

The Forge



Image courtesy of Sam Klug

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Organizing at the Frontier of Higher Education

Sam Klug *and* Julie Kushner

A persistent challenge for labor organizers in institutions of higher education is the perception that universities are worlds apart. The notion that universities are tranquil spaces of learning and reflection — as opposed to workplaces that, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, **employed** 3.9 million people in the United States in 2019 — has long posed problems for those who seek to improve the working conditions of all kinds of workers on campus.

Few people understand how to navigate these challenges better than Julie Kushner. The Connecticut State Senator and former president of UAW Region 9A began her career organizing clerical workers at Barnard College and Columbia University, campaigns that have long been **recognized** for their remarkable success in building diverse organizing committees, overcoming departmental divisions, and bargaining strong contracts that addressed sexism and racism.

Many of the challenges faced by clerical workers in the early 1980s are recognizable to organizers of graduate workers, adjunct faculty, and other university employees today, from the division of the workforce into isolated departments, to administrators' arguments that a union would disrupt the "special relationship" between professors and their secretaries — or their students.

Throughout her career at the UAW, Kushner brought the lessons learned in the clerical worker campaigns to the graduate worker campaigns she led at the University of California, NYU, Columbia, and Harvard. In this interview, Sam Klug, an organizer with the Harvard Graduate Students Union-UAW, talks with Kushner about her career, the recent trajectory of the labor movement in higher education, and where we might go from here. This interview has been edited and condensed.

Interview Julie Kushner



SK: What got you involved in organizing and what led you to make a career out of labor organizing?

JK: I was very young when I started organizing. I definitely came from a political perspective that we need to change the world and that the best way to do that would be to start with workers and building strong organizations of workers.

I graduated [college] around 1975. I did what most women did at that time. I became a secretary, and I worked at the university that I graduated from. It didn't take me long to realize that it was really important to organize amongst my coworkers. At that time, we were much more geared toward consciousness raising, women's rights, but it really quickly evolved into union organizing. And so I became a union organizer in 1977. My interest was in organizing secretaries, which at that time, was a frontier of organizing. And I was very fortunate to work with a group of women who were very collaborative and very interested in learning from each other, as well as looking at past organizing models, but really developing new models to meet the challenges of this new frontier.

SK: You were very involved with District 65, which is a legendary part of the labor movement that organized many unorganized workers in New York dating back all the way to the thirties and forties. But in the seventies and eighties, a big frontier they were organizing was clerical workers and universities. What kind of new model was developed in those campaigns and why do you think that new model was so effective?

JK: We had to make some mistakes before we figured out best practices. And I think some of the mistakes we made — because a number of people came from university environments — came from publishing. We thought we could write it all down in a very cohesive message and that people would sit down and read it and they would join the union. That was a mistake we made early on. We figured it out quickly though, that that wasn't effective. We took from the old methods of having worker committees that were present in the workplace and really very organic but we expanded that to look toward having organizers that reflected the workforce. So that meant a lot of women, a lot of young women, women with children, which hadn't happened in the labor movement before.

When I had my first child in 1979, I was working on an organizing campaign and the president said, "Oh, well, so you'll be like leaving after this, right?" And I'm like, "No, I'm coming back." And he was like, "Really? No one's ever done that. They have their babies. And then they find another job." In the labor movement, but not as organizers.

Focusing on connecting with workers in a deeper, more organic way was really important to the model. Developing broad committees that were prepared to commit for the long haul. These campaigns were not quick campaigns. They weren't like in manufacturing, where you could go in and organize quickly and turn around and have a strike for recognition. They were much more geared toward a long, well-developed campaign that could sustain itself against an anti-union campaign from the

employer. The anti-union campaign was very different too. It wasn't as much driven by firing the leaders; it was driven by a web of misinformation and fear. It's the same fear, it's just that it exhibited differently, not so much firing people as much as making them afraid they would lose some of that.

SK: This is at Columbia in the eighties?

