

FIVE

Dividing Up the Struggle: The Consequences of "Split" Welfare Work for Union Activism

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We've got a divided house in Jackson County [a pseudonym]. Last year when negotiations stalled, there was a strike that left everyone mad. The eligibility workers had a strike vote and won. I thought the contract was going to go through and the next day I was putting up picket lines. . . . They got the votes together by promising the social workers that they wouldn't get mad if they [the social workers] crossed the picket line. The social workers crossed the lines. Then the EWs got mad. It lasted three weeks—right before Christmas. It was a real disaster. Their wage gain was minuscule and it severely damaged relations between the EWs and social workers. (Union Field Representative for Jackson County, Local 222)

This short-lived, divisive strike in Jackson County in 1987 is emblematic of deep rifts in the California local of the welfare workers' union. The eligibility workers (EWs), who screen and process welfare applications, are unionized together with professional social workers (MSWs) who provide social services to children and families,¹ and the EWs and MSWs are often at odds with one another. The strike vote was taken when contract negotiations with the county broke down over the EWs' demands for a limit on the number of cases assigned to them. Routinely assigned 150 to 500 clients at a time, EWs view reduced and standardized caseloads as one of their primary goals. Although enough of the social workers were sympathetic to support the strike vote, most of them did not share the intensity of the EWs' grievances. Serving fewer clients and exercising more discretion than the EWs, social workers in Jackson County are concerned more with preserving their "professional" autonomy. The social workers were further alienated from the EWs' strike because it seemed to them too abrupt, aggressive, and non-strategic.

The Jackson County strike demonstrates a second, less obvious split between state service workers and their historical ally, welfare clients. In the 1960s and early 1970s, employees of California county welfare departments joined with clients' groups (such as the locally organized welfare rights organizations) to protest punitive welfare and workplace policies. But the Jackson County EWs' clients, whose applications were delayed for three weeks by the 1987 strike, were not assisted or organized by the union, were not included in any strike activities. This omission of clients reflects more than careless organizing: EWs' grievances consistently exclude clients' agendas for increased and improved services. Neglecting clients as potential allies and failing to secure support from the social workers, the EWs' strike was, as their field representative said, "disastrous."

ELIGIBILITY WORKERS AND SOCIAL WORKERS: THE NEW PROLETARIAT?

The fissures between the state welfare workers and their clients evident in the Jackson County strike have not been anticipated by scholars of public-sector labor movements. In fact, analyses of state service work have predicted that it will become increasingly proletarianized and lead to workers' alliances with clients.² James O'Connor, the most notable proponent of this view, suggests that in the current constrained fiscal environment, welfare workers and clients experience similar hardships and thus will join together. Cutbacks in services threaten both clients and the workers who administer the programs. Increasing bureaucratic surveillance and sanctions against clients and service workers will propel them into a struggle against punitive state welfare regulations. O'Connor argues that a movement of public-sector workers and their clients could transcend special-interest union politics to make joint demands for a broader constituency of state workers and dependents.³

O'Connor's predictions are rooted in solid ground. The decline of the Great Society funding in the early 1970s evoked a wave of protest from grass-roots coalitions of social welfare unions and hundreds of locally organized welfare rights organizations. The passage of Governor Ronald Reagan's 1971 welfare reform bill in California mandated a new emphasis on fraud prevention, restricted access to welfare, and standardized services to cut costs.⁴ Anticipating reductions in aid and layoffs, workers and clients protested the results of welfare reform in work actions and demonstrations in 1970. The Local 222 newsletter of March 1970 described joint client-worker actions that had occurred in a two-month period:

On Friday, the 13th, Social Workers in Los Angeles demonstrated at the . . . Sheriff's Station over the police killing of a client at the 76th Street welfare office. The demonstration followed a protest work-stoppage at the 76th Street office on March 11, when workers negotiated improvements in security, staffing, and cash aid for GR [General Relief] clients to forestall such incidents in the future. Another Los Angeles work-action over deplorable working conditions loomed after a client fell down a poorly lighted, long flight of stairs at the Ramparts office on March 12. . . . In other counties members of Local 222 are acting against the abuses imposed on workers and clients through cut-backs, staffing limitations, and short-sighted county policy. On February 16 over 300 clients and workers staged a noon demonstration in Sacramento County over budget cut-backs in AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children], Licensing, and General Assistance. The demonstration was followed by union . . . meetings with county management and much of the program cuts were restored.

