten locals, each with a working president from the plant, fifty shop stewards, 100 percent turnout at union meetings. In this sociopolitical and economic context? Right! You could look at 401 and say, oh my god, they are top-down. And you can try to hang on to that model and watch yourself die.

This narrative has two implications. First, it places a limitation on what is possible. Greater internal democracy is desirable but not feasible because of the nature of capitalism. Second, it marks Local 401 as forward-thinking and proactive. The leaders recognize the threats to the union, and rather than hang onto the past, they are responding to new realities—and the implication is that the local is surviving and thriving as a result.

#### MEMBERS' RECEPTION OF LEADERS' NARRATIVES

Before discussing the role of these narratives in the life of Local 401, it is important to establish to what extent the members embrace and internalize the framings created by the leadership. How much do they share these perspectives and participate in maintaining and reproducing them? For the narratives to play a part in shaping the actions of the union, the membership must see them as legitimate and reflective of their personal experiences.

In general, I found a high degree of buy-in by members, as was evident by the similarity in language, including the common usage of specific terms across the members interviewed and consulted. This noticeable consistency in framing is a central feature of Local 401. Particularly pronounced was the shared language around external narratives. The use of the word *aggressive* and its synonyms in describing Local 401 was almost universal among members, regardless of their background or experience with the local. Even new members who had had little interaction with the leaders adopted this frame. Most participants also expressed a sense

that Local 401 was in some way different from other unions. Often, this difference was related very specifically: the union had more internal cohesiveness or was more member-driven or more willing to fight. One comment offers an interesting perspective: "Sometimes [unions] lose track a little bit but then they gotta pull themselves back on track. And during that time they're off, it can cause some harm. I've never really seen, at least not in my twenty-five years, I've never seen 401 off-track" (member, 6). Sometimes this sentiment was relayed in more general terms. One member, for example, could not pinpoint what made Local 401 different, but expressed that somehow Local 401 is more responsive, more active, more aggressive: "Local 401 is the one that stands beside us, is the most, that will take them [our issues] on compared to other locals" (member, 7). Taken together, members' comments implied a sense of pride that Local 401 does its job better than other unions.

Similarly, internal and member narratives associated with how responsive the union is to members were widely adopted. Members felt that the leaders were both strong and accessible and that they were listening to the membership. Almost all participants agreed with the sentiment that they could "pick up that phone and reach the president" (member, 23).

Not all narratives, however, were reproduced so universally. Members were less likely to accept the leadership's framing of the necessity of and value in strong, centralized leadership. More than one member interviewed expressed concern about O'Halloran's "dictatorial" tendencies. But even people expressing concern about his tight control tempered it with a vague sense that someone needs to be "in charge." At times, the concern about the centralized control in the local surfaced as expressions of frustration at how the leadership uses activists. "It was sort of like being a chess piece in a game," said one member. "So I would show up and sometimes they would say, okay, today you're going to be getting pictures done for posters. And I didn't object to any of it. I knew full well what was going on. But sometimes it kind of felt like the strings on my hand were getting pulled this way and that" (member, 3).

The other narrative that was somewhat contested was about who the members are. While members seemed to agree that their background and labour market positions make them harder to organize, they diverged somewhat from the official perspective. Some members were less likely



than the local's leaders to interpret the lack of activism as an implied desire for the leadership to do it for them. More commonly, members saw the difficulty in mobilizing as a challenge for the union, which needed to do more educating of members and put more effort into bringing the inactive workers around: "People need to be encouraged. Shop stewards, we have to be out speaking, encouraging our members. When someone says why that is not happening, I teach them that we have the meetings, and it is good for them to come to the meeting and air also your concerns" (member, 14). Apathy and lack of involvement is not seen as a justification for centralized authority but as a reason for putting more effort into fostering activism.

Despite these two exceptions, the self-identity constructed within Local 401 is widely accepted by the local's members. They appear to have internalized much of the framing that is generated through the various vehicles of leadership-member interactions. These findings suggest that the narratives identified in the analysis are effective in organizing experiences and events in the local. It lends weight to the conclusion that the narratives play a key role in understanding why Local 401 took the actions it did over the past twenty years.

#### THE ROLE OF NARRATIVES IN UFCW LOCAL 401

In addition to describing Local 401's narratives and the internal logic they create, we need to ask what purpose they serve within the local. Whose interests are served? How do the narratives support the power dynamics in the local? An exploration of these questions yields deeper insight into the function of narratives and how, within Local 401, they bolster the existing power regime within the union. It also helps to explain the transformation that occurred over the past two decades.

The narratives told by the local's members and leaders help make sense of Local 401's actions and evolution in three ways. First, they build legitimacy for and create a sense of normalcy in the unique leadership structures and behaviours in the local. Second, they help create unity and decrease dissent within the local. Third, they create a framework for managing change while simultaneously strengthening stability within the local.

## Creating Legitimacy and Normalcy

One of the primary purposes of narratives in Local 401 is to build legitimacy around and normalize the decision-making structures and leadership style of the local. The narratives lead to this outcome in several ways. First, they divert members' (and others') attention from the formal aspects of the local's structure and its firm-handed, top-down design by implying that formal structure matters less than other aspects of leadership—in particular, being down-to-earth, accessible, and responsive. When one accepts this framing, it doesn't matter that O'Halloran was originally appointed to his position by UFCW Canada, nor is it important that he possesses an inordinate amount of authority in the local. The narrative shows him to be populist, accessible, and caring. His credibility rests not in his formal authority but in his decades-long practice of being "out and about" with his members. Furthermore, the emphasis on his informal accessibility dampens potential for the nondemocratic features of the local's structures to create a serious challenge to his presidency.

More than that, the centralized style exhibited by the leadership team is turned by the narratives into a point of strength for the local rather than a point of critique. The phrase "Doug's local" is expressed both as reality and as shorthand for the union being strong, clear, and focused. It's okay for Local 401 to be "Doug's local" because Doug is popular, accessible, and perceived to be responsive to the members. Democratic engagement, transparency, or respect for minority opinion cease to be measures of good leadership, replaced by an ability to take on the employer on behalf of members. Militancy becomes both an active tendency and a signpost for good leadership. Paired with the "fighting union" narrative is the "principled union" narrative, which, post hoc, promotes the militant actions as serving a higher interest. Within the narrative logic, the union's actions are not acts of self-preservation or self-interest; they are done in the name of a loosely defined higher principle.

By any objective measure, the difficult struggles taken on by Local 401 in recent years would be considered admirable, and they clearly do point to a commitment to defending the rights of workers. The narratives are not problematic in that respect. But they do serve the leaders' interests when they legitimize their actions in a manner that papers over other, more concerning aspects of their leadership. The lack of mechanisms for

dissent and member engagement in key decisions and the weak accountability frameworks fall out of focus under the bright lights of what is perceived as strong, principled leadership.

The danger for the leadership team in emphasizing the fighting spirit and principles of the local is that if the leaders fail to deliver, they risk undermining their primary source of legitimacy. If they lose an organizing drive or sign a substandard collective agreement, the threads of the narrative start to fray—thus their tendency to oversell their accomplishments. The message to members is not “We have a good contract”; it is “We have the best contracts in this province, we have the best Loblaws contract in Canada, we have the best Safeway contract in Canada” (staff, 24). With members’ general inability to confirm the accuracy of such claims, the message is not easily disproven and thus helps keep the threads intact. In this manner, the realities of bargaining (including compromise) and incomplete achievements are subsumed under chest-thumping declarations of victory, and the local ends up looking more effective than it may be in reality. Indeed, no union is ever as effective as it wishes to be.

Thus, we can see the formation of a legitimation matrix. The informality and the focus on action combine with the active effort on the part of the leadership to construct a model of leadership that emphasizes strong individuals, decisive action, and minimal collaboration, all of which are created and reinforced through an interlocking network of narratives. Each narrative prevents the others from being undermined by the niggling details of reality. The role of leadership in this matrix is to equate the traits exhibited by the leaders—strong, heroic, and principled—as desirable traits. Thus, when they act in a top-down manner, their legitimacy as leaders is, ironically, confirmed, not challenged. For example, O’Halloran’s practice of entering tough negotiations at the very end in order to be the “closer” becomes evidence of his strong leadership rather than of his usurping the role of the bargaining committee. The narratives carve out the space the leadership needs to maintain its legitimacy and credibility while acting as it has for decades.

Two final pieces complete the legitimation matrix. Sketching a picture of a passive, difficult-to-mobilize membership that wants a strong, decisive leader to act on its behalf further supports Local 401’s current structures and allows for less emphasis on member mobilization and member-based

decision making. Furthermore, the argument that the growing power of external forces renders a less centralized process ineffective (or impossible) closes off the possibility for an alternative model for the local. Not only are the leaders doing their job for the members, but they would be placing the local at risk by decentralizing authority and allowing more rank-and-file input into key decisions.

Maintaining a stable, centralized leadership in a democratic organization during volatile times requires that a number of pieces fit into place. In the case of Local 401, the narratives play their role well by narrowing the range of possibilities, emphasizing certain criteria over others, and ensuring that characteristics and behaviours that could be seen negatively are marked as positive by the membership. No one could survive twenty-five years as a union leader—especially as a centralized, controlling one—without finding a way to earn and maintain legitimacy. The internal logic within Local 401 plays a large role in sustaining that legitimacy on behalf of the existing leadership of the local.

### **Building Unity and Reducing Dissent**

The second function of the narratives and the internal logic they create relates to increasing the level of solidarity and unity within the union and, concomitantly, decreasing expressed dissent. Various narratives feed into a process that connects members with the union, creates a sense of belonging and common cause, and motivates acts of solidarity. The flip-side of this is that many of these narratives also restrict opportunity for dissent and open debate within the union. The framing of Local 401 as a close-knit family is the most explicit of the unifying narratives. Members are given a sense that they belong to something bigger than a collection of workplaces, that when they come together in the union, they are connected in some higher fashion. A sense of family invokes loyalty, as well as a notion of “fatherliness.”

Both feeding into and fed by the family narrative is the informal nature of accountability within the local. When members believe they can address issues directly with the leadership, this leads to a sense of personal engagement. However, it is a double-edged sword, for while it may engender trust and connection, it also individualizes dissent. Members are encouraged to raise matters one-on-one with the leaders. This

approach has the potential of preventing spaces for collective expression of disagreement or concern. It reduces the opportunities for open debate, where dissent can be observed by others. The formulaic, almost flippant manner in which the general membership meetings are run is indicative of this dynamic. The local's leadership style fosters unity and a sense of organic familiarity, but it also quietly closes off avenues of public debate and discussion. The ramifications of this closure cannot be understated. Even in democratic organizations, the temptation exists to confuse dissent with disloyalty and to give greater priority to consensus than to the value of free debate. The narratives employed in Local 401 exacerbate these tendencies and risk forfeiting the vibrancy and resilience that can come from open debate.

The unity created by internal narratives is bolstered by the storyline that Local 401 is different from other unions and that many unions are jealous of the local's achievements. First, it creates a sense of us versus them, which is always an effective tool for engendering internal unity and discouraging dissent. Second, the narrative inoculates members against internalizing any of the criticism they hear. The "different than others" narrative creates an automated response: those others are envious or do not understand how 401 works. This response makes it less likely that members may seriously reflect upon the nature of the criticisms and raise uncomfortable questions internally.

The storyline of being a diverse and inclusive union creates a particularly interesting dynamic, with a twofold outcome. First, through direct observation, I can confirm that it does create an environment in which everyone is welcomed and respected. The creation of such an atmosphere is bound to instill loyalty among members of minority groups and create a sense of solidarity between groups. However, the way in which the narrative is constructed—that Local 401 is "blind" to race, gender, and so on—also serves to limit the story to easier aspects of accommodating diversity. It becomes an easy way to "whitewash" more challenging issues related to race, gender, and age, such as power inequities and the entrenchment of particular intergroup relations. In this way, paradoxically, the narratives embrace diverse identities while simultaneously sidelining them. Other identities are rendered secondary to the "UFCW Local 401" union identity, a prioritization internalized by members themselves. This

particular vein of the narrative network is not so much about diminishing dissent as it is about maintaining existing power relations within the union. Fully embracing diversity would require asking serious questions about how the union is run, who runs it, and how people may be differentially included in its locus of power. Those questions point to the leadership structures themselves and could cause the entire power dynamic to unravel. Thus, diversity is a force that must be contained, and the narratives of inclusivity, family, and unity help keep it in a narrow box.

Striving to achieve unity is a difficult tightrope for unions to walk. Solidarity, a core union principle, is created through building a sense of belonging, mutuality, and common interest. Unity lies at the core of that process and is a precursor to solidarity. However, nurturing unity can also lead unions to see dissent, disagreement, and internal debate as a threat. Too many identities and perspectives muddy the effort to create a single goal upon which to build solidarity. The case of Local 401 shows us two sides of the narrative coin: storylines can both foster unity and discourage disagreement and dissent.

### Frameworks for Managing Change

Local 401 narratives also serve to create a set of frameworks that facilitate leadership-managed change. The internal logic that develops from these narratives has led to a pattern of organizational innovation and to an institutional environment which facilitates that innovation. However, it is very much a leadership-directed form of innovation, occurring when and how the leadership determines, meaning that the frameworks also serve to strengthen stability for the leadership.

While Local 401 has adopted centralized authority and top-down decision-making, certain narratives require the leadership to use that authority actively, responsively, and militantly. In short, the leadership must deliver, or at least be seen to be delivering. The need to maintain an appearance of accomplishment creates a dynamic in which the leaders are constantly looking for new ways to improve their performance. Interacting with this motivation are the structural particularities of Local 401 that lower barriers to achieving innovation.

Of particular importance here are the frames related to strong, responsive, and accessible leadership and a militant, principled, and

member-driven union. While they work to legitimize many aspects of the local's top-down structures and processes, they also create an expectation that the leadership's actions will be consistent with the narratives. While narratives are not deterministic, their ability to organize experience into coherent stories will shape how the leaders themselves interpret a given situation. Local 401's particular matrix of narratives fosters a tendency to try new things, be on the lookout for new organizing opportunities, and take tough stances against employers. The union's track record of change is, in part, a by-product of its construction of narratives. In addition, the local's strong centralized control permits change to happen at a pace and in a manner that does not destabilize the organization. In short, the leaders must act, but they have great latitude in ascertaining when and how to do so.

It may be the combination of change and stability, both motivated by narrative, that has created the unique dynamics observed in Local 401. This combination, which has the potential to create tension and fracture, has instead created sustainable change within the status quo, at least during the two decades examined here.

#### NARRATIVE INFLUENCE: POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE?

As we have seen, narratives appear to both reflect and influence dynamics within Local 401. They serve the interests of the powerful within the union to maintain legitimacy, stability, and the status quo. This outcome can raise questions about what happens to other perspectives, such as those coming from individuals or groups who hold dissenting opinions or who offer alternative ways to run the union. An outsider to the local may find it difficult to justify narratives that squelch internal democracy, entrench highly centralized authority, and encourage notions of leadership residing in one strong (male) individual. At the same time, however, narratives also impose a logic upon the powerful that restricts their available options. They are, of course, better positioned than others to create and amend the narratives, but that can be difficult to do if the existing narratives are effective at stabilizing power relations. The end result is a complex matrix of narrative consequences.

The question of whether, on the whole, narratives have a positive or negative impact is complicated by the fact that answers to that question

will vary depending upon the perspective one takes. Is organizing the unorganized a union's most important function? Should unions have a vibrant internal democracy with mobilized activists? Is the purpose of unions to promote class consciousness? What one sees as the most appropriate or valuable goals of union action will colour one's judgment of these narratives. While I was in the process of analyzing the narratives that dominate Local 401, I discussed preliminary findings with friends. When I described how certain narratives work to create unity, one friend, looking at the case from a psychological perspective, was impressed by how effectively these narratives fostered feelings of inclusion, acceptance, and belonging, which he felt would be beneficial for the members and make for a stronger organization. Another friend, who came from a union activist background, was appalled at what she perceived as the union leaders' manipulation of members to advance their own self-interest. The narratives and their effects did not change; what differed was the perspectives of the judges.

Whether for better or for worse, however, narratives have undeniably played a key role in shaping the trajectory of UFCW Local 401 over the past two decades. The leadership, like any powerful group, has taken advantage of narratives to create and maintain legitimacy and unity within the union. The narratives have also created a particular logic that has propelled the local toward certain decisions and actions and facilitated and directed change. What seems, from the outside, to be an apparently contradictory set of patterns in Local 401's behaviour and history gains coherence through an analysis of the narratives constructed and reproduced within the local.