JK: Absolutely. And so we started organizing in Columbia. I started on the campaign in 1980. We had already failed in a previous election. I had just had my son, and we went about a long-term campaign plan where we developed a base amongst the workers. And it was very strategic in thinking about: where are the majority of the workers? We had always been strong in the humanities and in the small faculty offices where there wasn't any real strong opposition but had trouble breaking into the areas like the registrar's office or the bursar's office, or the controller's office. And the big pools of workers.

And there were lots of racial elements to this too because in those bigger pools, there were more workers of color than in the faculty offices. And so there were real divisions. Figuring out: how do you develop leadership that will carry you through that? You have access in faculty offices; you didn't have access in the administrative offices. So all of these challenges had to be figured out.

And basically, we developed a model where we found leaders, real leaders, in those departments who would organize their coworkers and relied on us for guidance and information, but did the organizing themselves. That's not anything new, and I'm not trying to say that was different. I think the main difference was that it took longer. People had very little experience with unions so they didn't have some experience to draw on from another work experience. And, in some ways, that was harder because you had to be able to explain how this would work. But, in

some ways, it was better because people felt like, this is exciting. This is something new. This is something that might really make a difference.

SK: That lack of experience with unions is increasingly the experience for all kinds of workers in the United States with our declining union density. But in higher ed, it's also something we've come up against in the grad union campaigns of the last decade as well. People not knowing what unions are and people also having a sense that, well, unions are for other people. They're not for us and not for workers like us.

JK: That was the case for secretaries too. They were like, Oh, the unions aren't for secretaries; they're for factory workers. In 1980, we affiliated with the United Auto Workers. The management just loved that because now all the literature is: why would you want to join the auto workers? And that's still the same message you hear today, whether you're organizing faculty or graduate workers. And they fail to mention the historic evolution of organizing within the UAW amongst academic workers.

The way we overcame that was just, again, not letting them carry the day with their narrative and having our own focus on the issues that were important to the workers. And there were so many issues. Issues of discrimination, particularly at Columbia where people of color were about 48 percent of the unit. The discrimination in wages was very real, very tangible, very evident, and then was confirmed once we were successful and had the information to back that up.

There were problems with healthcare. Changing the health plans and making people pay more out of their pocket. The introduction of video display terminals. The whole beginning of computerization and these VDTs, they used to call them. The screen, the monitors, the computers themselves had a lot of health hazards and people were getting carpal tunnel for the first time, headaches. The machines have changed a lot, but in the 1970s and '80s, people were actually getting sick from it. And so

there were all kinds of health and safety issues that you'd never expect in a university. And so we focused on those issues, and we made demands along the way, and we exposed a lot of the problems.

And most people weren't, then, that interested in the university's line of, "Well, why would you want to be in the Auto Workers Union?" It was like, these are our coworkers. You call us outsiders, but when we see the list of names and which departments they work in, all of a sudden that line, that it's a bunch of outsiders, just doesn't resonate. It's not accurate. And it doesn't resonate.

SK: It is quite amazing how familiar a lot of those problems sound to the organizing work we've done among grad workers recently. And you, of course, have had a big role in that as well. After your time organizing with District 65, the Columbia clerical workers campaigns, which ultimately did win recognition, right?

JK: Yes. We petitioned for an election in 1980. It took three years to get the election. And, in 1983, we had the election and then it took two more years to get through the morass of the legal challenges that they put us through. And then, ultimately, we were certified, but it was five years to go from the time we petitioned for an election. That's why I say digging in and being committed to these long-term campaigns. It was well worth it and the people we developed, the leaders within Columbia, were very committed to being there and sticking with it.

SK: That is a really long road.

JK: People were angry, they were hungry for change, and they were ready to take on the challenge. And so we had a strike deadline. We negotiated. It was a very intense negotiation. It lasted months and months and months, probably about 18 months of negotiations. And,

ultimately, we had a strike deadline, and we were not able to settle. I think the university was in total shock that we actually went out on strike.

We had incredibly strong support and after four days they settled with us and we won major changes. We improved the wages, we won an equity fund to address inequities and particularly racial inequities and wages. We rolled back some of the healthcare concessions, we got a job classification language that was really important to win. There were just a multitude of changes: reasonably scheduled, flexible work hours for working moms and students. It was a remarkable first contract. And I think that it really did feel like we were changing lives, and that's what makes this all worthwhile.