The contrast between Local 222's joint client-worker defense of welfare programs in 1970 and the disunity between groups of workers and clients in the Jackson County strike in 1987 raises questions. Fiscal stringency has continued to dictate high caseloads and low wages for welfare workers, while clients receive reduced services and benefits that keep them below the poverty line. None of the conditions O'Connor emphasizes in his explanation of worker-client activism have changed. Given the plausible argument that state workers' and clients' shared material interests and opposition to welfare regulations would be heightened during a fiscal crisis, we would expect to see continuing labor solidarity and struggles with clients. The departure point for this study then is a question: Why are workers and clients who have apparently allied interests divided?

The answer lies in the changes in welfare work organization. One of the welfare reforms implemented during the fiscal crisis of the early 1970s was the division of casework into "eligibility" and "services." Caseworkers, who had provided income maintenance and social services to clients, were replaced by EWs and MSWs, who are each responsible for a portion of these duties. Eligibility for aid is now determined by EWs, and professional social workers provide noneconomic counseling and referrals. O'Connor, who ignored the specific effects of the fiscal crisis on work organization and workers' consciousness, could not anticipate that the reorganization of welfare work in the early 1970s would transform state workers' and clients' movements.

Although social work and eligibility work are both more standardized and more closely monitored than was casework before the fiscal crisis, the administrative control of work has been enacted differently among MSWs and EWs. Caseworkers all carried out similar tasks and

were subject to standardized rules and working conditions. In contrast, MSWs and EWs occupy different workplaces with distinct duties, regulations, and working conditions. Consequently, social workers and EWs have distinct experiences of client work that lead to different and sometimes conflicting grievances. While both MSWs and EWs have suffered from cutbacks in the welfare system, this deprivation has been meted out in different degrees and ways.

Separated in different offices and work sites, providing different services, and reporting to different supervisors, EWs and social workers have only one opportunity to make workplace policy together: union meetings. For four months I attended lunch-hour membership meetings, informal grievance sessions, executive board meetings, and negotiations with management. Directly assisting the field representative of the union's Mandana County chapters [a pseudonym], I had the opportunity to get to know most of the chapter's union activists as well as other field representatives. After this period of participant observation research, I conducted informal interviews with three social workers and three EWs. The following three sections examine how the specific workplace experiences of caseworkers, social workers, and eligibility workers have generated three distinct forms of public-sector unionism.

CASEWORK AND CLIENT-WORKER ACTIVISM

Beginning in the early 1960s, Local 222 spearheaded organizing drives among caseworkers in California county welfare departments.⁵ Previously represented by public employee associations narrowly concerned with wage gains, caseworkers were organized by a union of political activists. The union first gained formal recognition in 1966 by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors after a highly visible twenty-two-day strike in which caseworkers and clients shut down local welfare offices. Welfare reform, designed largely to "stabilize" the rapid growth in the California welfare rolls in the 1960s, was the focus of union protest as early as 1969. Local 222 caseworkers and welfare clients responded to the reforms with a defense of welfare benefits, assaults on proposed fraud detection programs, and lobbying efforts aimed at local politicians.⁶

Such militant client-worker activism would appear to support an explanation of state service workers' movements linked to fiscal crisis: workers and clients become aware of their shared material interests and bureaucratic regulation when threatened with budget cutbacks. However, when we consider caseworkers' specific exposure to clients' needs at the dawn of the fiscal crisis, it becomes apparent that the structure of caseworkers' formal duties provides a more compelling explanation of the alliance. Caseworkers were given discretion both in providing

services and in granting benefits to clients. Serving the "whole client," caseworkers formed personal ties with their clients, which paved the way for activist alliances between the union and welfare rights organizations.