Of course, narratives do not explain everything. Yet by studying action and structure alone, we risk missing important aspects of union life. By bringing in narratives and the internal logics and identities they create, we can start to see inside the processes that led to the outward actions. The leaders of Local 401 were acting consistently, based on the sense they had made of their experiences. Furthermore, the narratives that were constructed had the effect, intentionally or not, of shaping the power dynamics within the local, creating legitimacy for the leadership while at the same time compelling them to act in ways consistent with the stories they were telling. And thus we begin to see the why behind the what.



## 5 | Accidental Revitalization and the Role of Leadership

The role of leadership in unions is often a paradoxical one. Unions, at their core, are anchored in collectivity, democracy, and workers' rights. At least in theory, unions are the epitome of the democratic organization, born of worker mobilization and powered by solidarity. In practice, however, they are much more complicated, largely because, in the modern era, labour relations lend themselves to expertise and specialization. The result is that, in terms of concrete operations, unions often come to rely heavily on strong leaders and small cadres of professionals. It is thus at the intersection of the ideal and the real that the true nature of a union local can be found.

The basic organizational structures of Local 401 have not changed over time, nor has its tendency toward centralized authority. However, as we saw in part 1, over the past twenty years, Local 401 has evolved in both its internal affairs and its external actions. The membership has become more diverse, in part because of changes both within the industry and in the economy overall and in part as a result of the union's successes in organizing new groups of workers, many of which have occurred in workplaces that other unions shied away from. The local has adopted new organizing strategies, it has developed methods for representing a wide range of workers, and it has become more politically active. And while it remains highly centralized, it has a membership unified around an informal, highly personalized style of leadership that emphasizes accessibility and accountability.

The previous chapter revealed an internal logic operating within Local 401 that brings a sense of coherence to what might otherwise appear to be contradictions. This logic, which emerges from the narratives that the local has constructed, makes possible the combination of factors we have witnessed. This chapter takes the discussion of Local 401's transformation a step further by examining the changes in the local within the context of the broader phenomenon of union renewal. According to the standard wisdom, Local 401 should be an unlikely site for substantive union renewal because of its stable, centralized leadership and its lack of planning around reform. Yet, as the events outlined in part 1 demonstrate, Local 401 has indeed undergone a process of renewal over the past twenty years. How can this revitalization be explained in the light of current research into union renewal? The unexpected transformation of Local 401 offers a rich opportunity to examine the complex realities of union renewal.

#### THEORIZING UNION RENEWAL

Over the past three decades, the ground has shifted for the North American labour movement. The rise of globalization and neoliberal governments has weakened labour's position in the economy. Employers, spurred on by these macro-forces, have ramped up their antiunion efforts. Simultaneously, the labour market has changed, with the rapid expansion of service industries and the growth of a diverse workforce. Unions have been struggling to respond to these challenges. In the face of these changes, numerous researchers have turned their attention to the question of how unions can successfully revitalize themselves and return to a position of strength. In particular, union renewal research has sought to diagnose how traditional union practices and structures have contributed to the present crisis and to identify specific strategies to revitalize and strengthen unions (see, for example, Fairbrother and Yates 2003; Kumar and Schenck 2006a).

Research by Kim Voss and Rachel Sherman (2000, 2003) suggests that, although union renewal sometimes occurs from the bottom up, it is typically a top-down process, initiated by senior staff and leadership at the national or international level. As Voss points out,

The research on union renewal in the US . . . questions the rosy picture of bottom-up, worker-driven democratic change so prevalent in the academic work on union democracy. Member engagement and rank-and-file involvement are clearly important in their own right, but, to date, paid union staff, strong leadership and central coordination have played a more consistent key role in union renewal. (Voss 2010, 377)

Voss argues that revitalization is most commonly sparked by the infusion of new ideas from levels above that of the individual local, occurring when senior leadership plots a change of course and mandates the necessary priorities and strategies to locals.

That is not to say that vibrant, democratic unions with active memberships are not important to developing stronger unions. Research has shown that internal democratic processes are important variables in union revitalization (Lévesque, Murray, and Le Queux 2005) and that rank-and-file activists are essential actors in the process (Murray et al. 2013). However, activist-initiated renewal usually occurs when a union's members overturn the existing leadership so as to make room for leaders who will chart a new course for the local.

While member-driven upheaval is undeniably an inspiring source of union renewal—a recent example being the Chicago Teachers Union (Uetricht 2014)—the reality is that revitalization is more likely to occur through initiatives imposed on locals by national or international leadership. An instructive example in this regard is Justice for Janitors, a movement whose campaigns are organized by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). For at least two decades now, the organizing model adopted by the SEIU has been lauded for its capacity to reach out to racialized and gendered workers in low-wage positions and for fundamentally reconfiguring the way in which union-based social justice campaigns are run (see Cranford 2004; Milkman 2006; Savage 2006). Indeed, the SEIU's history of incorporating the broader community into its campaigns and creating activist avenues for workers is both well established and well reported. Less often discussed is the fact that most of SEIU's successes were achieved through highly centralized leadership, a reliance on paid staff, and heavy-handed internal manoeuvres such as local mergers and trusteeships, which had a negative impact on internal democracy, activist

empowerment, and member engagement (Moody 2007, 184–97). In addition, the strategies that the Justice for Janitors model uses to empower certain groups, such as recent immigrants, often unintentionally harm other groups, such as migrant workers (Foster and Barnettson 2012).

Another key finding of union renewal research is that renewal is usually a conscious and planned process—that the actors are aware of their goal and make decisions to achieve that goal. Commonly held definitions of union renewal, such as that of Daniel Cornfield and Holly McCammon (2003, 16), have embedded within them a notion of intentionality: “Labour revitalization itself consists of initiatives conceived, developed and taken by labour organizations to redefine their relations with workers, employers and the state.” Union leaders and/or rank-and-file members are perceived as making calculated decisions based upon an explicit analysis of changing external conditions. Case studies of renewal (such as Milkman 2006; Stinson and Ballantyne 2006; Robertson and Murningham 2006) highlight policy papers, internal debates, and structural and budgetary reforms aimed at achieving the explicit goals of renewal.

Union renewal research has thus tended to focus on empirical studies, with the emphasis falling on renewal as the product of conscious responses to external challenges. More recently, however, researchers have come to recognize that an examination of structures and policies is insufficient for an understanding of the dynamics at play if and when a union engages in renewal. As a result, attention has shifted to the internal dynamics that operate within unions, sometimes almost invisibly, and that, in combination with external forces, may either propel or frustrate change. As Christian Dufour and his colleagues (2010, 293) point out, at the same time that unions “reflect and refract” external forces, “they are also strategic agents, acting upon themselves and their broader operating environment.” This more recent research seeks to unravel the complex interplay of factors that determine whether a union will successfully revitalize its practices—variables such as power resources and strategic capabilities (Lévesque and Murray 2010), internalized collective identities (Murray et al. 2010), narrative resources (Lévesque and Murray 2013), and the framing of the crisis or problem (Yates 2010).

In particular, a number of researchers have begun looking at the role of internally constructed systems of meaning in determining union action.

They identify these discursive constructions in different ways—as frames (Yates 1998, 2010), narrative resources (Lévesque and Murray 2013), or even fortifying myths (Voss 1996)—but all refer to essentially the same phenomenon: the construction of frames of meaning. These discursive constructions, as Christian Lévesque and Gregor Murray (2013, 3) explain, “consist of the range of values, shared understanding, stories and ideologies that aggregate identities and concerns. They frame understanding and union actions, and inform a sense of efficacy.” Unions draw upon these frames of meaning—which, while relatively stable, are not static—to make sense of ongoing events and to structure their responses.

#### REFERENTIAL UNIONISMS

Of particular value to our understanding of union renewal is the concept of referential unionisms developed by Murray and his colleagues (2010). In their definition, “referential unionisms” refers to “the production and internalization of sets of practices and norms that inform union behaviour” (313). Over time, they explain, “trade unionists develop principles and practices that translate both their comprehension of how unions function and the social structures in which that unionism is embedded. These principles and practices, however implicit, make up a system of social representation according to which new situations are evaluated and actions envisaged and undertaken” (313). Simply put, then, referential unionisms are internalized constructs on which a union bases its sense of self-identity and that serve as points of reference for interpreting the present and planning a way forward.

Referential unionisms emerge from the interplay among five fundamental features, or dimensions, of unions: collective identities, repertoires of action, resources, representative capacity, and strategic capacity (see Murray et al. 2010, 314–17). *Collective identities* are the self-identities associated with specific groups within a union; these identities interact with one another, sometimes generating tensions and sometimes favouring integration. *Repertoires of action* are the modes and patterns of action on which a union typically relies in pursuing its objectives, while *resources* are the internal capacities, external connections, and discursive mechanisms that a union can mobilize as sources of power. *Representative capacity* refers to the relative degree of engagement between a union’s leadership and

the various groups within the union, whose interests may differ. Finally, *strategic capacity* consists in the ability of a union's leaders to interpret, articulate, and act upon current situations. A union's referential unionisms reflect certain combinations of, or relationships among, these five variables, and the manner in which they combine in turn influences the union's ability to respond to change.

The model proposed by Murray et al. (2010) integrates the various components of union behaviour into a conceptual framework that can help us to understand the mechanisms that operate in union renewal and thus to explain how and why unions change (or do not). By emphasizing the dynamic interaction of the five dimensions of union behaviour, the concept of referential unionisms succeeds in capturing the internal complexity of unions. At the same time, as constructs, referential unionisms "link both internal and external factors in multiple and dynamic ways" (313). In focusing on internal processes, the model does not deny the importance of external factors; rather, it aims to reveal "how these external factors are filtered by interventions on the part of various actors," whose actions may be influenced by internal frames of reference "of which the actors themselves are not always aware" (313). In other words, the concept of referential unionisms allows us to arrive at an integrated understanding of how the internal dynamics operating within a union interact with external forces.

In short, by moving beyond the conscious and overt to include less immediately observable influences on union behaviour, the concept of referential unionisms offers a new way to interpret empirical findings around union renewal. In particular, it emphasizes that outcomes are never determined solely by organizational structures or by decisions and actions founded on rational assessments but emerge as well from a range of tendencies, capacities, and contexts that come together in multiple and sometimes unpredictable ways.

Local 401's narratives, as identified in the previous chapter, feed directly into the work around referential unionisms. In the case of Local 401, how did the union's referential unionisms—created, in part, through its narrative resources—interact with the local's leadership to create opportunities for renewal?

The history outlined in part 1 shows the degree of change that Local 401 has undergone in the past twenty years. Organizing strategies, political engagement, and member involvement all shifted significantly. Meanwhile, the strong, forceful leadership remained steadfast and stable. What role did this unusually stable leadership play in the local's revitalization?

Three specific characteristics of Local 401's leadership fostered and shaped renewal within the local. First, President O'Halloran's combative approach to leadership and his strained and at times rebellious relationship with UFCW Canada carved a space for local action that was unusual for UFCW. Second, the void left by the lack of long-term vision was filled by a pragmatic, in-the-moment form of decision making. Third, the interactions of the leadership's characteristics with the local's narrative-created internal logic (in part shaped by the leadership) built a clear pathway toward renewal.

### An Unexpected Rebel

Doug O'Halloran's involvement in UFCW Canada is filled with contradiction. Deeply embedded in the union's culture in the 1980s, he ascended to the presidency of Local 401 through appointment. However, once there, he took some significant steps to distinguish his leadership from that of both his predecessors and other UFCW locals in Canada.

In the 1980s, the structures of both UFCW Canada and Local 401 fed into strong presidents and weak processes for accountability, which in turn led to concentrated power and tight hierarchical control. UFCW was not known for its political involvement or its social conscience, and it had a reputation for arranging backroom deals and avoiding confrontation with the employer (Moody 1988, 179–82). A former national staff member confirmed this:

Our union lived on voluntary recognitions. The grocery store grew, we grew. Voluntarily recognized, wasn't a lot of fights, not a lot of battles. [We] didn't need to have a fight, a battle. You just got 'em. There they were. So as a president your job was to hire—we used to call them baggage carriers, who typed your letters, and you just floated on the membership rising. You didn't have to fight, no organizing, you didn't have to be smart, didn't have to think. (KO, 38)

In the 1990s and 2000s, UFCW struggled to respond to changes in its core industries, and across the continent, it embarked on “a strategy of ‘controlled retreat’ . . . [which] meant a willingness to accept concessions . . . as long as this did not threaten the international union’s dues base” (Rachleff 1993, 81). Membership engagement was low and militancy was actively discouraged (Moody 1988, 199–206).

As a UFCW Canada staffer, O’Halloran was accustomed to operating with this context. When he was appointed president of Local 401, the leadership of UFCW Canada probably did not expect him to change the direction of the local, given how deeply entrenched he was in the culture. However, he made a distinct mark on the local:

The local 401 as we know it is Doug O’Halloran. Before him, this local ran just like so many other local unions did, very conservatively, very watch the money, watch the spending. . . . Most presidents don’t know who half their members are, they rarely go on a picket line. Doug leads the charge. That is Doug’s style, always been Doug’s style. (KO, 38)

As Local 401’s president, O’Halloran soon began charting an unusual course. As we have seen, his early actions included moving away from voluntary recognitions and rejecting sweetheart deals that he felt undermined the members’ bargaining position. O’Halloran took a highly independent stance, making decisions that he felt were best for the local regardless of consequences elsewhere. As a result, he developed a reputation for sparring with the national office. “National office has given Doug lots of leeway, first of all because they have to. Doug has his reputation. . . . He does what he needs to advance the interests of his local union. My guess is when Doug decides to retire, that national office will probably have more of a presence here and it will be toned down a bit” (staff, 27). O’Halloran acknowledges the dynamic: “The national office, some of the situations we get ourselves into, down there they just think we are fucking crazy. Well O’Halloran did it this time!” This dynamic with the national office is still evident, as exemplified by the pressure placed on O’Halloran to settle in the lead-up to the 2013 Superstore Strike.

It is unclear why UFCW Canada has allowed O’Halloran a greater degree of latitude than that afforded to the leaders of other locals—an autonomy that, as evidenced by the continuing tension between the two



parties, is still contested ground. We must also be mindful that considerations other than O'Halloran's determination may come into play. For example, some study participants suggested that UFCW Canada's reluctant willingness to allow Local 401 to take Superstore on strike when other locals accepted rollbacks may have been affected by the recognition that Alberta, with its booming economy at the time, was a different economic context, making rollbacks a more difficult sell to members.

Regardless of the reason, during his tenure as president, O'Halloran has found a way to chart a semi-independent course for Local 401. This degree of freedom has proven to be an important starting point for the local's path toward revitalization. Had UFCW Canada more strongly asserted its authority over the local or had O'Halloran proven less effective at staking out his territory, many of the initiatives and innovations undertaken by the local may have faltered or never occurred. This point is bolstered by the fact that many of the initiatives remain unique or rare across UFCW Canada. Local 401's strike pay is unmatched by any other local. Its diverse organizing targets and ability to mobilize traditionally hard-to-organize workers, while not unique, remains the exception to the rule within private sector unionization and within UFCW in particular. Local 401 has the most robust and active strike record of any UFCW local in Canada.

Of course, creating space for local-level leadership does not necessarily lead to the use of that space to renew and revitalize. O'Halloran's degree of independence from the national union does not fully explain how and why the local transformed so dramatically. However, O'Halloran's rebel act was a necessary precursor to changing the direction of the local's activities.

### **Pragmatic Change in Local 401**

The second leadership characteristic that led to renewal has to do with how the local navigated innovation and change. The current study revealed no evidence that Local 401's leadership actively and consciously set out to revitalize the local. To the contrary, the evidence suggests the union was engaging with decisions in the heat of battle, working out solutions to problems as they arose and trying to learn from past failures. There was no grand plan, no larger vision. The local's leaders were just doing what they needed to do to serve their members and win their battles.