SK: How did you translate that experience when you were working with graduate student workers in the 2000s and 2010s?

JK: Well, the graduate student organizing began earlier than that. And I was very fortunate because District 65 was involved at the University of California. It became a UAW campaign, but it started with District 65. And I actually went out and met with the TAs at Berkeley, and I remember being extremely intimidated, like, oh my God, I'm going to be meeting with faculty, with TAs, with people who taught me in college. I was really intimidated about going into those meetings. And what I learned very quickly is that, yes, they were highly intelligent people with a knowledge of labor history, of science, of mathematics, things that I had no idea about, but they didn't know how to organize. And what they really wanted from us was the expertise on how to build an organizing campaign.

By 1998, NYU was boiling over, and workers at NYU were looking for ways to change their conditions. And I came in to help with a small group of people who were friends: a former union organizer with District 65 was in the American Studies Department getting her PhD. And she said, "Can

you just help us do a strategic plan?" And so that's how I got involved and spent an afternoon helping them develop their strategic plan for organizing. And a few months later, they called me back and said, "We'd just like to organize with you. Would you help us and the UAW?" And I said, "Of course."

And I think what was really helpful was my experience in universities with clerical workers. I'd already been through that, "Are they really workers and do they really belong in the UAW?" And so, for me, it helped me to understand that what was important was to make sure that we were clear about what made a teaching assistant or a research assistant a worker. What are the elements of what you do that are clearly work so that we could dispel the myth that somehow academic work isn't real work. And we needed to dispel that myth, both amongst the workers, obviously, but also amongst the public. And that was the way we went into the NYU campaign. There were unions for graduate workers in the public sector — not in the private sector. And so we knew there would be a legal challenge that we were going to need to put resources into, but that we were also going to need to commit for a long-term campaign in order to be successful. And the UAW was prepared to do that and provide those resources. The workers were prepared to stay involved and commit to a yearslong campaign.

SK: You mentioned the public shift that you were trying to achieve. I'm curious if you think that shift has happened in the 20 plus years since that NYU campaign was getting going?

JK: I hadn't thought about that question. It's a good question. I think that public perception is more accepting of the idea that graduate assistants, teaching and research assistants, and faculty will be unionized, can be unionized, should be unionized. I think that's more acceptable. I would question whether we've really convinced some of those key decision-

makers in public places whether it's real work. And I don't want to name names or anything, but we got some really big, powerful elected officials who were extremely helpful. And I think they did that out of a commitment to the labor movement in our society.

Especially at the beginning of the campaign, we did these forums with some elected officials, major officials. We had Senator Schumer there for instance. And what I really appreciated was when we organized those forums, they weren't your typical forum, and Senator Schumer was prepared and willing to participate in a way that he hadn't been asked to do before. So instead of coming and making a few remarks and leaving, he came to a meeting and sat in the audience and listened to workers tell their stories for about 45 minutes before he was even asked to say anything. And then he was asked to comment on it and you could just sit there and watch him during those comments. It was a real educational experience. You could watch him and see that he was beginning to understand things he'd never understood before about academic work. And that was incredibly helpful to us because having somebody high profile in New York State, and now nationally, understand the work in a more real way was extremely important.

And I appreciated his willingness to do it. And then he was engaged fully and really part of the campaign to pressure the university to recognize the union after years and years of legal battles. There were people like Schumer who stayed involved the entire time and many others in New York City. The faculty were incredibly important, the undergraduate student organizing was important. And that was true, not just for graduate workers, but even if you look back at the clerical workers in Columbia, that outside support for what the workers were doing was very helpful.

SK: I was a student organizer with the Harvard Graduate Students Union at the same time that you were working with the Columbia graduate students on their campaign, which of course led to the NLRB decision that restored the rights of graduate workers at private universities. What did you think was important about organizing student workers for the broader labor movement?

JK: Whenever I think about organizing frontiers, you look to industries that previously have been under-organized. And, as a result, the kind of things that the employer is able to get away with are detrimental, not just to the worker, but to the entire sector. And so whenever you're looking at a new frontier like higher education, you see so many opportunities to address problems that haven't been solved for a very long time. And in some cases, those problems are specifically for the workers. Sometimes it's for the greater good of the institution.