Caseworkers became client advocates because using the welfare system to meet their clients' economic needs was part of their legitimate agency job description. Welfare managers, prompted by city officials anxious to assuage the growing number of militant welfare rights organizations, gave caseworkers discretion in granting aid.⁷ Because caseworkers determined eligibility for welfare benefits by complex and in some cases nonstandard criteria, they were able to interpret regulations broadly and liberally. For example, caseworkers could supplement clients' monthly checks with special grants for items, such as winter coats or new appliances, not covered in the client's monthly budget.⁸ Administering liberal welfare regulations, caseworkers had the tools with which to help clients.⁹

Welfare work, combining a set of economic remedies with a continuous personal relationship, led to caseworkers' structural understanding of clients' problems and advocacy. The following report, written by a caseworker and published in the union newsletter in 1969, shows how the worker's direct contact with her client's impoverishment leads to her economic definition of the problem:

Client X, mother of 3 married children and 2 dependent boys (9, 11), calls to ask me to come out and discuss her problems. House in upset condition due to recent moving in. Problems: rent too high but had to get out of other house; mistake in grant causing shortage; shortage of food; PG&E [gas and electricity] to be turned off; no money to get furniture from storage; alimony not coming in; trouble with mail and husband's own bills coming to her; real nervous and unable to think straight. Sister, daughter and daughter-in-law relate (1) she had slight breakdown a few wks ago due to these pressures (2) she's talking of committing suicide (3) she's talking of giving up two boys. References made in orderly manner to help her plan how to counteract various problems—visiting post office and PG&E, calling lawyer. Talk to calm her and try to make her feel less tense. . . . Talk with Supervisor re: mistake in grant and special need for storage money. Transmittals made out. Called church for extra food
 . . .¹⁰

Though Client X is clearly experiencing severe emotional problems, her caseworker understands the problem to be based in unmet material needs (rather than clinical dysfunction) and is able to address them. A service worker who did not have an intimate knowledge of this client's financial problems might not have recognized their primacy in this case.

Caseworkers, whose daily work involved the manipulation of the state welfare system to serve their clients' needs, formed a union that

tied good working conditions to adequate services for clients. Although there were caseworkers who came to state service work with a political agenda that included organizing the underclass, most welfare employees did not share this vision. For the majority of workers, the experience of their daily work life most significantly informed their activism. Because the discretionary aspect of casework lay in serving clients' economic needs, caseworkers were able to identify their own interests with those of clients. Welfare rights organizations that wanted to make services and aid more accessible to clients were natural allies for the advocate caseworkers.

Begun as a caseworkers' craft union with an overt political agenda, Local 222 added EWs to its chapters in the early 1970s. Recruited by the counties in large numbers almost exclusively from the ranks of former welfare clerks, EWs were and are largely Black and female.¹¹ Welfare clerks, who had authorized and disbursed checks to clients, were given the caseworkers' task of determining clients' eligibility for aid when they became EWs. Income maintenance, however, was stripped of its special grants and complex formulas that allowed caseworkers discretion in distributing welfare. The number of MSWs added to the county welfare system declined sharply from the total number of caseworkers previously employed.¹² Union activists resisted the reorganization of casework because they believed it would cause layoffs, hamper communication between workers, and erode already strained services. Despite Local 222's spirited opposition to the plan, by 1972 the politically popular separation was in effect in California as well as most other states.

SOCIAL WORK AND PROFESSIONAL GRIEVANCES

The grievances contemporary social workers bring against their state employer present a stark contrast to the earlier joint caseworker-client activism. While MSWs represent their clients' need for professional services in grievances and actions, they do not solicit their participation in organizing. And although social workers are willing to demonstrate or strike over what one social worker called "life-and-death issues" such as health insurance cutbacks or the elimination of flextime, they negotiate most of their grievances quietly through the formal process.¹³

Casework, which generated welfare workers' political advocacy through their economic duties for clients, has been replaced by state social work, which in contrast gives MSWs discretion only over their provision of noneconomic social services. MSWs, while coming into contact with clients' material deprivation, do not have the intimate knowledge of their finances that caseworkers had. From the social workers'

vantage point, clients' domestic problems, substance abuse, or poor school performance are unconnected to their impoverishment. Furthermore, social workers are rewarded with workplace privileges for instrumentally defining clients' interests as a need for MSWs' protective services, rather than material support.