As an illustration, the decision to raise strike pay significantly, to a level almost equal to that of many members' regular wage, was critical to strengthening the resolve of strikers and thus increasing the likelihood of winning a strike. This decision arose out of the aftermath of the failed 1997 Safeway strike. O'Halloran saw inadequate strike pay as a barrier to maintaining a strong picket line, so he corrected it. The key to getting picket line support, he said, "is being able to pay reasonable strike pay. And thank god the membership at 401 has recognized that. We try to pay the people 80 percent of their income in strike pay. No other union does that." But the strike pay bump does not appear to have been made with any long view calculation. Rather, it appears that O'Halloran made the decision in response to a failed strike. It was an attempt to correct a mistake and prevent it from happening again.

Similar motivation can be seen with other initiatives. The relief rep system was implemented to address staff burnout. Increasing the responsibilities of stewards was a response to breakdowns in servicing. Establishing new committees (such as the Community Action Network Committee) was an effort to shore up weaknesses in the local's outreach to diverse groups.

Another example is Local 401's use of increasingly provocative and dramatic communications during strikes. During the two-decade period of study, communications became more pointed, assertive, and controversial. This change flowed from a growing recognition that bolder messaging was more effective at getting public and employer attention. As Hesse explained:

Ultimately the union should be the voice of reason and compassion, but to the extent that we do that, we get marginalized. We don't get noticed by the media, and so you have got to be loud to get attention in a loud, provocative world. . . . Outrageous times will increasingly call for outrageous measures. There is a reactive component to what we do. We certainly try to be proactive, but there is a reactive component. . . . If people who are not involved in your cause or your purpose directly [are going] to be interested in or get your message, you need to be provocative.

Hesse's repetition of the word *reactive* suggests an emphasis on a case-by-case response to the situation. There is evidence of ongoing

learning from each strike experience, but participants articulated that the learning was more about fixing what didn't work the previous time and tweaking what did work than about developing a new communications strategy for the local.

The shift in organizing strategies and tactics tells a similar story. The local did not set out to be an organizing union that adopts innovative approaches. A more accurate reflection may be that it fell into that identity. The initial impetus for additional efforts in organizing actually came from UFCW Canada. At the 2003 national convention, a decision "put percentage mandates on locals. . . . Whatever revenue you have, you have to spend a percentage on organizing" (staff, 2). This national resolution started the wheels of organizing within Local 401, but it was internal decisions that shaped the nature and targets of that organizing. While many nonunionized grocery stores and related food service companies were available to the local as potential new certifications, its leadership opted to organize new types of industries rather than focus on deepening the local's density in grocery. As of the time of writing, the union has not engaged in a major grocery-related organizing drive in almost twenty years.

However, the outcome of organizing casinos, meat-packing plants, car rental companies, and so forth did not emerge out of a coherent set of strategic decisions. Neither leaders nor members could articulate a vision for Local 401's organizing strategy. Instead, they self-identified as belonging to a local that "organizes anybody":

We're pretty proud of the fact that we're the union that will represent anyone, even when other unions don't want to because it's economically not feasible. Shaw was the prime example. CUPE [Canadian Union of Public Employees] suggested the workers come to us because they believed that we could take on the kind of fight that it took to win there. (O'Halloran, quoted in Howell and Mah 2005)

The leaders and members alike take a great deal of pride in the local's willingness to organize any group of workers who want unionization. "We certainly don't turn anybody away," said one member. "I've never heard of anybody approaching us looking to be unionized and we've said no" (member, 6). It is widely recognized by members that organizing targets are often decided by O'Halloran out of personal determination or stubbornness rather than a mapped-out strategy. For example, many feel

that the victory at Lakeside was due to O'Halloran refusing to give up. Despite substantial defeats over multiple campaigns at the plant, O'Halloran kept ordering another effort. "So virtually for the first three or four years we never got our allotted 40 percent. But through the persistence of President O'Halloran for one, we remained here" (Duckworth, ALHI interview, 2007).

Often, Local 401 did not actively target employers but simply responded to requests. It was always O'Halloran who decided whether to take on the challenge. In interviews, none of the three leaders were able to articulate a long-term rationale for selecting organizing targets, leaving the impression that campaigns were chosen based on a mixture of opportunity, stubbornness, and personal impulses.

The development of innovative organizing and representation strategies appears to have occurred through a similar ad hoc process. The new approaches to campaigns described in part 1—including multilingual literature, peer-to-peer organizing, involvement in the cultural communities, and new means of persuading potential members—were sometimes strategies that had been used by unions elsewhere, but often they were developed internally through trial and error. But again, the emergence of new tactics was less strategic and proactive than it was reactive, combined with the organizers learning from past mistakes. In the Lakeside experience, for example, the successful drive was an act of jumping on an opportunity created by the immigrant activists who staged a wildcat strike, and the innovations implemented during the drive represented an attempt to learn from past failures. Staff and activists in the local talk about doing things on the fly in response to changing circumstances. A common message among those involved was that they tried new things because old tactics were not working, and at the time, they were not at all sure the innovations would help.

For Local 401, being innovative was simply a survival strategy. "We were going to organize on a large scale," a staffer recalled. "But that meant massive litigation and not being afraid to litigate. And not being afraid to litigate meant you needed the creative argument and a creative way of doing things" (staff, 24). The local developed a tendency to draw in community groups, such as churches and advocacy organizations, into their disputes and broadening the nature of the issues discussed. It also

increased its use of paid advertising to persuade the public and to expand the scope of the dispute. Both were efforts aimed at increasing the profile of the local's disputes and were developed for specific campaigns rather than as part of an overarching plan for renewal.

Finally, it must be remembered that all of the changes and innovations undertaken by Local 401 occurred in the context of a highly centralized, top-down structure. Decisions to try something new did not have to be debated by a large body or wait on the approval of an oversight committee. Changing course was usually a matter of persuading O'Halloran that something was a good idea. In other words, while it is not impossible that a similar dynamic would have emerged even if the local had operated in a more democratic manner, Local 401's hierarchical structure and internal processes facilitated the implementation of fast-paced, ad hoc decisions. Furthermore, the presence of a highly streamlined decision-making process, which allowed the local to change direction as need be, tended to discourage its leadership from sitting down to plan for the future. As a result, the local did not develop grand schemes and new visions for how to chart its future. Instead, change came from a series of reactive decisions that had longer-term ramifications for the organization.

### Interactions with Narratives

The local engaged in reactive, pragmatic innovations that proved effective in revitalizing the union in a number of ways. Both the centralized structures and O'Halloran's ability to carve out an independent space for the local were integral to facilitating the implementation of those innovations. But what led to the cumulative nature of the reforms? Something set in motion a dynamic that encouraged continuous improvement and ongoing experimentation. To answer that question, we return to the notion of narrative.

In chapter 4, I argued that families of narratives created an internal logic that made sense of the local's experiences. The logic flowed into a self-identity that defined 401's character and behaviour. While the local's leaders clearly did not have an overarching plan for renewal, within the logic created by their narratives, they believed that their actions were consistent with Local 401's identity and that what they were doing simply made sense. It is this sense of consistency that sets in motion the possibility of ongoing revitalization.

That the leaders perceived themselves to be acting in accord with this broader self-identity is illustrated in how they framed the rationales for many of their actions, frequently justifying their innovations, changes, and actions through the claim of being guided by higher principles. In doing so, they brought in the language of many of their narratives, speaking of the union as being member-driven, militant, and principled and claiming that effectiveness requires strong, accessible leadership. Also implicit in their language was the narrative that Local 401 is different from other unions.

A few examples may illustrate the degree to which they appealed to the internal logic created by their narratives to understand and explain their actions. On the issue of increasing strike pay, O'Halloran, in addition to acknowledging the strategic benefits, emphasized that they acted out of a sense of fairness and concern for their members' well-being: "We are able to keep the wolf away from the door" (quoted in Kleiss 2009).

The local's leadership returned time and time again to the concept of acting upon principles or a broader philosophy. When explaining why the local is willing to organize anyone, O'Halloran put it down to principles:

You know, some places that have twenty members, forty members, fifty members—a lot of unions won't organize them. A lot of unions won't organize places where you know you are going to have a fight. We have always had a different philosophy. The union should always be there with morals and principles to do the job for the underdog.

Here, O'Halloran draws upon both the commitment to principles and the local's superiority to other unions, which further elevates the nobility of the union's cause.

The leaders were unable to provide strategic reasons why they target the workplaces they do for organizing. Again, they returned to principle. "It really is a philosophy that either you have or you don't have," said O'Halloran. Hesse argued that the local's more controversial communications strategies arise from the fact that its leaders are "truth tellers." "I think there is an element of responsibility," he said. "Employers will say it is outrageously provocative to talk about food safety in Lakeside, but it would be irresponsible not to."

One could argue that these justifications are simply examples of rhetoric designed to create the impression of acting upon principle. But why would Local 401's leaders be reluctant to admit that their decisions were actually based on strategic considerations? Furthermore, the language of principles was used by a wide range of participants in the study, not just the leadership trio. Narratives about social responsibility are evidently deeply ingrained in the identity of Local 401.

It is clear that the local's leadership, staff, and members draw from the constructed narratives to explain and make sense of their action. But it is equally clear that the internal logic arising from those narratives shapes the actions that the local takes. When confronted with the need to decide how to respond to a new situation or problem, we naturally draw upon past experiences and learning. Since narratives help us make sense of our experiences, the stories we have constructed about our past actions will loom large at that moment of decision. Such is the dynamic that took shape in Local 401. When faced with a new challenge—a tough organizing drive, demands for rollbacks, difficulty in mobilizing new members—Local 401 leaders, staff, and activists have drawn upon past experiences, which have been ordered and explained through the prism of their constructed narratives, to inform their decisions and actions. Having built a self-identity of a principled, militant, responsive, member-driven union, a logic kicks in that propels them to act in a similar fashion the next time. Subsequently, innovation begets further innovation, even if it was not strictly planned. Add to that a structure and leadership style that facilitates the implementation of innovative ideas, and the local is set upon a course of revitalization, even if its members and leaders are unaware of that direction.

#### THE DYNAMICS OF UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

As Local 401's evolution over the past twenty years reveals, renewal arose from a series of pragmatic, reactive decisions rather than from any conscious strategy to revamp the local's practices and approach. This raises the question of the relationship between intention and outcome in the context of union renewal. Clearly, in the absence of decisions made by Local 401's leaders, it is very unlikely that renewal would have occurred—and yet those decisions were not intended to produce renewal. Such a scenario,

in which union revitalization occurs inadvertently, stands in a position to add nuance and depth to our understanding of union renewal processes.

### Accidental Revitalization

I began this project expecting to find that Local 401's leaders had experienced a eureka moment, a point when they recognized the need to change if the local was to survive. That moment never came. While the leaders recognized the threats of a downward trend in the grocery industry, the rising wave of neoliberalism and its associated antiunion animus, and the challenges of increasing diversity in the workforce, they never crafted a strategy to combat or address these challenges. Perhaps they were too busy fighting immediate battles. Instead, renewal came via a series of ad hoc decisions as they tried not to repeat past mistakes and to become more effective in a pragmatic way.

The particular path taken by UFCW Local 401 does not fit neatly with current theories about how unions reform themselves. As discussed earlier, reform efforts are seen as resulting either from directed, centralized action by national leadership in response to an analysis of a problem (Voss 2010; Stinson and Ballantyne 2006) or from rank-and-file insurgency that turns the local toward activist unionism (Cranford and Ladd 2003; Kainer 2009, 15–32). In the case of Local 401, it was a bit of both and a lot of neither. The national union played a minor role in directing resources for organizing, and a subset of local members had become more active, spurring some change. However, the bulk of the transformation resulted from the actions of local staff and leadership. Furthermore, renewal occurred without an identifiable crisis within the local, without a change in leadership, and without a vocal call for change by the membership, all of which are regularly identified as necessary precursors to renewal efforts. Perhaps most important, the change occurred without an intentional, conscious plan of action. The leaders of Local 401 did not set out to renew their local; they were simply going about their business as best they could.

The patterns observed in the case of Local 401 might usefully be termed “accidental revitalization”—although this is not to imply that revitalization was a matter of blind luck or chance. Accidental revitalization refers to a situation in which actions that have an immediate, short-term goal end up leading to longer-term transformations of union



behaviour and structure. Local 401 leaders did not embark on a project to revamp how their local operates; in fact, in many respects, they were (and still are) highly conservative. Instead, they responded to specific issues with focused decisions designed to win particular battles. However, taken together, their decisions developed an internal consistency, fuelled by a strong self-identity narrative, and thus built upon one another in a way that served to alter the longer-term trajectory of the local.

The notion of accidental revitalization does not deny the existence of logic and intentionality. Rather, the “accident” in accidental revitalization resides in the relationship between immediate intention and eventual outcome. In arriving at decisions, Local 401’s leaders sought to identify actions that it perceived would serve the best interests of the local in the present situation. Overall, their goal was to expand and strengthen the union. Some might thus argue that the renewal of Local 401 was not accidental at all but was rather a deliberate process spearheaded by the union’s leaders. O’Halloran, in particular, made key decisions at key moments. He decided to organize outside the grocery industry. He decided to increase picket pay. He decided to adopt innovative organizing tactics. Inarguably, these actions led to revitalization. So what is accidental here?

The answer has to do with intention. In making decisions, the intention of the Local 401 leadership was to take the most promising next step, and their logic was thus circumscribed by the moment. At no point were the union’s leaders able to articulate an overall strategy for the local or even, for that matter, a concrete vision. Their account of events revealed a high degree of short-term thinking, with little apparent attention given to mapping out the future. Their focus fell on the moment, not on sustaining the vibrancy of the local over the longer term. To engage in an intentional process of renewal, however, one needs more than ad hoc decisions. Most studies of union renewal find the presence of an explicit plan for change, and that was lacking in the case of Local 401. Yet the fact that no policy papers or grand edicts informed the actions taken by the union’s leadership does not diminish their impact, nor does it reduce their effectiveness in contributing to long-term change.

The concept of accidental revitalization opens up space for an understanding of change within unions capable of accommodating the complex

practical considerations that operate on the ground. Often there is insufficient time to ponder a long-term strategy for survival: sometimes unions have to react immediately. The term “accidental revitalization” seeks to capture the fact that a union’s trajectory is often the result of a series of responses to continually evolving conditions, internal as well as external—responses that interact to produce unanticipated consequences over time. The term serves to focus our attention on the unintended or inadvertent nature of the long-term change, which emerges almost as a by-product. In the case of Local 401, renewal was not the goal, but it was the result.

Accidental revitalization can be integrated into more deliberate models of renewal, creating a multifaceted explanation of how unions renew themselves. Whether from the top down or through rank-and-file action, a union may construct a framework for reform and then implement critical decisions, yet the outcome is still contingent on the reactions of individual actors to immediate situations. In the context of a renewal project, a local’s executive staff, along with union organizers and activists, are called upon to engage with workers, employers, and representatives of external agencies (such as the state or the press), all of whom have their own interests. Those actors must frequently make judgment calls, and, while their judgment may be informed by broader strategies, the specific choices they make shape the overall direction of the renewal project. Accidental revitalization recognizes that any organization committed to its own evolution is caught in a dialectic between intentions and consequences. Actions may be purposeful, but their outcome can rarely be predicted with certainty.

### Local 401 from the Perspective of Referential Unionisms

Perhaps not surprisingly, union renewal is often associated with a change in leadership, given the tendency of power become entrenched. But it is important not to overstate the case. As Local 401 illustrates, at least in some circumstances, strong and well-established leaders can act as agents of transformation. The willingness of leaders to make bold decisions is contingent upon a variety of factors, including the internalized narrative frameworks within which they operate and the opportunities available to them to implement change without undermining the security of their position. If the decisions made by Local 401’s leadership ultimately played a central role in the union’s revitalization, however, they did so in the

context of the local's existing and emerging referential unionisms. The concept of referential unionisms thus offers a useful lens through which to view the changes that occurred at Local 401.

The most visible aspect of the local's evolution lies in its repertoire of actions. The toolbox of actions available to the local's leadership both shifted and expanded significantly over the years. As Murray et al. (2010, 315) point out, new repertoires of action generally evolve through a process in which "defeat and victory, support and opposition, imagination and repression variously overlap" (315). The more effective certain actions were in the past, the more likely they are to be repeated, with the result that repertoires of action can function as obstacles to change. In the critical estimation of Local 401's leaders, however, many of the union's past actions seemed unlikely to be successful in present circumstances. They therefore exercised their imagination, rejecting long-standing approaches and developing new organizing tactics.