For me, organizing graduate employees in higher ed was really about seeing the broader picture and recognizing that there was a lot to be gained from having a university system that was highly organized like other countries where workers really saw the benefit of having a union. For the labor movement, there's a tremendous advantage of organizing graduate employees and other academic workers because of the energy that's brought to our movement from young workers who are fully engaged and ready to take on very difficult situations and do it for all the right reasons. Because they're not looking to just benefit themselves, but really make a change in society. The benefit to the labor movement is, obviously, growth in sectors where we have more people organized, we have more power, we have the ability to effectuate more change, but also just the energy that comes from organizing in higher ed.

SK: What do you think are some of the new directions that the movement can go in, not just for graduate workers, but across the

different workers on university campuses?

JK: We had succeeded in organizing NYU and getting that first contract, and it was a big deal and people were talking about it. And again, it was another great example of a first contract where we made tremendous advances. I went to a meeting on campus with some faculty and students to talk about our experience and what we had negotiated. And I made this reference to "these lowest paid workers on campus." And someone in the room raised their hand and said, "Excuse me, but I'm adjunct faculty. And we are the lowest paid people in a university."

JK: And it was just shocking to me that there's always something else that's there. And so we actually ended up organizing the adjunct faculty at NYU. If we had not been involved in organizing the grad assistants, we would not have gone on to organize the adjuncts. And while there are definitely unions that have organized adjunct faculty for many, many decades, the times have changed. Universities have really migrated away from full-time faculty to part-time faculty for all the obvious reasons of cost savings and flexibility.

And there had not been an effort to organize adjuncts by themselves, and they really needed to be organized at that moment as a standalone separate unit of adjunct faculty where they were the priority. They weren't in a bigger unit where their needs weren't going to be addressed head-on. That was a really important thing at NYU and a decision that the workers made. They came to us and they said, "We want to be our own unit." And we agreed to accommodate that. That led to the organizing at the New School of the part-time faculty.

So these things snowball because when you organize and take on the issues of a group of workers, the next group of workers in the place next door, they see the advances and they want to be part of that. And then I would look at what happened at Columbia, where we ended up, after

organizing grad employees, organizing the postdoc employees. And so I think that in the university setting, we are looking toward, how do you organize the entire university, all of the workers in a university, and then how do they work together in coalition to advance everyone?

Not just the academic workers, but also the clerical workers and the maintenance workers and the custodians and the whole university community so that you work as a coalition. And I think, ultimately, you end up where we see things headed now with undergraduate student workers who are also organizing, and the student athletes that we're now very much aware of how they're exploited and taken advantage of [they are]. And so I think that you keep seeing this explosion of organizing in higher ed.

SK: That's a very inspiring vision of a kind of campus wide organization where each group of workers is organizing for themselves and together. But of course, that isn't where we are right now.

JK: We hit a few bumps in the road.

SK: One or two.

JK: I just retired from the UAW in 2018. And, as I mentioned, I got started with NYU in 1998. So for twenty years, I watched how we would advance and then the political change in Washington, we would be on the defensive again. With the Bush decision at NYU. And then when Obama won, we were ready, we filed a petition immediately and we were ready to go. And then we watched the setbacks under the Trump Labor Board. It's fascinating to me that universities are so resistant to union organizing.

To me, it's a profound contradiction of the mission of higher education, the way they treat their workers and the way they deny their workers the democratic rights that you would think universities would not just uphold but herald — that they would be the leaders in creating freedoms and

democracy. And yet, when it comes to their own workers, they're some of the worst. And so we've seen two decades now of a fierce fight over organizing rights of workers in higher education. And what I find so rewarding is that they can keep fighting, but the workers find creative ways and the union finds creative ways to keep fighting as well — and we keep winning. The UAW hasn't turned its back on these workers, the workers themselves are truly committed to keeping the fight on until they win. And as a result, we've had progress and we've had forward motion.

SK: The need for people to be committed for a long haul is really important. And I know people enter grad school and they have a million different things they have to do; the concept of being in a multi-year fight to gain these rights isn't something that is altogether top of mind for a lot of workers in these positions. And so getting a critical mass of people who are willing to say, "This is what we need, and we need to stick with it," is really maybe the first challenge I think of moving forward in any of these cases.