Consequently, client activism has become largely outmoded, both in the MSWs' appraisals that it has become impractical and in union practice. Social workers, invested in a defense of their workplace control based on client needs that are legitimated by managers, find confrontational union activism to be irrelevant or even contrary to their goals. Dismissing joint organizing with clients and any direct confrontation of bureaucratic authorities, MSWs have narrowly bounded their union struggles to their own interests.

Mandana County MSWs, represented by Local 222, are nonsupervisory employees who provide direct services, such as counseling and referrals, to clients. Social workers generally have small, stable caseloads of clients whom they know by name. The vast majority of their clients are children and families who receive AFDC benefits such as food stamps, Medi-Cal, and a monthly stipend. In contrast to the caseworkers, however, the social workers' formal responsibilities to their clients no longer involve advocating for economic aid. When confronted with a client in need of benefits, social workers make routine referrals to EWs in other offices. The MSWs' discretion lies in providing noneconomic services to clients.

Social workers now investigate and counsel clients in programs that emphasize clinical or institutional solutions to clients' problems with drug abuse, child abuse, truancy, foster care, and adoption cases, among others. A social worker succinctly describes herself and her work as "part attorney, part cop, and a little casework." A social worker will influence, for example, the court's decision on whether or not to take a child away from her parent, or place an adolescent in a juvenile detention facility or psychiatric institution. Spending about half their time in direct contact with clients, social workers' other major responsibility involves writing reports and filling out standardized forms necessitated by state and federal funding agencies. Though the form of the social workers' recommendations and reports is largely standardized, the decisions MSWs make in these cases are based, in their terms, on their professional judgment.

Acting as liaisons between the welfare agency, clients, and state institutions, MSWs work with their clients not only in the welfare office but in clients' homes, courtrooms, and schools. Unlike most nonsupervisory bureaucratic employees, social workers can make their own schedules, choosing to come in an hour late one day and stay an extra

hour on another. Social workers, moving in and out of the office and often on irregular schedules, are frequently outside their supervisors' view. Even when under the scrutiny of a supervisor, social workers are allowed to bypass some of the agency rules. A social worker commented that an EW might be docked for coming in three minutes late, but a supervisor wouldn't "dream of even mentioning the time to a social worker." Managers generally "leave MSWs alone" according to another social worker, because they "don't want to mess with their productivity." The measure of autonomy enjoyed by MSWs in their work is widely understood by county management to be necessary if social workers are to fulfill their diverse responsibilities to clients and state institutions.

Many social workers consider themselves to be client advocates. One long-time union activist, who refers to his adoption caseload as "my kids," voiced the prevalent view of client advocacy when he said, "In my job it means getting involved with clients, providing services . . . wanting to help." Agency bulletin boards advertise garage sales, ethnic dances, and food fairs sponsored by social workers to benefit child welfare clients. MSWs periodically hold bake sales in the agency lobby to buy new furnishings and toys for client waiting rooms. Other social workers mentioned that they have gone to clients' baptisms, graduations, and weddings over the years. Though she will always be considered "that white lady from the agency," one social worker said that she has developed a bond with some of her clients. Counseling small caseloads of families and children, social workers have developed a client advocacy that is expressed in personal relationships or a set of voluntary services.

Social workers are at once genuinely concerned about clients' needs and strategic in their use of clients to maintain and expand their autonomy from bureaucratic supervision. Their grievances typically call for a reduction of workplace regulations so that clients can better benefit from social workers' professional services. For example, social workers in a child abuse emergency response unit protested the rigorous enforcement of a county policy that demanded written or telephone authorization for all overtime. Although most of the social workers indicated that they found making a check-in call demeaning when at a hospital, they focused their complaint on their inability to provide quality services to the children. One social worker said: "We can't go running off to the phone in the middle of the child's examination . . . it gets in the way of the job we're paid to do." Because the MSWs' direct client services have been defined by the county administration as necessarily discretionary, social workers have a legitimate basis for an argument that they need further flexibility in their schedules.