Although, during the period of study, the leadership of Local 401 remained stable, collective identities within the union underwent a significant transformation. Along with an influx of women and youth, the ethnic composition of the local shifted dramatically, multiplying the number of collective identities gathered beneath the Local 401 umbrella. This, in turn, placed pressure on the representative capacity of the local's leadership. Its response was to foster a strong identity for Local 401 as a whole, thereby creating a group cohesion that transcended other identities and facilitated collective action against employers. In creating this sense of shared identity, the union's leaders made effective use of the power resources at their disposal, most notably narrative resources, which played a central role in building an internal logic and diminishing resistance to change. In addition, the leadership drew on both internal and external resources, by enhancing communication strategies and cultivating organic leaders and by forging political alliances.

At the time, changes in the union's core industry, including an increasingly antagonistic stance on the part of employers, had raised questions about the sustainability of relatively collaborative approaches to negotiating with employers. The need for new tactics was a test of the local's strategic capacity. Its leaders responded successfully, displaying a clear ability to interpret new situations and adjust the union's actions

accordingly. They were particularly adept at the use of one of the key components of strategic capacity, namely, framing. As Murray et al. (2010, 317) explain, framing refers to “the capacity of unions to develop and put forward their own projects and relate them to a larger whole,” a process that entails “shaping a common understanding of society, collective action and the role of unions.” Local 401’s leaders were very good at articulating a broader framework within which to situate and justify the union’s actions.

During the periods under study, Local 401’s leadership faced two major challenges—one internal, in the form of an increasingly diverse membership, and the other external, in the form of the reaction of employers to changes in the economy. The challenge to the union’s representative capacity created by the development of new collective identities demanded that the leadership work to foster and maintain internal solidarity, while also safeguarding their own authority. In response, the local’s leaders drew on power resources, especially discursive resources, to create a sense of stability—to define a clear identity for Local 401 around which workers could rally and to persuade members to have faith in existing organizational structures and centralized leadership.

At the same time, shifts in the negotiating climate required the leadership to pursue new tactics, which not only further expanded and diversified its membership, as the local successfully organized new workplaces, but also altered its familiar repertoire of action. As a result, Local 401’s leaders had to find ways to justify these new modes of behaviour, both to union members and to the broader community. Again, they drew on narrative resources to create an internal logic that, while reinforcing a sense of unity and stability, also expanded the union’s strategic capacity by providing a framing that legitimated the decisions made by its leadership. The union’s high degree of strategic capacity in turn facilitated changes to both its repertoire of action and its representative capacity, changes that were bolstered, especially, by the use of narrative resources.

In the case of Local 401, the interaction of the five dimensions thus reveals a complex and dynamic matrix of factors that created a pathway for renewal. One can speculate that, had changes within one of the dimensions taken a different shape, the matrix might have disintegrated, and possibly revitalization might not have occurred at all. In other words, even

though Local 401 might initially seem an unexpected site for renewal, one can construct a coherent explanation for the phenomenon by examining the interconnections among the union's five basic dimensions. While narrative resources and the logic they impose on leadership are central to the story of Local 401, narratives do not exist in isolation. Rather, the changes observed at Local 401 were produced in part by interactions between narratives and other factors.

An analysis of union behaviour based on the model of referential unionisms, which emphasizes the dynamic nature of the interpretive frameworks that give rise to a union's self-definition, dovetails easily with the notion of accidental revitalization. Understanding change as the product of interaction among a series of variables—the five dimensions—allows space for accident. Not only is the precise form that these dimensions assume in the context of a particular union itself contingent on human action, but so are the outcomes of the interactions among them. At a micro level, the model allows us to identify points at which a contingency intervened to alter the intended outcome of a specific action, as well as to trace the ramifications of this unexpected outcome for the union ecosystem as a whole. At a macro level, we can see how, over time, changes within one or more of the variables—whether these changes were prompted by internal decisions or external forces—altered existing patterns of interaction to produce results (such as renewal) that union actors did not actually set out to create.

#### LESSONS FROM LOCAL 401

As we have seen, the transformation of Local 401 over the past two decades challenges much of the standard wisdom about the circumstances that give rise to union renewal. Although the Local 401 leadership recognized the need to respond to an increasingly inhospitable climate within the grocery industry, which it did by choosing to organize outside that industry, we cannot point to a particular point of crisis or a specific moment when a strategic decision was made to alter the basic philosophy or character of the union. The changes in Local 401 did not result from rank-and-file agitation, nor did they reflect strategic decisions made at the national level. The standard triggers of renewal are absent.

Bearing in mind that Local 401 is only a single case, what can we learn from the particular way in which its revitalization occurred? Certain conditions were present, even if they were not the familiar ones. The leadership was secure, but it was not isolated from the local's members. It faced immediate challenges that sparked innovative strategies, and it had enough legitimacy and authority to implement these strategies. And, finally, the local's narrative self-framing—the stories it told about itself—created the image of a bold, “fighting” union, willing to embrace change, while at the same time affirming a number of enduring principles that served as an anchor. Even if the actions taken by Local 401's leaders were motivated more by pragmatics than principle, the narrative framework lent coherence to those actions.

In short, in the case of Local 401, the process of revitalization rested on a combination of internal logic, narratives, and structures that facilitate action. In addition, the local's leaders obviously played a central role in the changes that occurred—yet they did not intentionally embark on renewal. Their focus fell on the immediate future, and their decisions aimed to achieve short-term objectives. But the actions they took altered the union's equilibrium, changing the patterns of interaction among its various components. In the longer term, then, the result was a shift in Local 401's referential unionisms. Although inadvertently, the local redefined itself, and in a way that produced revitalization.

The concept of accidental revitalization has the potential to deepen and strengthen our understanding of how unions change. For the most part, union leaders and activists are preoccupied with daily issues and challenges. They focus their energy on the latest round of negotiations, the current organizing drive, or a looming political campaign. At the local level, unionists are pragmatic practitioners. While they are most certainly capable of long-term vision and strategizing, the emphasis often falls on more immediate concerns. There is an intuitive logic to understanding renewal as a by-product of shorter-term decisions. Drawing upon that intuitive logic can contribute to a more robust theorizing of union renewal.

## 6 | Revisiting the Business/Social Union Divide

One of the most enduring notions about unions in North America is the division between business unions and social unions. These categories serve to organize our insights into union behaviour and structure, which is why they remain powerful concepts. However, they risk oversimplifying the internal life of unions and overlooking other dimensions of union behaviour.

Much has changed for unions in the past thirty years. The onslaught of neoliberalism, globalization, and deindustrialization has dramatically reshaped the world in which unions operate. While the concepts of “business union” and “social union” have existed since the emergence of industrial unionism, their meanings became entrenched by the postwar Wagner model of labour relations and the Cold War. A key question is whether such conceptualizations are relevant today.

UFCW Local 401 is a useful case for examining the question of whether the long-standing notion of these two types of union accurately depicts forms of union behaviour today. UFCW International has an entrenched reputation as a classic business union, with its top-down structures, resistance to activist mobilization, and reluctance to engage in radical politics (Moody 2007, 114–20). The same is true, to a lesser extent, of UFCW Canada. As we have seen, the outward appearance of Local 401 is similarly linked to business unionism—in particular, its structures and leadership style. Yet when one examines more closely what Local 401 actually *does*, the

picture begins to blur. The local's aggressive tactics against employers, frequent strike action, willingness to engage in a variety of political and broader social causes, and embrace of underrepresented workers belie the portrait of a stodgy, conservative business union. Compared to similar UFCW locals in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, Local 401 appears to be more militant and welcoming of diversity. Making sense of Local 401 in terms of categorizing unions requires a more careful examination of features not readily visible to the outside observer and may demand a rethinking of traditional categories.

In this final chapter, I examine the social/business union divide through an exploration of how it is understood within Local 401 and how it manifests itself in actual union action. I adopt an integrated approach, taking into account structure, process, and outcomes, as well as the intentions and internal frames that drive the local's actions. In this way, the dynamics between the practicalities of Local 401's experience and the theory of union forms are revealed, which in turn leads us to new reflections on the nature of the unionism duality.

#### THE THEORY OF BUSINESS AND SOCIAL UNIONISM

Despite the ubiquity of the business and social categories, much of the literature on the topic assumes that these terms are straightforward and well understood. There is, however, some confusion about the exact meaning of the terms, not only because many other words are used to refer to these two broad concepts but also because scholars and practitioners use the terms in multiple ways. While most researchers today acknowledge that the business/social categorization is a spectrum rather than a dichotomy, our common usage of the terms continues to imply the latter.

#### Business Unionism

Business unionism interprets the union role narrowly. The task of the union is to address the immediate workplace needs of its members. Business unions eschew a broader political agenda and tend to perceive workers as having "a common community of interest with capital" (Moody 2007, 164). Internally, business unions are more likely to have a top-down, leader-driven structure with limited avenues for member participation (Schenk 2003, 246).



In much of the unionism literature, business unionism—sometimes called economic unionism, the service model, or bread-and-butter unionism—is underdefined. It often receives only a couple of short sentences (or even bullet points) before the author moves on to juxtapose it to social unionism (see, for instance, Schenk 2004, 188–89; Kumar 1993, 210). Christopher Schenk (2003, 246), for example, offers eight brief descriptors of business unionism: a tendency for union leaders to solve problems for members; a reliance on formal grievance procedures; a passive membership; a reliance on experts and technical specialists; closed channels of communication; centralized and top-heavy structures; a growing dependence upon the employer; and external and internal organizing as distinct activities.

Because they lack a vibrant internal democracy, business unions are heavily shaped by their leaders, a dynamic dubbed “popular bossdom” by H. A. Turner (1962, 291). In such unions, “the relations which actually exist between the membership and the key officials will depend very much on the latter’s style of leadership . . . so that two unions of essentially the same real governmental type may present very different characters to the outside worlds” (291), as well as internally. One of the challenges of this leadership-dependent dynamic is the inherent difficulty in identifying consistent features of business unionism.

Implicit in much of the discussion of business unionism is the assumption that it is the mainstream, expected form of unionism today, reflecting the formalization that has occurred since World War II (Camfield 2011, 69–73; Robinson 2000, 127; Voss and Sherman 2003, 51–52). While this assumption contains an element of truth, its linkages to earlier eras of union history should not be neglected. So-called business unions have existed since the early days of unionism (see, for example, Hoxie 1923, 45), suggesting that business unionism is tightly linked to the nature of unionism’s relationship with capitalism rather than just being a creature of the postwar Wagner model (Hyman 1975, 185–203). Business unions attempt to work within the existing system. They may still be in conflict with the employer, but they are choosing to “play the hand they are dealt.”

## Social Unionism

The literature defining social unionism is more fully developed. There is widespread agreement that social unionism takes a broader outlook on the role of the union, one that is more explicitly political and sees workers as citizens with a diversity of identities and interests extending beyond the workplace (Schenk 2003, 247; Kumar and Murray 2006, 81–84; Baines 2010, 489–90). There is also broad consensus that social unions engage, to a greater or lesser extent, in more democratic, activist internal processes and structures (Ross 2007, 27–28). Different forms of social unionism have been identified based upon on how unions manifest the broad goals of social unionism and their motivations for adopting those goals.

In what some call the “organizing model” of social unionism, unions adopt an inclusive, activist orientation with the goal of increasing union vitality and facilitating the organizing of new members (Schenk 2003, 247). While it is strongly focused on membership, this model prioritizes the interests of the institution over the goals of social justice. In contrast, “social movement unionism” has a more democratizing goal (Ross 2007, 27)—mobilizing members to build the union as part of a broader political movement. Another subcategory of social unionism is “community unionism,” which seeks to disconnect unionization from the rigid legal framework constructed since World War II (Black 2005). Community unions espouse organizing across worksites and among the unemployed, impoverished, and marginalized, and they are concerned with broader economic and social issues. They “bridge the home-workplace divide” and “take a holistic approach to the lives of working people” (Black 2005, 26). This form of social unionism is rarely, if ever, found in the contemporary Canadian labour movement (Baines 2010, 490).

There is little agreement among researchers about how common social unionism is in North America. Some argue that it is frequently found in Canada and that most Canadian unions display some social union characteristics (Ross 2007, 17; Kumar and Murray 2006, 83). These authors point to specific unions, such as the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) and the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW, now Unifor), as examples of unions practicing a broader political agenda (see, for instance, Gindin 1995, 197–254). Others, such as David Camfield (2011), adopt a more pessimistic outlook, positing a thesis of “the decay of unions as

working-class movement organizations” (67) and arguing that all unions in Canada today are business unions (84–88). Jeff Shantz (2009) argues that social unionism is limited by structural barriers embedded within Canada’s decentralized legal regime for collective bargaining.

One of the challenges in isolating the features of social unionism is that outward behaviours can emerge from a range of motivations. As Stephanie Ross (2007, 26) notes, the “key to recognizing, and understanding, social unionism is therefore not the use of a particular tactic but rather the *relationship* between that tactic and the underlying goal it is meant to serve.” This observation suggests that while, at their core, business and social unions may be fundamentally different, their various possible manifestations make the act of identifying the range of characteristics separating them rather fraught.

#### COMPARING UFCW LOCAL 401 TO THEORY

The intriguing structures, processes, and actions of Local 401 make for an interesting storyline, as we saw in part 1. But what does this narrative teach us about classifying unions? How well do the practical realities of Local 401 fit the conceptualizations of business and social unionism?

In her overview of business and social unionisms in theory and practice, Stephanie Ross (2012) introduces a novel approach to classifying unions. She begins from a recognition that categorizing unions on the business/social continuum is more complex than first imagined. Her earlier work found evidence of internal contradictions, such as practices that did not align with a union’s stance on environmental sustainability (Hrynyshyn and Ross 2011) and actions by a so-called social union that potentially undermined “ongoing solidarity and mobilization” of the working class (Ross 2011, 114). Ross used these observed contradictions to draw out the nuances in our understanding of unionisms, arguing that business and social union actions are more similar than we might expect. Positing business and social unionisms as dichotomous types, she says, “ignores the fact that, for most unions, these are two related faces of union activity, often in tension with each other but sometimes mutually reinforcing” (Ross 2012, 43). She argues that the dualist framing overstates linkages and constructs false barriers. For example, she suggests that the link between external social union action and internal

participatory democracy is overstated and that so-called narrow union functions such as collective bargaining can be a site for achieving broader gains for the working class. In short, Ross raises the possibility that both unionism as dichotomy and unionism as continuum may be inaccurate and oversimplified.

Ross (2012) proposes that union practices be analyzed on three dimensions: collective action frames, strategic repertoire, and internal organizational practices. Collective action frames are the sets of narratives and identities that provide purpose for union activity and define how the union sees workers and their interests. They can be seen as products of the process of narrative construction and as part of the logic that narratives create. A strategic repertoire is the series of tactics and strategies chosen by a union to enact its claimed purpose. Internal organizational practices are the dynamics enacted within the union and the use of power within the structures. While Ross gives some degree of primacy to collective action frames in organizing the union's identity, she argues that the three dimensions interact to shape, limit, and enact one another. In other words, the elements combine to create a logic that structures union action. Ross argues that certain combinations of elements sometimes occur to form our conceptions of business and social unionism; however, "the three elements are not rigidly attached" (34) and a great deal of contingency exists in union action. Ross acknowledges that the elements can be contradictory and that collective action frames are not always consistent. The dynamic created among the dimensions allows for contradiction and uneven patterns of behaviour that may not fit within existing social/business conceptions.

Ross's analysis remains in the conceptual realm. She provides a useful analytical tool, but to date, she has not attempted to apply the approach to a real world situation. In this chapter, I aim to operationalize Ross's conceptualization by examining how Local 401 exhibits each of her three elements.

### **Internal Organizational Practices**

Earlier chapters examined the formal structures and informal decision-making processes of Local 401, revealing a local operating with an openly top-down internal process. While the local's loose, informal

dynamic makes the leadership appear approachable and accountable, there is little doubt that the local is run by the small cadre of leaders. The changes to the local in the past twenty years were determined and navigated by those leaders with little input from members. Furthermore, their long tenure and the lack of any visible dissent within the local gives the leadership team a high degree of security. Elections appear to be fairly nominal and the oversight by the executive board seems more theoretical than actual.

This top-down structure with secure, long-serving leaders is considered a common and defining feature of business unionism. In this regard, Local 401 fits neatly into that conceptual basket. It inherited a traditional business union structure from the international union, and the local leaders have utilized that structure to secure their authority within the local.