JK: I think that what you find in any group of workers is that, if they can see the result of organizing, if they can see the advantage that workers will have even though they themselves might never realize it in their own work life.... People who organize unions are the best people because they're mostly not doing it for themselves. They're doing it for other people, the next generation of workers that come behind them. And I have a very dear friend, the woman who invited me to her home in 1988 to organize the grads at NYU. And, by the time we won that election, when we had the election, she wasn't eligible to vote because she had already moved on to working on it. She was no longer teaching. And then we organized an adjunct unit there, and once again, she had been an adjunct, and she missed the boat. She didn't get to vote again, but she

worked on these efforts, not for herself and not for her own personal gain, but for what could be done to change the institution.

SK: You're retired from the UAW and working as a state legislator. I'm curious how your career in organizing has informed this new work that you're taking on as a legislator.

JK: Well, it's been really interesting. I was really recruited to be a candidate in 2018. I had not planned to retire and be an elected official. My plan was to retire and probably continue to be an organizer somewhere and continue to build within the labor movement. And I got talked into it because, of course, I was convinced by different allies that I was the best person to flip a longtime Republican seat. And the person I took on was very conservative, very anti-labor. We didn't just flip the seat. I was the polar opposite of my opponent. Much of what happens as a state legislator is you end up negotiating, you negotiate bills much like you negotiate contracts and find the right compromises that will get enough votes to pass the bill in the best form you can get.

I became the Senate labor chair. And there were those who said, "Don't get pigeonholed into labor just because you've come from labor. You don't really want to be the labor chair. Ask for something else." And I'm like, "No, no, you don't get it. I want to be the labor chair. This is what I believe really makes a huge difference in people's lives." And so I ended up being the labor chair, and I'm there with instructions from our allies to do two things. You got to win the \$15 minimum wage, and you got to win paid family and medical leave. And you got to do it at the same time in the same session. In your first time ever as an elected official. It was daunting. And the people who were advising me, they didn't realize that, as somebody who had led union organizing campaigns, when I had a deadline, I'm serious about that deadline. We have to meet that deadline. It's much harder in the legislature. There are more things you don't

control. I was desperate that I hadn't met any of my goals because we were off by weeks, not just days.

What I found out was that having the union background really helped in many ways. I've never believed that any individual is really that powerful. They may think they are powerful. But I didn't believe that I could become the state senator and snap my fingers and we would have paid family leave or a \$15 minimum wage. I always understood it was about the strength of the movement to win these things. And so the organizing aspect of it, organizing your colleagues, working with the coalition (the coalition of organizations became like the organizing committee), meeting every day. There was a whole coalition of organizations that helped to shape what that bill was going to look like. And when we couldn't get somebody to vote for it, those people were on the ground sending postcards and visiting legislators and making phone calls and really bringing together all that organizing energy that you need to create a movement to get something done.

And so it was just an amazing opportunity to be involved in something that impacted so many people. And the night we passed the \$15 minimum wage, I got quite emotional. I had negotiated some pretty big contracts for thousands of workers and I had never felt like, we just passed a bill that's going to give 350,000 people a raise.

SK: What's one piece of advice that you would give a young organizer today as they go off into organizing their workplace?

JK: I would say, be prepared to sacrifice personally. It takes great personal sacrifice to commit yourself to organizing, but to understand that that sacrifice will be more than worth it. There were many times when I felt like I missed important events in my family or worked so hard that I was exhausted. But when you look back at the victories that have been won, it's so well worth it. It's the most rewarding work you could ever do

because you're really making a difference in people's lives, as individuals but also in the broader movement. And that's an amazing feeling to be part of it.



About **Sam Klug**

Sam Klug is a historian and an adjunct professor at Columbia University and George Mason University. He has organized with the Harvard Graduate Students-UAW Local 5118 since 2013.



About **Julie Kushner**

Julie Kushner on her decades-long career organizing university workers, her vision for building a deep coalition of students and workers across campus, and why she thinks union organizers are “the best people.”