MSWs commonly speak for their clients in their grievances. One of their long-standing complaints against the increasing paperwork assigned to each case is based on their argument that they cannot provide crucial direct services to clients when bureaucratic records multiply. Similarly, clients' needs for quick, dependable, private services provide a rationale for the MSWs' requests for privacy in their offices, a well-maintained motor pool, and more flexible schedules. Although clients may be incidentally better served by such workplace reforms, MSWs—unlike the caseworkers—do not consult clients and their representatives to determine what clients define as their most pressing need. The same MSW, who considers himself a client advocate, explained, in an unusually frank statement, clients' irrelevance to the union: "Providing better services to clients is not the point of the union. The protection of membership is the point. . . . We may use clients to make a point, but we aren't storming the barricades to say that we've got to get services to clients. . . . We are protesting onerous work." Unlike the caseworkers' advocacy, the MSWs' personal commitment to clients is completely distinct from their grievances in the workplace. Their struggle against the bureaucratic regulation implicit in a strict overtime policy or mounting paperwork only symbolically involves and serves clients.

The MSW's assertion that clients' movements are irrelevant to union grievances is reflected in the absence of political organization between the union and clients.¹⁴ Client organizing, when suggested by the Mandana County field representative during executive board meetings, receives at best a lukewarm reception from social workers. MSWs, while supportive of voter registration drives and legislative lobbying with clients' representatives, view direct political participation with clients as a "thing of the past." Clients, according to social workers, are now more likely to be "chemically dependent," "uneducated," and "dysfunctional" in a group environment than they were in the 1960s. One MSW interested in making broader coalitions between mental health workers and community groups noted that his schizophrenic patients "cycle" and are heavily reliant on drug therapy. While acknowledging the importance of direct alliances with clients, this MSW sees organizing with these clients as almost impossible because "they have no sense of rights."

Social workers' pessimism toward organizing with clients is, in part, a product of the constraints their work places on their advocacy. Charged with treating the problems of the poor with only clinical or institutional remedies, MSWs are equipped to serve only a portion of clients' needs. They can offer little or no help other than referrals to welfare eligibility services or legal aid if a client is losing utilities or being evicted. Social workers, unlike caseworkers, have no obvious way

in their formal duties to help clients meet their material needs. Caught in a frustrating position, many social workers understand advocacy as no more than a personal relationship with their clients or an offering of funds collected from an agency bake sale. Direct political action with welfare clients or striving to empower the schizophrenic who is unaware of his or her rights appears irrelevant to the MSWs' role of providing "protective" services to clients.

Reinforcing this disaffection with client organizing are the workplace privileges social workers have acquired by instrumentally defining clients' needs. MSWs continue to have flexible schedules, are treated with relative benign neglect by supervisors, and are allowed to provide services outside of the office because they have convinced the county administration that this discretion is necessary if clients and other state institutions are to be served. MSWs, who are savvy in using clients' needs as a rationale for their own interests in grievances, would have to give up the control they exercise in these complaints if they were to participate with clients. Furthermore, if county managers were to be confronted with grievances that linked welfare rights organization agendas with those of the MSWs, they would be likely to amend some of the social workers' privilege. MSWs who make claims for professional privilege, but do not question the administrative design of client services, have negotiated a compromise with state managers who are willing to give them limited discretion.

MSWs claim a need for workplace control, expressed in flextime and discretionary duties, because their work with clients demands it. Using this argument they have successfully maintained their autonomy from close supervision when providing direct client services, both in and out of the office. However, they have not managed to maintain their freedom from regulations in the standardized recordkeeping and reporting that makes up a major portion of their work. "Court work," such as petitions, reports, applications for foster care payments, and legal notices that must be completed according to a strict time schedule, leaves the MSW little room for discretion. However, MSWs' grievances concerning this work do not demand more autonomy from bureaucratic regulations; rather, they attempt to quietly minimize or sidestep these duties.