Other aspects of business union internal practices are not so easily applied to Local 401. One of the dimensions in which social and business unions supposedly differ is in their level of rank-and-file activism and the degree to which the union encourages member empowerment and engagement. Local 401 cannot be considered an activist local. It has long relied heavily upon paid staff for handling the work of servicing and negotiating. Until recently, shop stewards in grocery stores did not even file grievances, instead handing that responsibility off to the staff representative.

In the past decade, however, there has been a concerted effort to shift away from that model, and the local has invested a great deal of energy in expanding its activist pool, training activists, creating more opportunities for activism, and giving more responsibility to workplace stewards. As in any effort to engage workers in union life, the results have been uneven and imperfect. It should also be noted that the nature of the new activism is workplace focused, aimed at improving ground-level activism on shop floors rather than encouraging greater member input into the direction of the local itself.

The nature of Local 401's activist culture complicates the picture. Clearly, it is not a picture of a classic social union, since the scope of activism is narrow and tightly controlled. The local emphasizes unity and common goals within the organization, which is also a marker of a

business union. Yet, in a Canadian twenty-first-century context, Local 401 could be considered among the more “active” union locals in the country. It is building an activist base in the many hundreds. It has not been afraid to mobilize its members through strikes and other direct action to further union goals. Furthermore, it appears to encourage members to take leadership roles on picket lines and in their workplaces, and it draws upon members who have leadership standing in their cultural and geographic communities to engage in union affairs. The local’s approach to activism may be an example of internal processes in flux.

Another element of Local 401’s internal practices, one that is harder to categorize, is its approach to finances. Moody (1988, 193–219) demonstrated that business unionism leads to prioritizing the health and stability of the local over other goals, leading to a degree of financial conservatism and a tendency to intertwine the interests of the union with those of the employer. This tendency is not evident in Local 401. The leaders emphasize their willingness to risk the financial stability of the local to fight for their members. Looking back on the Safeway strike, McLaren recollected, “I remember even back in ’97, Doug says, if we have to, we will sell the office buildings, we will sell everything we got in order to get it done.” O’Halloran talked about the money the local spends to wage campaigns and fight legal battles: “We spent probably a couple million dollars preparing for the Superstore strike. And as a matter of fact before, three weeks before the strike, maybe a month, we spent a million dollars. We ran a full page ad in every major newspaper, which cost \$450,000.” While much of this talk can be interpreted as bravado, there is no question that Local 401 “puts its money where its mouth is.” The multiyear effort to organize Lakeside cost millions. The leaders are willing to take on first-contract labour disputes with units rejected by other unions. Their behaviour suggests a leadership more focused on winning battles for their members than ensuring the long-term financial health of the union, which has more in common with social unionism than business unionism.

Furthermore, the local’s leaders are clear that the local’s interests conflict with the interests of the employer. The local is, for example, highly antagonistic in its bargaining approaches and quick to criticize all aspects of the employer’s operations. Unlike Samuel Gompers, John Lewis, and other famous business unionists (Skurzynski 2008), the Local 401 leaders

do not preach the virtues of capitalism; instead, they are quite clear that capitalism is the problem, and they openly pass that analysis on to their members.

In summary, though built upon a base of business union structure, Local 401 demonstrates some inclination toward social union approaches in its internal union life, making it hard to discern where it is most appropriately slotted. In its internal operations, clear signs of both forms of unionism can be found.

### Strategic Repertoire

Ross's second dimension of union practice is the range and choices of a union's strategic repertoire—the series of tactics and actions it adopts. Business unions restrict themselves to the traditional strategies of formalized collective bargaining and its corollaries, while social unions adopt a wider variety of actions to further their goals. UFCW's range of tactics can be difficult to categorize.

Social unions, being active in broad political campaigns and issues, use a wide range of strategies for advancing their members' interests, including rallies and involvement in community coalitions and issue campaigns. In this regard, Local 401 can be considered moderately active. Its primary political vehicle, like that of many unions in Canada, is the provincial NDP. The local's support has consisted mostly of financial donations and staff time to work campaigns. In recent years, it has expanded the pool of people booked off for campaigns to include shop stewards and other activists. The president has taken a strong informal leadership role in the party, playing something of a "kingmaker" in key party decisions. The local has taken a strong partisan stand internally, making the NDP a central topic of any gathering of members.

Other political engagement has consisted mostly of financial and some volunteer support for various left-wing political causes, including antiprivatization initiatives, progressive research, LGBTQ solidarity, and migrant worker advocacy. However, the local has become more visible in these organizations in the past decade, and some of its more recent connections extend beyond the usual realm of union-friendly left-wing causes (such as migrant workers). In recent years, the local has also taken a leadership

role in the Alberta Federation of Labour and in local labour councils, increasing its level of cooperation with other unions in the province.

While this is not an insubstantial list of political activities, it is bounded in significant ways. Most of the local's support is demonstrated either through financial or in-kind donations or through symbolic gestures (entering a float in gay pride parades, for example). On the one hand, these are the kinds of action that are easily approved and controlled by the local leadership and do not require significant membership mobilization. On the other hand, the leaders' overt and dogged efforts to promote the NDP among the local's membership speak to an attempt to engage the members more directly in politics.

Of course, support for the NDP in recent decades is not necessarily a signal of social unionism. Many of the more conservative unions in the country are NDP loyalists, while more politically militant unions have distanced themselves from the traditional party of labour (Evans 2012). The relationship between partisan support and forms of unionism is not easy to discern and will not be resolved here.<sup>1</sup> However, within an Alberta context, active partisan support for the provincial NDP, which during most of the two-decade period of study was a small party with only a handful of seats, can be interpreted as a politically aggressive act, since more conservative unions opted to support the larger Liberal party (or the governing Conservatives) or to remain steadfastly nonpartisan. While the status of the NDP changed drastically and unexpectedly in 2015, when it won a majority government, Local 401's connection with the party long predates that turn of events.

Interestingly, the leadership's pitch for the NDP is couched in class terms. McLaren specified that when talking to members, "we always say the NDP is for the working person." O'Halloran put it more bluntly: "So do you want to join a party that is screwing the average workers on any given day or do you belong to a party that is fighting for the rights of those workers?" In education classes and conferences, the leadership incorporates economics and politics. For example, at the Superstore shop stewards

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1 As a case in point, the former Canadian Auto Workers, by reputation a "social union," took up the practice of strategic voting, leading to their endorsement of multiple Liberal candidates. Such a tactic is usually regarded as a sign of business unionism.



conference, a talk about the role of the shop steward focused mostly on the nature of capitalism and corporations and on working class-based resistance as embodied in the shop steward. How effective these tactics are and how deeply they penetrate into the membership are open questions. Furthermore, since there is no attempt to discuss alternatives to capitalism, the goal appears to be raising awareness of conflicting interests under capitalism rather than beginning a discussion of socialism. Yet the language is not that of traditional business unionism and appears to have more in common with social unionism.

Local 401 is known mostly for its organizing and labour dispute activities, a realm in which it has, without question, been innovative, aggressive, and creative, drawing in larger social issues and unabashedly targeting corporate power. It has also adapted strategies to reach out to racialized workers, young workers, and other groups normally under-represented by unions. Activities of this nature fall into a grey zone in the unionism literature. Local 401 is narrowly focused on the bargaining relationship, aiming to achieve a “good” contract for members. However, the local’s practice of broadening the framing of the dispute to public health, corporate greed, and social justice and its adaptation of new strategies that acknowledge differing identities of workers suggest social union tactics that many business unions may not attempt. In particular, the local’s ads and external communications (such as leaflets) demonstrate a self-conscious strategy of linking narrow workplace issues such as health and safety to broader social issues like public health. Local 401 has also recently adopted some of the tactics of social movements, such as the flash mob and balloon release in an Edmonton Superstore prior to the 2013 strike. In a way, the local incorporates into the workplace frontier of conflict a more broadly political agenda, a possibility acknowledged by Ross in her theorizing. In this way, the line between business union actions and social union tactics becomes blurred.

## Diversity and Unionisms

One of the most significant reasons for categorizing Local 401 as a social union is its embrace and encouragement of diversity within the local. As discussed in previous chapters, some of Local 401’s diversity is a product of shifting employment patterns and some is due to organizing choices

made by the leadership. Regardless of how it came to be, the union has had to tackle head on the question of how to represent a diverse membership and how to encourage activism within a range of groups. Many of the initiatives implemented arose out of the necessities of organizing drives rather than from proactive planning.

The outcomes of those organizing drives are a clear indication that many of the local's initiatives were successful in drawing in member groups normally underrepresented in union membership and activism. But how effective has the local been in involving and integrating such diversity into the life of the union? Here the picture is more mixed. At union events such as conferences and general membership meetings, diversity is evident: women, racialized workers, and young workers are heavily represented. However, no formal steps are taken to ensure that these workers feel welcome, understand the local's decision making process, and/or feel respected and at ease. The tacit assumption made by the local's operations is that all those in attendance come equipped with more or less the same knowledge base and comfort with the local's internal culture. This lack of accommodation is part of a more generalized *laissez-faire* approach to formal meetings and events in the local and hints that the union has not fully come to terms with the realities of equitably integrating marginalized workers into the union.

Although both youth and women's committees have existed for some time, how far they function to create meaningful participation is debatable. As one member pointed out, in his area, the youth committee has largely become inactive, almost to the point of extinction, and hence no longer serves as a source of new ideas. "A couple of people have said they are willing to stay," he commented, "and hopefully we can work on, you know, getting a solid idea out there. (member, 10). In contrast, the women's committee "has grown, almost doubled from what it was" (member, 5), and yet members interviewed could not point to significant initiatives or achievements. Neither committee appears to have a significant influence on the specific policies or practices in the local that affect their respective groups.

In 2013, in an effort to increase grassroots participation, the local introduced a Community Action Network (CAN) Committee to create links to various ethnic and cultural groups. Since the committee is still in its early

stages, however, it is too soon to be able to judge its potential effectiveness. The local has also developed a “cultural comfort course” (staff, 9) designed to teach members about how to navigate a culturally diverse workplace and union local. One young activist described it as “a course for old snarky white guys who don’t know how to let women into their warehouse and new Canadians into their warehouse. Basically, what the course does [is] teach you how to deal with a more diverse workforce” (member, 16).

The local claims to do a good job of ensuring representation on bargaining and other shop floor committees. An example is the bargaining committee described by O’Halloran during the Lakeside strike: “We have twenty-two people on the committee. I would say probably half are female, and at least half are of ethnic origin. So it’s a very multicultural committee, and it’s one of the best committees that I had ever seen” (ALHI interview, 2005). The local has also made efforts in recent years to select shop stewards who better reflect the membership. As one member explained, the union has been trying “to become much more culturally inclusive in the way we are getting our shop stewards, so they have the ability to talk to members in their own . . . language or cultural group or whatever it happens to be” (member, 3).

Aside from these initiatives, the local’s approach to promoting activism among a range of groups has been informal and passive. Its approach is to appeal to members based on the value of the union and what it provides for members rather than to accommodate cultural, age, and gender identities. As one staffer put it,

It is through collective bargaining that we are able to relate. Because people are able to see the concrete nature of what that is and when you are talking about outreaching to young workers and new Canadians and temporary foreign workers, the nuts and bolts of what we do as a union is we negotiate and we service members. If you have got good contracts, it allows you to outreach to those people a lot easier. (staff, 24)

The local’s initiatives around diversity recognize the need for broader representation but ensure that existing power structures stay intact.

Overall, it is difficult to evaluate Local 401’s efforts in creating a diverse union local. Its organizing and representation strategies have

been, at times, quite effective. Translation, integration of community leaders, and the embrace of diversity have been hallmarks of the local's attempts to do the work of being a union. However, in terms of creating an internal union environment that reflects the composition of the membership, efforts and outcomes have been mixed. The local has been more successful at reflecting diversity at the shop level than at the higher levels of the local itself. To a degree, this bounded success is attributable to the local's relatively weak internal democracy; there are simply few opportunities for a wide range of members to engage in decision making within the local.

There is a desire by the leadership of UFCW Local 401 to be an inclusive, respectful union. There is also a desire to be seen as an inclusive, respectful union, and this latter desire may provide the local with significant motivation to act on issues of diversity.

### Collective Action Frame

Stephanie Ross (2012) anchors her analysis of unionism in how a union frames its role and the nature of its members' interests. Once again, Local 401 does not neatly fit into either categorization. The first key observation is that most of the local's energy is spent on organizing and bargaining efforts, the crux of institutionalized unionization under the Wagner model. It can be argued that Local 401's efforts are inward-focused, aimed at improving the lot of its members either by improving their contract or earning certification. The local does not exhibit a similar degree of structured commitment to political causes by engaging its members in political campaigns or advocating for social change.

Although one could point to that inward orientation and argue that Local 401 is a version of a militant business union, such a focus would overlook key aspects of the local's activities. Its education agenda is infused with economic and political analysis. Its communications—both external and internal—are designed to link members' motivations, issues, and concerns to broader trends and institutions. The local's leaders use the language of class, referring to the members as "workers" and "working people." These are all traits of a union that adopts a wider action frame.

According to O'Halloran, a union leader's job extends beyond matters of bargaining and arbitration, for the simple reason that the

material circumstances of workers' lives are ultimately shaped by social and political forces:

Every political decision that is made affects our lives, whether it be who controls water, who controls air, who sets the laws, who, from labour's perspective, decides OH&S—those decisions are all made by some government body. . . . So you go back to why you are involved in the union and the job that you do as a union. It is because you are trying to protect the rights of people, basically protect their health. (O'Halloran)

The idea that unions exist to defend the broader interests of their members, not merely to represent them in the workplace, is characteristic of social unionism.

A complex, somewhat paradoxical image thus emerges. While Local 401 appears to accept a broader, more class-based, political role for itself, it engages in that role with more inwardly focused strategies and actions. However, as Ross (2012) points out, the link between frame and strategic repertoire is not always linear. When we analyze Local 401's actions, their outcomes, and the motivations behind them, a complex dynamic becomes evident. To fully make sense of what Local 401 does, and to integrate it into theory, we might need to rethink the link between inward-focused action and an outward-focused frame. The apparent contradiction may be resolved by asking whether the aims of social unionism can be achieved via business-unionesque repertoires. Can collective bargaining lead to a form of social unionism?

### Local 401's Self-Framing

A core element of a collective action frame is understanding why a union does the things it does and how those involved perceive their union. Most often, researchers need to surmise the frame through observable actions and implied meanings. The case study of UFCW Local 401 affords us a rare opportunity to supplement those observations with the self-articulated perspectives of the local's members and leaders themselves. All study participants were asked what they thought the role of a union should be and whether they considered Local 401 to be more of a business or social union. Their answers provide valuable insight in understanding how Local 401 fits into our notions of unionism.

Members' responses reflect an apparent awareness of the local's complex patterns. A few interviewees labelled Local 401 as a business union and suggested that the local was doing what the members wanted—focusing on workplace issues. A larger number opted for the social union label. However, the largest portion of member respondents either said the local was both a business and a social union or argued that it didn't fit either concept very well, as the following comments illustrate:

I would call us a social business union [laughs]. We are very, very good at representing our members. We are very focused on representing our members, but at the same time, we also see the broader implications outside—what's going on that can affect our membership, be it good or bad. (member, 6)

I see the business side of it more, but you know what, I could see them being a very social union, I can see that. (member, 23)

These responses suggest that at least some members are conscious that the actions and structures of Local 401 defy the traditional categories. While their perceptions may have remained somewhat general, their instinctive reaction was to reach for something more nuanced.

We see a similar reluctance to choose between business or social union in the leaders and staff. Some of their responses were somewhat defensive: “[We are not] a business union because we don't do anything that's fucking logical business wise,” declared O'Halloran. There was also a tendency to hold onto both concepts, as shown by Secretary-Treasurer McLaren's response:

We go the extra mile for members. We are not just filing grievances for the sake of filing grievances. We are out there in the communities. We are in the political scene. . . . It is all about the members. It is not about how much money we have in the bank. Yes, we've got to be fiscally responsible, obviously, but we're not gonna stop doing something for social reasons and purpose because of money.

Some interviewees acknowledged the local's evolution over time, showing an awareness that at one time, it was a business union, but it has changed:

I think we are not the same union we were twenty years ago. We are not the same union that signed the original Superstore deal in

1984. That was the business union that went in there. If we were the same union we would have signed the No Frills deal. So, we are still a pragmatic, nuts and bolts, that traditional business sense union. I think key activists and key people within the local have started to shift, started to change that. (staff, 24)

I think we were business but we are evolving into social. I don't think we are there yet, totally. We're getting there, but I think we could do more politically. We need to do more politically because . . . they [unions] are dying out. (member, 4)

The third member of the leadership team, Tom Hesse, offered an extended critique of the notions of business and social unionism, challenging the distinction between them. "There is no such a thing as, on an ipso facto basis, a more socially conscious union and a more business-like union," he said, arguing that these notions "are just constructs, these are just terms that people just throw around in different circumstances to serve different interests. I think they are highly artificial, highly contrived." He then proceeded to offer a lengthy and complete definition of the two terms, suggesting he was not dismissing them as completely invalid. He linked business unionism with adopting a business frame, "acquiring market share, acquiring dues, providing a narrow service," and with a "cost-benefit analysis." He also acknowledged the narrower, "bread and butter" approach of business unions, their reluctance to be involved in politics, and their lack of militancy through actions such as strikes. In contrast, social unions are "less interested in money"; they are less about acquiring dues and more concerned about doing "the right thing" and acting on principle and "morality." He implied that social unions are also more political and more militant.

The essence of Hesse's argument is twofold. First, the reality is more complex and fluid than rigid categorization allows for. "I think unions are about surviving," he said, "and what I might do on a Tuesday might be different than on a Wednesday. My members' interests should be in play. And I need to be flexible and so I think it is circumstance driven." He explained that any union can display both social and business union traits, depending upon what is needed at that particular time to advance the interests of its members. Second, he argued that the terms are used less as markers of union forms and more as leverage in conflicts and

competition between unions. He used the UFCW/CAW conflicts over fisheries in the 1980s as an example:

We had a big raid, big back and forth war with them [CAW] in Newfoundland over this. . . . Of course they held themselves out as a social justice union and us as a business union. And so they tried to frame the debate in those terms. But you can't help but notice as well that they were under financial pressures in their industry, the auto industry is struggling. There is a sort of pressure, they have a shrinking membership. There is no doubt they have an interest in expanding their membership in order to survive as an organization.

Hesse questioned the authenticity of the terms in that context, arguing that they are often used more as weapons than as accurate descriptors. "Maybe there is a legitimate debate about where you sit on the spectrum," he conceded, "who we ought and not ought to be. But in tough times, there have been times where it raises issues of the bona fides of the labels and how they are being used."

Hesse's provocative challenge to traditional conceptions may be, to a degree, a bit of sophistry, and it is certainly convenient for him to undermine the premise upon which criticisms of UFCW are built. However, he raises an important and underacknowledged point: the terms *business union* and *social union* can be used for particular political and strategic purposes and may become rhetorical devices as much as accurate descriptors of union behaviour. While it may be difficult to disentangle Hesse's argument from his self-interest, that does not invalidate his point. Local 401 does display a remarkable mixture of strategies, structures, and actions, making the local difficult to categorize. It raises the interesting possibility that maybe the problem is with the categories rather than the actions of Local 401.

#### BLURRED LINES

Applying Ross's three dimensions to UFCW Local 401 reveals a complex picture not easily fitting traditional notions of union forms. On all three dimensions, Local 401 demonstrates features of both forms. The subjective views of the local's activists and leaders confirm that they internalize this apparently contradictory picture. The experience of Local 401 is complex, multilayered, and in flux. However, it only appears contradictory if we



rigidly apply the traditional business/social categorization to the findings. To develop a coherent understanding of Local 401 in action, we need to rethink our conceptions of union forms.

First, we need to jettison our notion of unions as static organizations defined by formal structures and institutionalized rules of behaviour. But this doesn't mean devolving them into aggregations of human action, without form or constancy. Antonio Gramsci (2005) was partly correct: unions are constantly in the process of being constructed, shaped by both internal and external forces. But Gramsci does not sufficiently acknowledge the limits to the extent of their change. Unions are caught in a particular relationship with capitalism that is not of their own making. While the specific manifestations of capitalism change, and have been changing dramatically in the past few decades, the nature of its relationship to unions remains constant, meaning that certain elements of unions and what they do is static. Nor can we completely ignore that unions are composed of formal structures and rules, which can be quite stable and enduring. Change happens, but it occurs within a logical framework, both at a micro (union) and a macro (capitalism) level. It can be argued that unions are in a constant state of bounded creation. They are not inert, but they continue to be informed by their past.

The case of UFCW Local 401 shows us that unions are made at the intersection between structure and action. The leadership of Local 401 made decisions in real time based upon real events with practical outcomes. However, those decisions were informed by past actions and frames and were constrained by both externally and internally imposed limits to action (labour laws, the degree of membership mobilization, and so on). The range of possible action is also bounded by the local's structures. To be more specific, the local's top-down structure facilitates certain actions but makes others more difficult. Its centralized model made it easier for the local to alter organizing strategies or launch aggressive ad campaigns but inhibited any efforts to create meaningful engagement opportunities around membership diversity or political action. The local does not disengage from its history, even as it moves forward into the future. The reforming initiatives of the leadership changed Local 401, but they did not create an entirely new union. That which came before, and persists, colours the nature of the change. The end result is a union local that

exhibits multiple characteristics, in part because it still is (and always will be) in flux and in part because the future always links back to the past.

A second way of looking at unions differently involves questioning the legitimacy of the entire business/social divide. Whether these types are viewed as a dichotomy or a continuum, the patterns found in Local 401 are not easily explained in these terms. A more fruitful way to understand the mixed results is to remember that social unionism and business unionism “are two related faces of union activity, often in tension with each other but sometimes mutually reinforcing” (Ross 2012, 43). All unions possess elements of both because both are inherent in the work they are required to perform. It may be that this dual nature of the union role is simply laid barer in UFCW Local 401 than in other locals. Or it may be that we need to ask different questions to reveal the inner complexity of union activity.

Local 401 was chosen as the site for this case study because it appeared to display contradictory tendencies. It is now apparent that the tendencies are internally coherent and reflect the local’s specific context. The contradiction disappears when we relax our notion of opposing unionisms. The concepts of “business union” and “social union” are more fluid than they appear, and the possibility of existing in both spaces simultaneously is real. The difference between this conception of unions and the traditional business/social divide is similar to that between Newtonian physics and quantum physics. We are required, like the quantum physicist, to accept the possibility that a particle, in this case a union, can exist in multiple points in space simultaneously. Indeed, that is the only way a union can exist—by embracing multiple elements of the union role.

The third rethinking arising as a consequence of this case study is that we need to separate more carefully how we theorize about unionisms and how we actually use the terms. Much of union theory acknowledges that unions can exhibit characteristics of both union forms, but rarely do researchers and practitioners absorb the consequences of that acknowledgement, and so tend to fall comfortably back into traditional categories. Thus, the notion of “two types” of union persists and the complexities get lost, with two consequences. First, the terms sometimes become weapons for pigeon-holing unions. In this regard, Tom Hesse may have a point when he calls them “contrived.” In practice, the terms are used as much to obfuscate as to illuminate. They become labels of virtuosity or vileness

rather than accurate descriptors of what is happening. Second, sidelining complexity diminishes the vividness of union life. When applying the concepts roughly rather than precisely, unions become two-dimensional entities. The interesting stuff lies in the tension between the two mandates of unions. It is in the union's response to that tension where the insights are found. Blithely applying the labels causes us to look in the wrong places for the essence of unionism. But it would be a mistake to jettison the terms entirely, for they do offer a useful starting point for understanding the choices that unions must make.

Stephanie Ross's three dimensions of unionism prove to be very helpful in unpacking the complexity found in the Local 401 case study. Instead of trying to wedge the local into one category or another—as is the common tendency among labour practitioners and, to a lesser extent, scholars—the case of Local 401 suggests to us that there is room to consider other possibilities.

We still have much to learn about how the theories of union behaviour and the on-the-ground actions of unions interact. The case of Local 401 reminds us that the realities of union life are dizzyingly, wonderfully complex and messy. Yet if we look more closely at those realities, our theorization will be greatly enriched by the experience.



# Conclusion

There is something for everyone in the story of UFCW Local 401. For those who simply appreciate a strong narrative, it has bold, colourful personalities and no shortage of incidents. For activists, it is an inspiring tale of workers standing up for their rights, and for diversity advocates, it spotlights immigrants and racialized workers, women, and youth. For the labour historian, it offers some significant moments in modern labour history, including the Lakeside Packers strike and law-changing court challenges. Organizational scholars can get a glimpse into the nature of organizational culture and change, and labour relations practitioners can take away an array of strategies and tactics that can be employed elsewhere.

The story of Local may hold the greatest benefit, however, for those who care about the future of unions. Both those working with and in unions and those who study them can learn and apply important lessons from the past two decades of UFCW Local 401. Although Local 401 is only one local operating in a handful of sectors in one western Canadian province, the struggles it faces, the challenges it has overcome, and the dilemmas it confronts are essentially the same as those faced by all unions in the twenty-first century. Yet, while Local 401 is in many ways similar to other locals in Canada, it features a complex combination of internal dynamics rarely found within a single local. Once we begin to investigate these dynamics, we find we have little choice but to start asking questions about some of the bigger issues related to unionism in the twenty-first century and about our conventional understanding of how unions act.

I selected UFCW Local 401 as a case study because it displayed fascinating inconsistencies. Indeed, contradiction has been at the heart of the study, and understanding Local 401 requires coming to terms with the nature of that contradiction. Indeed, it is through embracing the contradiction that the most valuable insights emerge. During the course of the study, it became increasingly clear that the apparent inconsistencies were, to some degree, a matter of complexity rather than contradiction.

However, contradiction did not entirely disappear. In fact, an element of contradiction is fundamental to unions. As Richard Hyman (1975, 199) reminds us, "There is an inherent dialectic in the processes of control over work relations: conflict and accommodation are two contradictory but inescapable aspects of industrial relations." Hyman's comment points to the reality that unions are born of and immersed in a contradiction—that of challenging the structures of capitalism and operating within its limits. We try to downplay the contradiction by adopting the business/social union divide, but the act of simplifying strips away some of the important insights we can gain by embracing the contradictory tendencies within union behaviour.

What, then, do we learn from a case study of Local 401? When the local is examined in detail, we discover that it wears neither a white nor a black hat. Studying Local 401 thus teaches us the importance of viewing unions in their totality and remaining open to the tensions and apparent contradictions that force their way into the picture. In addition, we discover that Local 401 is a union in motion, one that has changed significantly over the past two decades. It has more or less repudiated the UFCW International's preference for voluntary recognitions and tame negotiations. It has branched out to new industries and found ways to attract workers underrepresented by unions, adopting innovative organizing strategies along the way. It has become a relatively militant union, if militancy is measured in terms of strikes and rhetoric. It is becoming more engaged with politics, not just with the NDP but with community-based groups such as Migrante Alberta and the Parkland Institute. Moreover, far from inhibiting transformative change, the local's stable, highly centralized leadership has actually facilitated it.

Local 401 has also begun, somewhat belatedly, to improve its communication and engagement with members. At the same time, in terms of equity and democracy, it still lags behind. While the local has reached out to diverse groups of workers, its leaders have not taken the more difficult steps required to ensure that young, female, and/or racialized workers have a place of equality within the union. Similarly, it has, to a degree, empowered members on the shop floor and on picket lines, but it has not created democratic processes that would allow those members a formal voice in how the union is run. Although the local's top-down structure has facilitated certain forms of change, it also places limits on internal openness and participation.

These apparent inconsistencies bring us to the issue of internal logic. What might at first appear inconsistent or perhaps even contradictory to an external observer acquires coherence when viewed within a narrative framework, one with which insiders are already familiar. Narratives articulate an organization's sense of self-identity and purpose, on the basis of which we are then able to interpret its behaviour. When Local 401's actions are understood within the framework provided by its narratives, those actions make sense. In other words, analyzing narratives allows us to grasp the internal logic that operates within the local. Grasping that logic does not oblige us to accept a union's behaviour on its terms. In the end, we may conclude that the union's internal logic is flawed or that it fails to justify certain actions—but first we must understand that logic, and we must suspend judgment long enough to do so.

A number of questions remain about the local. Yes, it is growing more political, but its politics are not really about transformation or substantial social change; rather, they are about practical electoral and community issues. How are we to assess this approach? Does Local 401 meet the standard of a so-called social union? How much less (or more) is it really doing than most unions in Canada these days?

Second, how are we to evaluate the local's approach to union democracy? The dynamic within Local 401 forces us to confront the difficult question of the balance between participatory democracy (a central tenet of unionism) and the capacity to act decisively and quickly in response to crises. Are these aspects in conflict, as the Local 401 narrative suggests, or is there a way to achieve both?

Third, do the narratives within Local 401 exert a predominantly positive or negative force? As I mentioned at the end of chapter 4, how one views the impact of these narratives depends heavily on one's perspective. What features of an organization does one deem most important? Which principles matter more in our assessment of this union local's actions and their outcome? There is no single answer, nor should we expect one. Rather, evaluating Local 401 entails a series of partial answers accompanied by caveats: "Yes, but . . ." and "No, but . . ." Such equivocation suggests simply that we acknowledge the inevitability of contradictions and that we appreciate the manifold ways in which complex entities can be evaluated.

Much can be learned from the story of UFCW Local 401—and not just in terms of organizing innovations, bold communications, and timely legal appeals. We can use the case of Local 401 to develop more nuanced and enriched ways to understand unions and their actors, ways that more accurately reflect the complex, conflicted, and contingent realities of unionism in the twenty-first century. That may seem a lot to ask of a single union local, but President O'Halloran has always said he is up for any challenge, so it may not be so much to ask after all.

#### PRACTICAL LESSONS

A number of practical lessons can be taken from UFCW Local 401's experiences over the past twenty years. The first and possibly most valuable lesson is the message that unions need not be afraid of experimenting, even if they haven't fully worked out a path forward to renewal. Local 401 was constantly solving problems, trying new things to fix what wasn't working. Not all of its attempts were successful, but those that worked were repeated. The case of Local 401 demonstrates that considerable positive change can occur through makeshift problem-solving. Too often, union leaders are afraid to make mistakes or believe that they have to have a sweeping strategy before change can occur. Local 401 has demonstrated otherwise.

Many of the innovations implemented by Local 401 serve as a useful reminder that in order to organize effectively in the twenty-first century, unions need to become more responsive, more creative, and more proactive. The local's organizing success demonstrates the effectiveness of



strong, well-trained, and well-supported inside committees; peer-to-peer organizing; and organic leaders nurtured within worker communities. Simple actions like translating materials into workers' first languages can reap disproportionate benefits in an organizing drive. In general, the experiences of Local 401 are a lesson in the value of tailoring strategies to accommodate the specific needs and perspectives of the workers.

The effectiveness of Local 401's decision to raise strike pay cannot be overstated. While not all unions may be in a financial position to offer strike pay that covers most of their members' lost salaries (401's members tend to be in lower-paid occupations), the labour movement needs to re-evaluate the economic price paid by workers for going on strike. Globalization and neoliberalism have undermined unions' ability to exact economic pain on employers during labour disputes, since it is increasingly difficult to hamper production. Employers are in a stronger position than they were several decades ago to wait out picketing workers. One way to counter this change is to increase strike pay, which strengthens the resolve of striking workers. The day of token stipends for picketing may be coming to an end.

Local 401's brash and aggressive communications strategies, especially during labour disputes, have been controversial. They universally earn the employer's ire, sometimes land the local in legal hot water, and often teeter on the edge of incredulity. That said, they have also proven remarkably effective in garnering public attention, broadening the scope of the dispute to issues that are in the public interest, and embarrassing employers into settling—or at least altering their behaviour. While the local's provocative ads, attack websites, and appeals to issues of marginal relevance to the bargaining table may seem outrageous and amateurish, especially to communications professionals, as strategic tools they work. These communications also have a secondary benefit—they send a message to their members that the local is fighting with every possible tool it can find. Other unions, and those who study unions, should take note of the ability of these strategies to goad employers into settlement.