An MSW, in a social work subcommittee meeting, proposed a reorganization of social workers' duties that would not draw attention to the change. Reading aloud from a list of "improvements" she had drawn up for the foster care division, she said:

It's ridiculous that when we do W.O.D.¹⁵ we end up answering the phone . . . \$35,000-a-year employees making copies and answering the phone! We need another clerical worker in the unit. It isn't professional to hook the phones up to an answering machine. . . . Also we waste a lot of time filling out court reports. Some of the response categories are standard and don't need to be written in sentence form.

MSWs attempt to deemphasize the more regulated portion of their work by trying to standardize it further, or preferably by reallocating it to another worker. Hoping to appeal to managers' interests in cutting costs, the social workers in the subcommittee meeting consciously framed their grievance so that it would be noncritical of the forms.

Social workers, who argue that paperwork takes away time from their "real" job, client services, subjectively define their work to include only discretionary client duties. The MSWs' division of duties into tedious, nonprofessional tasks and autonomous client contact, however, ignores the fact that all of the MSWs' contact with clients is expressed in standardized reports. Social workers' tangible product, the court report, for example, has been formulated for the sake of regulating clients' lives according to welfare policies that are determined by state administrators. Ultimately, then, the discretion social workers exercise over clients is based only in MSWs' experience of flexible schedules and personal freedom from close supervision, and not in the product of their work. If social workers were to argue for discretion over the form of court reports, they would be forced to confront the authority of managers. As it is, MSWs chose to maintain narrow professional privilege through the orderly grievance procedure. By attempting to sidestep rather than fight against their duties, which are highly regulated, social workers ultimately reallocate the struggle to other workers who cannot use a high salary to justify its inappropriateness.

MSWs' grievances, which ask for more workplace control because it is necessary if the county wants their "professional" services, exclude both clients and nonprofessional workers, such as the EWs. State social work that locates the MSWs' discretion in direct services, but gives them no economic resources to provide to clients, personalizes and depoliticizes welfare advocacy. Given the authority by managers to define client need, social workers use clients in their grievances as leverage to avoid close supervision. Having based their argument for workplace control on a rationale of professionalism that management legitimates, MSWs cannot openly fight regulated work without jeopardizing their privileges.¹⁶ Social workers, who produce documents that legitimate the regulation of welfare clients, ultimately have little discretion over their own work that extends beyond their personal experience. Rejecting

political organization with clients and any confrontation with authority, MSWs are engaged in a defense of a constrained and narrow workplace control.

ELIGIBILITY WORK AND WORKERS' STRUGGLES

Like social workers, EWs place clients at the center of their grievances and activism. EWs' complaints about poorly run client services and their unwieldy caseloads, however, are expressed not only to managers, but also through public activism aimed at taxpayers, politicians, and state agencies. This public activism, in contrast to the agitation of caseworkers, is in opposition to clients that they claim are lazy, addicts using welfare to support their habit, or simply crazy. EWs use clients negatively to oppose workplace programs and policies that are most punitive to workers. Further separating themselves from the MSWs, EWs are willing to disturb the workplace order and their already tenuous relationships with managers. Engaging in illegal collective slowdowns, flamboyant work actions, and, in the past, strikes, EWs show little respect for the order of their workplace. Viewed as undisciplined and erratic by social workers, EWs pursue their own brand of unionism with little support from the MSWs.

EWs' periodic attacks on clients are generated and fueled by their daily interaction in welfare agencies. Responsible for reviewing and checking the welfare applications of hundreds of nameless clients, EWs have little opportunity to form personal relationships with clients, usually described by them as their "caseload." The rushed and standardized interaction of EWs with clients builds resentment among EWs that becomes focused on welfare clients in general. EWs' dislike of providing these unpleasant services is invested in their public attacks on specific programs that add additional client services to their already overwhelming workloads. Lacking the compact social workers have with administrators, which guarantees MSWs a measure of freedom from close supervision, EWs have resorted to grievances that extend beyond the formal process and into the public arena.