Beyond specific tactics, some additional lessons emerge from the story of UFCW Local 401. Intentionally or not, the local's leadership created a culture of learning within the union. Innovation was encouraged and new ideas were seriously considered. The local developed a capacity to learn

from past failures and successes, a capacity that, over time, reaped substantial benefits. Although a discussion of how to create an organizational culture of learning is beyond the scope of this book, we would be wise to consider how to foster an environment where innovation and experimentation are encouraged. Local 401 has also demonstrated the power of building confidence, trust, and solidarity among members. The consequences of the Safeway strike twenty years ago—which failed because of apathy, unwillingness to strike, and internal division—are still being felt among portions of the membership. In contrast, the victory at Lakeside has helped prevent ethnic and cultural divisions from undermining the union. One reason why members believe that Local 401 is a militant union is because they can point to tangible examples of the union taking on the employer and winning. Obviously, victories cannot be manufactured at will, but unions can use the victories they earn to propel future activism. Victories need to become embedded in the self-identity of the union.

In addition, unions must not diminish the importance of perception. Members need to see their union standing up for them. In Local 401, the actions taken by the staff and leadership were highly visible to members. The leaders spent a great deal of energy on ensuring that members knew what the union was doing for them. From provocative ads, to workplace campaigns, to a boastful approach regarding past and current achievements, the leaders never missed an opportunity to inform their members about how great a job the local was doing. Some may consider this to be manipulation of the members, and there certainly was some self-interested motivation. But the self-promotion went beyond rhetoric; the leaders had to walk the talk. And it worked. Their efforts built pride and confidence among the members, which made mobilizing easier when the need arose.

We should also not lose sight of the interactions between formal and informal dynamics in a union. As Local 401 shows us, sometimes the informal processes and interactions that emerge can have a greater impact on the life of the union than the formalized structures. Union researchers often emphasize the formal aspects of internal union democracy. Perhaps more attention needs to be paid to those informal aspects and their ability to create change in a union.

There are some tougher lessons as well. Local 401 is credited, rightfully, for mobilizing and engaging hard-to-organize workers, particularly

racialized workers. What the local's experience shows us, however, is that it is one thing to bring new workers into the union. It is a much more difficult task to fully integrate them as equals into the life of the union. Having them sign union cards is the beginning of the work, not the end. Furthermore, establishing committees and providing sensitivity training are insufficient. Unions that wish to take diversity seriously need to critically examine their structures and processes to evaluate how they create barriers to participation for groups traditionally underserved by unions. Again, here is not the place to engage in a fuller discussion of the issue, but Hunt and Rayside (2007) offer an insightful examination of diversity in labour for those interested in exploring further.

Finally, the case of Local 401 leaves us with a challenging question around the issue of centralized leadership. Doug O'Halloran elicits strong reactions in the Alberta labour movement—and probably among readers of this book. Some may be tempted to dismiss his achievements because of the methods he sometimes employs. Others may wish to take the case study as an example of why internal union democracy is overrated or as confirmation that Robert Michels (2001) was right about the iron law of oligarchy after all. I would urge that a different kind of lesson be taken from this study. In unions, there will always be a tension between democratic control by members and the need for fast, clear decision-making. Union activists and researchers would be well-served by remaining mindful of that tension at all times and incorporating that awareness into their actions. Only if we are conscious of the enticing attraction of centralized control can we ensure that it does not overtake the interests of members, while at the same time preventing paralysis through process.

#### CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE STUDY OF UNIONS

From the beginning, this book has never been solely about UFCW Local 401. The local's story was used as an instance upon which to foster generalizable insights. Case studies are valuable in their ability to use specific contexts to draw out issues of greater import. The specific conditions that brought about the changes in Local 401 cannot be wholly replicated elsewhere: some aspect will always be different. But that does not prevent us from considering the broader implications of what was found in examining their trajectory.

This book focused on three areas of inquiry: the effect of contradictions on the business union/social union conceptualization, emerging complexities of union renewal, and the role of narratives in shaping union dynamics. While those areas were made explicit throughout, it may be valuable to briefly discuss how the findings contribute to the study of unions in Canada.

## Contradiction and the Unionism Divide

A key goal of the book was to examine the consequences of contradictory tendencies within a union on our perceptions of business and social unionisms, which have traditionally been regarded as two opposites, either as dichotomies or opposite ends of a spectrum. As was discussed at length in chapter 6, Local 401 is not easily categorized within the dominant conceptualization as it exists because neither category fully describes the characteristics of this local. The case teaches us that the reality is much more multidimensional and complex.

Paradoxically, the contradiction we see in union action is both inevitable and illusory. It is inevitable because unions exist in an ambivalent relationship to capitalism: they need both to work within it and to challenge it. Stated another way, when unions act on behalf of workers they strike at the heart of capitalist structures (i.e., capital's control of the means of production), the very same structures upon which a union's existence depends. How each union responds to this contradiction is conditioned by its history, its structure, the nature of its membership, and the context within which it operates, as well as by the internal logic that informs its actions and the stories that it tells about itself. The extent to which a union privileges one or the other of these two contradictory objectives will determine its position on the business-social union continuum. Especially in the case of unions situated toward the two extremes on the continuum, actions that support the objective that the union generally de-emphasizes may appear to contradict its fundamental identity.

But this contradiction is also illusory. The actions of a union gain an internal coherence if we adopt a more fluid approach to interpreting how unions behave. A new approach necessitates seeing unions not as static institutions, identified by skeletal observations of structure and outward appearance, but as bodies in motion. They are also bodies tethered to their

history and structure, creating a form of bounded creation and re-creation. When we observe a union carefully in its context, examining closely the union's self-identifying narratives and internal logic, what initially seems contradictory begins to become reconciled.

We must also develop more fluid notions of union forms, notions that allow for a union to exist in multiple spaces simultaneously. As noted in chapter 6, most current theorizing about unionisms adopts a paradigm like that of Newtonian physics, but a shift to something resembling quantum physics is required in order to explain apparent anomalies. If we can acknowledge that a union can embody aspects of both business and social unionism (in fact, is likely to), then we can build a more nuanced understanding of how unions function.

One of the barriers to adopting a more fluid and nimble conceptualization of unionisms is how we tend to use the terms *business unionism* and *social unionism* in practice. Often, these terms are used not to edify but to strategically position. The act of categorizing unions is not as dispassionately clinical as identifying species of birds by their plumage. Both those who are active in unions and those who study them have certain political or strategic agendas and are thus invested in the outcomes. These interests drive the tendency toward oversimplification. However, we may be doing unions a disservice by creating unattainable markers that lead ultimately to disappointment and confusion. There is a need to use the terms with greater care and subtlety.

So how should we deal with the business/social union divide? The terms *social union* and *business union* will continue to exist, since they serve a practical purpose as shorthand for the general priorities of particular unions, but the unintended consequence of their use is the stunting of our understanding of how and why unions act. Therefore, we need to find a way to open the concepts up to greater fluidity. This study cannot complete that task, but it may open the door to a possibility. Rather than evaluate unions on a single criterion (social/business), we need to recognize that unions exist on multiple planes and that both types of unionism can be embodied in a particular union and called on at different times and for different actions.

The Local 401 case serves as a practical application of Ross's (2012) three dimensions of union practice—collective action frames, strategic

repertoires, and internal organizational practices—and demonstrates that her conceptualization has potential to draw out nuances regarding the nature of union forms. This study suggests that Ross's dimensions can be expanded to include other relevant aspects of unions, including formal versus informal processes, approaches to employer relations, staff roles, and so on. The combination of Ross's theoretical work and the empirical findings of this case study suggest that rather than relying upon a single continuum when evaluating union practice and forms of unionism, we should construct a matrix that incorporates the various aspects of union structure and action. By isolating these aspects and permitting them to potentially conflict and contradict one another, we can build a richer picture of union life. A preliminary sketch of this matrix would include measures for the union's formal structures, informal processes, leadership style, roles of members and staff, member activism, approach to employer relations, organizing methods, and political activism, among others. The union's narratives are also a necessary element of the matrix, for they create an internal logic that ties the separate components together.

### Dynamics in Revitalization

The second central focus of the book is how the internal processes and dynamics within unions advance our knowledge of how unions revitalize and renew. The case of Local 401 reveals that renewal can be more complex than the literature anticipates and that the process is more uneven and can be less planned than previously thought.

Local 401 did not set out to revitalize, yet a degree of renewal occurred. Furthermore, it took the shape of bounded change within a context of leadership stability. Both unplanned renewal and revitalization through the initiatives of local, stable leadership are unexpected and unaccounted for in the renewal literature. It shows that reform need not arise out of a grand plan or strategy; it can emerge through the compiled logic of moment-specific decisions. The increased field of possibility exists because unions are created at the nexus of structure and action. Unions possess a variety of structures and engage in renewal actions in a manner consistent with their context. This complexity allows for greater scope around when and how unions revitalize themselves than is often acknowledged.

This lack of acknowledgement may stem, in part, from the fact that much of the renewal literature has looked at the more obvious cases of intentional, planned renewal. The most famous case, SIEU's Justice for Janitors, possessed a scope and range that left an indelible mark on the renewal literature. Other, more grassroots reforms arose from dramatic local events and thus were also highly noticeable. Change at Local 401, in contrast, took place under the radar. No one really saw the transformation because it was never announced as a plan and it occurred in slow motion, over many years. Further masking the renewal was the entrenched senior leadership, giving the impression of inertia rather than change. The lesson here is that sometimes we need to take both a longer view and a closer look at what is happening inside unions to ascertain whether renewal is occurring or has already taken place, for it is not always obvious from the outside. The dynamics that foster (or inhibit) renewal can be both more subtle and more complex than expected. Renewal can appear in multiple forms and via myriad processes. Accidental revitalization, as described in chapter 5, is a source of so-called stable change. How widespread this form of renewal is remains unknown, but this study demonstrates that it is possible to establish the conditions that lead to accidental revitalization through a stable yet motivated leadership. This new form of revitalization can sit comfortably alongside existing descriptions of renewal. Its purpose is to highlight our emerging awareness of the complexities of union renewal. It may well be that the bulk of union renewal efforts occur via either planned strategy from above or directed change from below. Accidental revitalization may be rare, but its presence confirms the importance of contingency in union renewal. Further research will have to demonstrate how common this accidental form of renewal might be.

### The Role of Narratives

The third purpose of the book is to demonstrate that narratives are a fruitful avenue of inquiry to explain union behaviour. Using critical narrative analysis, I sought to draw out insights into how the leaders and members themselves come to understand their own actions and responses—in other words, what narratives they constructed about their actions. Actors' interpretations of events is an underexamined phenomenon in the study

of unions; we seem preoccupied by cataloging *what* unions do and thus lose sight of *why* they do it. Critical narrative analysis opens a window into the internal world of unionists, allowing us both to see how they come to understand their actions and to question those actions and the interpretations of them.

The case study makes clear that how activists and leaders understand the forces acting on them and interpret their own responses to those forces have very real consequences for union action. Narratives play a critical role in constructing internal logics that propel certain actions while limiting others. In the case of Local 401, those narratives created space for a particular kind of change while simultaneously entrenching leadership styles that benefit those in power in the local. Other unions might come to understand their situations differently, and their narratives might shape a different form of union action.

Narratives both arise from and shape a union's history, structure, and context, so how a union's members and leaders come to understand external forces and their own responses to them will be internally consistent but will vary from union to union. In other words, a union's response to the challenges of the twenty-first century is highly contingent.

Narratives play a clear role in union dynamics. They organize experience and build a self-identity upon which an internal logic is formed. This internal logic propels the union forward, creating a coherency behind the apparent confusion of union action. Narratives are crucial to creating solidarity and member affinity with the union. They can also function as tools for maintaining power structures within the local, since they can provide rationales for the status quo. Furthermore, narratives provide insight into the internal life of unions and into union revitalization, revealing things not observable through other means. In this regard, they contribute to our understanding of unions in multiple ways. They provide glimpses into the motivations and perspectives of union actors, helping us to refine our understanding of forms of unionism and acting as a conduit between experience and self-identity.

In addition to using narrative to help understand union actions and motivation, it is important to apply a critical analysis to reveal how power is exercised in unions. By recognizing that narratives are not neutral, we can isolate the ways in which the powerful legitimize their



power within the union through the construction of narratives. Narrative provides us with deeper insights into how union actors understand and interpret their actions, but recognizing its role in power dynamics allows us to remain critical of those actions by revealing the interests being served through narrative.

#### LOCAL 401: NOT AN ANOMALY

One of the challenges facing any case study is demonstrating that the study is relevant to a more general set of circumstances. It is possible that UFCW Local 401 is an anomaly, an entity created by a set of circumstances so distinct as to be virtually unrepeatable. In that event, the conclusions we draw cannot be generalized: they lose their capacity to reveal something about unions in Canada. All case studies run the risk of failing to demonstrate relevance, and often only time can adequately determine whether they pass or fail in that regard.

In one sense, replicability is not the issue, since case studies, which are always embedded in specific contexts, are by definition not replicable (Flyvbjerg 2006). For insights from the Local 401 case to be generalizable, then, the local must, in some fashion, reflect what happens in other union locals. The key question here is whether the unexpected mixture of centralized and stable leadership and slow, evolutionary renewal is so unusual as to be an anomaly, an exception that demonstrates the broader rule. It is possible that the apparent contradictions found in Local 401 are normally unsustainable and that one or the other—the leadership or the move toward change—will collapse if translated to other contexts. However, I argue that by focusing only on the specific dynamics of Local 401, however interesting and illuminating they are, we may miss the broader lessons that can be learned from the case study.

The story of Local 401 becomes more relevant if we remind ourselves that all unions live with contradiction in that they must, in some fashion, grapple with the reality that their *raison d'être* is both to contest capitalism and to accommodate it. Unions operate within the system, but they must also—if they are to be effective—challenge it. This fundamental relationship with external forces establishes the dynamic of contradiction, and that dynamic will show itself in some fashion in every union. In the case of Local 401, it is possible that the contradictions manifest themselves

in a way unique to this local, perhaps appearing starker to the external observer than in other unions, but that is saying something profoundly different than that Local 401 is an anomaly in the labour movement. Every union has its contradictions.

Take, for example, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW, now Unifor), which for years strongly advocated for government subsidies on behalf of its members' employers. It also embraced strategic voting, supporting one set of "bad guys" to prevent the victory of a worse set of "bad guys" (Savage 2012). Despite those actions, CAW's efforts toward building activism, advancing gender equality, and arguing for a greater role for workers in the economy, among other similar efforts, were not diminished. Other unions demonstrate a similar complexity. Likewise, Local 401's efforts to extend unionization to racialized workers, young workers, and women are not diminished because of its rather top-heavy leadership approach.

Local 401 is therefore not an anomaly because its contradictions only lay bare what every union is forced to confront. Pure forms of social unionism (or business unionism) are not possible because unions live in a complex reality with competing demands. All unions are a mixture of class interest and self-interest. I chose to study Local 401 because I believe it reveals that reality in a particularly intriguing and interesting way. The particularities of its dynamic remain: it is entirely possible, for example, that few union leaders could achieve the degree of legitimized, centralized authority as Doug O'Halloran has. Those particularities, however, should not distract from the possibilities the case brings to light. And in that way, Local 401's experience is relevant to anyone who is interested in the study of unions.

## THE FUTURE

UFCW Local 401 has changed significantly over the past twenty years. We can be certain that it will continue to evolve during the next twenty. The question—one for which there can be no clear answer—is, What form will that evolution take? One of the core lessons of this case study is that unions are created at the intersection of structure, action, and actors. They are constantly in the process of re-creation, but that process is bounded by what has come before. That logic applies to Local 401.

## The Future of Local 401

The current leaders of Local 401 were central to the nature of the change that occurred in the union during the period of study. Indeed, it is impossible to disentangle their impact—that of Doug O'Halloran, in particular—from the story of Local 401. As was said many times by interviewees, Local 401 is “Doug’s local”—so important has he been to its development. But O'Halloran is getting older. Having been president for almost thirty years, he has indicated an interest in retiring soon. The prospect of a leadership transition raises many interesting questions about the future of Local 401.

One question of particular relevance is how a leadership shift would impact the careful balance of stability and change that has marked Local 401 for the past two decades. Much of the leadership’s legitimacy flows from O'Halloran’s larger-than-life personality, vocal populism, and centralized authority. It seems unlikely that a successor would possess a similar combination of traits. However, we must be careful not to overestimate the impact of a single individual. O'Halloran’s leadership operated within a broader context of structures, organizational culture, and dynamics. Those broader contexts will not change with O'Halloran’s departure, at least not immediately.

Yet the legitimacy matrix in Local 401 is centred by O'Halloran’s presidency, and his departure will set that dynamic into flux. Aspects of the matrix will remain static, such as the formal structures of the local (in particular, those affording significant authority to the president). Others will need to be reconstructed. The members’ intense loyalty to O'Halloran will not easily transfer to his successor, who will have to find new avenues for creating and maintaining legitimacy. Innovative approaches to organizing and mobilizing will not cease, since they become forms of organizational learning, but they may take directions not contemplated currently. It is impossible to predict whether the local’s militant approach to employers will continue or whether it will revert to something closer to the UFCW Canada norm.

Narratives will no doubt continue to play a role in the union’s behaviour. They will, at least initially, serve as source of stability and continuity within the local, since the narratives transcend the president and are used to define the local’s identity. That definition will hold at

least for the immediate transition. But one of the most important features of narratives is their ability to evolve over time while still retaining their form. They will be a resource that the new leader will draw upon to create legitimacy, but they will also be shaped by the actions taken by the new leader.

It is quite possible that what members today allow in terms of centralized authority due to their trust of the current leadership will be deemed unacceptable under a new regime. Transitions are often a time when the internal workings of a local can be altered. Having built a significant activist base in the local and having encouraged new groups of workers to join the union, the future leadership of Local 401 may find those activists and new workers beginning to demand a greater role within the union. The business union–like structures of the local may then begin to falter under a call for greater union democracy.

Of course, the opposite path is also possible: the centralized structures embedded in the local's bylaws may facilitate a shift back to the business-union approaches used in the earlier days of the local. However, this seems unlikely. The stability of the narratives and the awareness within the local of the union's recent battles and victories seem forceful enough to prevent a retreat from such practices. Another likely scenario is that the existing patterns will continue, changing slightly to accommodate the particularities of the new leadership.

A return visit to Local 401 a few years from now could prove interesting. While the direction of future change is somewhat uncertain, we can be fairly confident that Local 401 will continue to be an intriguing union local offering much to researchers and interested readers.

## The Future of Studying Unions

In this book, I tell the story of one union and extract some lessons that might be applied to the broader study of unions. The approach taken in this case study has some potential to shape how we understand unions and how we come to study them.

First, it gives us the opportunity to step outside the structural functionalism that has pervaded much of union research. Most union studies look at structures, actors, and action, with a focus on formalized processes and verifiable facts. Collecting and analyzing quantitative data as objectively

as possible is, of course, critical to the credibility of the research. While these approaches are good at drawing out *what* happened, the question of *why* it happened remains unanswered. There is room in the study of unions to explore more fully how the actors understand their actions and to examine how key decisions were made. Answering those questions requires some additional tools. Critical narrative analysis (CNA) is one such tool (Souto-Manning 2014b). CNA is new to the field of industrial relations but has proven beneficial in other disciplines for drawing out the experience of actors within the context of power dynamics. And as this case study demonstrates, it has the potential to unearth interesting new insights into the life of unions. This is not a pitch for CNA, in particular. CNA is simply an example of how applying new and innovative approaches to the examination of unions can reveal dimensions previously overlooked. Union researchers should be exploring the potential of a wide range of methods, analytical approaches, and research topics. A diversity of research questions and study designs can only enrich the body of knowledge about unions.

Second, by embracing contradiction in this study, I stumbled across a new way of understanding union behaviour, stepping outside the either-or dichotomies that litter industrial relations research. Using this perspective, we can see unions in all of their complexity, both as entities born of and bound to a contradictory relationship with capital and capitalism and as bodies in motion, capable of displaying multiple forms of behaviour. Personally, I am excited by the prospect of altering my perspectives on how to understand what unions do and why they do it. I believe there is much to be gained from doing so. Unions are complex human organizations, and that complexity needs to be fully embraced and explored.

As much as the past two decades have been a period of crisis for unions, they have also been a period of challenge for the study of unions. Just as unions are attempting to renew themselves, as union researchers, we have an opportunity to revitalize our craft. Employing new approaches and adopting new perspectives on unions has the potential to reveal things that were previously obscured from view and thus to inject new vigour into the study of unions.

## The Future of Unions

Ultimately, the story of UFCW Local 401 is a story of hope. It demonstrates that unions can make the necessary changes to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. I do not wish to overstate the accomplishments of Local 401, which is merely one local attempting to do the best it can. Many of its innovations and tactics have been tried elsewhere. Its internal dynamics are not an ideal example of democracy in action. Its new certifications, successful strikes, and militant outlook have not altered the economic realities of the industries in which it is engaged.

No, Local 401 has not re-created unionism. But its story is one of hope precisely because of its imperfections and its limited scope. It is a story of a real life, warts-and-all organization attempting to do some good for its members and for society. It shows very clearly that unions can respond to challenges in real time and in real communities to find ways to make the lives of real workers just a little bit better. Local 401 demonstrates that unions are not anachronistic dinosaurs from the industrial age. They can be relevant today among the kinds of worker we have been told for years don't want unions. They can reach across racial, ethnic, and gender divides and build new expressions of solidarity. They can take on big employers and eke out some victories, at least some of the time.

For me, what gives the greatest sense of hope for the future of unions is that Local 401 shows that change doesn't have to be perfect; it doesn't have to be mapped out and efficiently implemented. It can be haphazard, lacking finesse, and still be effective. Unions are run by humans, after all, and a human endeavour is never perfect. It doesn't have to be. It just has to be good enough.

## *Appendix A*

# UFCW Local 401 Timeline

- 1953 The first Safeway store in Edmonton is organized. The Edmonton local of Retail Clerks International Union (RCIU) is created and dubbed Local 401. Over the next few years, RCIU organizes all Safeway stores in the province, served by two locals, divided geographically. (The southern Alberta local was Local 397.)
- 1974 The Edmonton local launches its first strike against Safeway. It lasts five days.
- 1979 United Food and Commercial Workers union is created via a merger of RCIU and Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America. The Edmonton local changes its name to UFCW Local 401.
- 1984 The two Alberta locals representing retail clerks merge to form the province-wide UFCW Local 401.
- 1985 UFCW Local 402, representing Co-op grocery workers, merges with Local 401.
- 1985 Tom Hesse is hired as a representative for Local 401, a position he holds until 1997, when he becomes an international representative for UFCW Canada.

- 1988 UFCW Canada is created as a semi-autonomous branch of UFCW International.
- 1989 Doug O'Halloran is appointed president of Local 401.
- 1992 UFCW Local 740-P, representing meat-packing workers in Lethbridge, merges with Local 401.
- 1992 O'Halloran wins his first election for president, defeating a challenger for the position. He is re-elected in 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016.
- 1993 Local 401 accepts rollbacks at Safeway, resulting in significant member unrest.
- 1997 The Safeway strike occurs. The settlement fails to make desired gains.
- 1997 Local 661, representing a grain-milling plant in Lethbridge, merges with Local 401.
- 2001 Tom Hesse returns to Local 401 as executive director of labour relations.
- 2002 Theresa McLaren is appointed secretary-treasurer. She is elected in 2004 and re-elected in 2008, 2012, and 2016.
- 2002 Local 401 organizes the Shaw Conference Centre in Edmonton and carries out a successful first-contract strike.
- 2004 A pair of challengers run against O'Halloran and McLaren. Both incumbents are re-elected.
- 2005 Local 401 organizes Lakeside Packers in Brooks and carries out a successful first-contract strike.



- 2007 Local 401 carries out a first-contract strike at Palace Casino in Edmonton.
- 2007 UFCW Local 373A, representing meat cutters in southern Alberta, merges with Local 401.
- 2008 Local 401 formally affiliates with the Alberta NDP.
- 2009 Workers are locked out at Old Dutch in Calgary. The dispute is settled via a landmark Labour Relations Board ruling that the Rand formula is constitutionally protected.
- 2013 Local 401 holds a province-wide strike at Superstore over concessions. The employer backtracks after three days.
- 2013 A Supreme Court decision relating to the 2007 Palace Casino strike rules that privacy legislation is unconstitutional for restricting rights on a picket line.
- 2016 O'Halloran is challenged in the presidential election by a member of Local 401 staff. O'Halloran is re-elected.
- 2017 Local 401 merges with Local 1118 to create a single province-wide local in Alberta under the 401 banner. It has a membership of almost 40,000 workers.



## *Appendix B*

# UFCW Local 401 Employers

NOTE: This list was compiled in September 2017. Some employers have multiple bargaining units. Representation may include all locations of the listed employer or only single locations and may include all employees or particular departments.

Agropur Cooperative  
Alberta Beverage Container Recycling Corporation  
Aramark Canada Ltd.  
Aramark Remote Workplace Services  
Avis  
Black Velvet Distilling Company  
Buffalo Métis Catering  
Burnbrae Farms Ltd.  
Calgary Quest Child Society  
Calgary Society for Persons with Disabilities  
Canadian Forces Base – Edmonton Garrison  
Civeo Crown Services  
Civeo Premium Services  
Compass Group Canada  
Core-Mark International Inc.  
Cott Beverages West  
Devon Lodges / PTI Group Inc.  
Edmonton Economic Development Corporation  
Excel Resources Society

G4S Secure Solutions  
Gate Gourmet Canada Inc.  
Gateway Casinos  
Horizon Northern Camps and Catering  
IGA Supermarkets  
International Union of Operating Engineers  
JBS Foods Canada  
Lilydale Inc.  
Maple Leaf Foods Inc.  
McKesson Canada  
North Central Co-op Association  
North Country Catering  
Old Dutch Foods Inc.  
Overwaitea Food Group (Save-On Foods)  
P & H Milling Group  
Premier Horticulture Ltd.  
Rahr Malting Ltd.  
Red Deer Co-op Ltd.  
Richardson Oilseed Ltd.  
Securitas Canada  
Service Corporation International  
Sobeys Capital Inc.  
Sobey's West Inc. (Safeway)  
Sobey's Western Cellars (Safeway Liquor)  
Sofina Foods  
South Country Co-op Ltd.  
Spectrum Supply Chain Solution  
Trophy Foods Inc.  
United Parcel Service  
United Protection Services  
Westfair Foods (Real Canadian Superstore)  
WOW! Factor Desserts  
XL Fine Foods (MCF Holdings)  
XL Beef

## A Note on Method

Many tools are available to draw out insights about how unions operate. Given the specific nature of the questions explored in this book, I have adopted a case study approach. Case studies are often disparaged because of their narrow focus on a single subject, but they are amply suited to tackle complex, multifaceted topics. In the study of unions, the case study approach is common (for examples, see Gindin 1995; Rachleff 1993; Smith 2004), in large part because unions lend themselves well to research that draws insights from the detailed examination of one case that are relevant to broader theorizing and practice (Hartley 2004). One of the advantages to the case study is that it preserves the context within which particular actions are taken and, in fact, highlights the interactions between the context and the subject (Stake 1995). This strength is particularly beneficial to the study of unions, which, embedded as they are within capitalist relations, cannot be appropriately understood outside of their contexts.

In addition to appropriate case study design, I employed multiple data collection and analysis strategies (Yin 1994) to achieve a sufficient degree of methodological triangulation (Wolfram Cox and Hassard 2010). The data are made transparent through “thick description” (Dawson 2010). Macro- and micro-level fields of analysis were employed to ensure the preservation of context and complexity.

Data was collected from multiple sources. I procured and analyzed a wide range of documents, including legal documents (such as bylaws and collective agreements), internal reports, third-party reports (such as Labour Board decisions), media stories, and union communications. A

search of eleven Alberta media outlets, from January 1996 to June 2014, revealed 487 articles related to UFCW Local 401 activities. I also received from the union copies of eighty-six pieces of communication intended for either union members or the public, including advertisements, leaflets, website content, paraphernalia, posters, issues of the local newsletter, a new-member welcome package, and a shop steward training package.

Between January and June 2014, I conducted thirty-eight semi-structured interviews at various locations in Alberta: Edmonton, Calgary, Red Deer, St. Albert, Fort McMurray, and Brooks. In addition to twenty-three current members of Local 401, I spoke to one former member, seven staff members, and four knowledgeable outsiders. I also interviewed the local's three leaders: the president, secretary-treasurer, and executive director of labour relations. Members were recruited through a variety of techniques with the aim of ensuring that those selected were broadly representative of the local's membership. The union provided a membership list from which I selected individuals using both random and targeted strategies. I approached the selected members, as well as other potential recruits, at union meetings and functions. I also sought referrals from the members I recruited. I considered the location, gender, occupation, and range of experiences with the local to ensure diversity in length of service with the union and functions performed. Outsiders were selected for their knowledge of the local and its practices. These interviews were supplemented by transcripts of interviews with Local 401 members, staff, and leadership conducted by the Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI) between 2003 and 2010; there are available to the public upon request.

Finally, I spent many hours directly observing the life of the local. I attended seven general membership meetings in Edmonton, Calgary, Red Deer, and Fort McMurray (in work camps north of the city), as well as a weekend conference for shop stewards in Edmonton. I observed both formal aspects of the meetings and informal interactions before, during, and after official proceedings. These events were supplemented by informal observation of interactions at union offices in Edmonton, Calgary, Fort McMurray, and Brooks.

A central goal of the project was to deepen our understanding of the role of narratives in union action. To analyze the process through which these narratives were constructed and how they fit into the power

dynamics within the local, I employed a qualitative technique known as critical narrative analysis (CNA).

CNA stands in a complementary relationship to the somewhat more familiar technique of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (see Souto-Manning 2014a). Whereas CDA adopts a macro-analytic perspective, focusing on the capacity of institutional discourses to articulate and reinforce relationships of power, CNA examines how power is embedded in everyday narratives, such as those that emerge in ordinary conversation. As Mariana Souto-Manning (2014b, 162–63) observes, “CNA allows us to learn how people create their selves in constant social interactions at both personal and institutional levels, and how institutional discourses influence and are influenced by personal everyday narratives.” CNA recognizes that narratives are created by and for particular interests and that power dynamics are thus deeply implicated in the construction of personal narratives. Narratives can be a way to express and exert power, but they can also serve to disguise that power, hiding it from public sight.

Methodologically, CNA requires the researcher to move sequentially from micro to macro levels of analysis in order to draw out various narrative elements of critical significance, in what is essentially a reflexive, iterative process (Emerson and Frosh 2004). In the course of this analysis, the power dynamics underlying the construction of narratives begin to emerge, which in turn reveals the role that narrative plays in the creation and maintenance of power relations within an organization—in this case, a union. In short, CNA allows the researcher to capture the significance of the participants’ experience while maintaining the ability to contextualize that experience from a critical perspective.

I began the multistage CNA process by identifying the factual elements within each of the narratives and comparing the information with that found in other sources to confirm its accuracy. This initial analysis pinpointed the key events that took place over the period of study. The second step was to return to the narratives, armed with an awareness of the key events, to examine how these events were described, interpreted, and understood. At this stage, the narratives were analyzed for the occurrence of common words, phrases, tones, and implications in order to draw out some broad themes, such as top-down leadership, populism, and militant approaches. These themes were then aligned with the key events

to begin the process of revealing how union leadership and members were talking about those events.

The third step involved comparing the event-specific stories to identify areas of convergence and divergence. Which story elements recurred and in what context? Through this process, those stories that were more integral to shaping actors' understanding of events were identified, allowing narratives to emerge. These narratives were then analyzed to determine how they fit together, creating a cluster of narrative families, each of which contained narratives that were related to one another thematically and functionally.

In the final step, I returned the narratives to their context within the union to reveal important power dynamics. For each narrative, I asked whose interests it served and how it did so. This part of the analysis required a conscious awareness that power relations are present in all organizations and that narratives play a role in establishing, maintaining, and shifting power dynamics. By laying bare the relationships of power within an institution, the researcher can see events, and the narratives built to explain those events, through a critical lens that reveals how those narratives contribute to the prevailing power dynamics within that institution.

In practice, the analytical steps did not occur sequentially. The process was more of an iterative spiral, in which I analyzed the data from multiple perspectives, moving back and forth between the various steps, each time gaining new insights. Through this process, the power relations implicit in the narratives were brought to the surface, revealing both the interests that these narratives served and the manner in which they did so. The end result was a richer understanding not only of the key events that occurred but of how the actors involved interpreted those events and how the power dynamics within the local were shaped by the narratives that these actors constructed.



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