EWs do the paperwork and brief interviews to determine clients' eligibility for aid primarily in the agency office. Carrying anywhere from 120 to 500 shifting clients in their caseloads, EWs do not have the opportunity MSWs do to form personal relationships with their clients. The contact EWs do have with clients, rather than building bonds between worker and client, is likely to contribute to disaffection. Unlike the MSWs' small, attractive waiting and interview rooms, the EWs' clients wait in a large area posted with security guards and decorated only

with signs that prohibit eating and drinking. By the time the interview begins the EW's client may have waited up to an hour in lines that stretch out the agency door. Both the EW and client are likely to be irritated and hurried at the start of the interview.

EWs, who determine whether a client's application for aid fits standard eligibility criteria such as income and number of children, lack the broad discretion caseworkers had to adjust formulas or authorize special grants. Most of the EW's time is spent checking clients' applications and records for consistency and authenticity. For example, each month welfare clients submit a statement of their income and assets, and EWs must ensure that the documentation is comprehensive. Any incomplete or potentially fraudulent forms are returned by the EW in the mail to the client, who has a month's time to correct the problem or be dropped from the welfare rolls. EWs also perform annual renewals, which consist of a face-to-face interview and a further audit of the client's income to ensure, according to an EW, "that she isn't driving a Cadillac." Augmenting contemporary eligibility work's emphasis on monitoring rather than serving welfare clients is the fragmentation of aid categories. Assigned to separate aid programs, such as AFDC, food stamps, Medi-Cal, or General Assistance, EWs are able to provide only one source of funding to a client who may receive several.

The services EWs provide to clients in face-to-face interaction are highly regulated, leaving EWs little opportunity to sympathize with the clients' needs. Even in the few stopgap programs that would seem to emphasize client service, such as Emergency Food Stamps, EWs are chiefly responsible for apprehending defrauders. An EW who works in the program commented:

The strongest point about my job is that you have to recognize certain techniques that people use. For some reason each month we get a different story. They say, like my boyfriend's beating me up. . . . Most of the time with that eye-to-eye contact you look at a person, and there's a way to ask questions. I might ask the question five times. And if I keep getting different answers I'll compare them with the application. The main thing we look for is consistency. There are about three different places on the application that we have the same questions. If you can't provide proof then the application will be denied. . . . We tell you that you have to go through the regular process that can take anywhere from thirty-five to forty days.

EWs are instructed to respond to a client who does not meet the Emergency Food Stamp criteria by going through an agency list of referrals to places such as the Salvation Army. If the applicant responds that she

has exhausted all of these resources, the EW will hand out canned food from her agency food bank. Any other response, such as making phone calls to other state agencies, is prohibited. Though the EW comes into direct contact with the victims of welfare cutbacks, the agency covers every contingency of the interaction with a routinized procedure. An EW, even if sympathetic to the client's distress, finds her advocacy restricted by workplace regulations.

Walking into the administrative portion of the EWs' offices past the security check, one sees rows of desks piled high with baskets of welfare applications and a few computer terminals. One office may serve as many as sixty workers. Unlike Mandana County social workers, who often have dividers between their desks, EWs have no privacy in the office. Nor are EWs allowed the privilege of leaving the office, except for occasional home visits for the more senior workers. Because most of the EWs' responsibilities are highly standardized and easily quantifiable, EWs are monitored and held to a standard of productivity by their supervisors. An EW who is a shop steward commented on how his supervisors' surveillance of him stepped up after he became active in the union:

I was recruited to the position basically because no one else wanted it . . . because as a shop steward you become a target. They have a tendency to start looking for little things like are you late, are you abusing lunch period. They look for little things to harass you. As a shop steward, you shouldn't have any medical problems. . . . You can't leave yourself exposed.

Managers' treatment of the EWs is characterized by EWs, MSWs, and union representatives as consistently punitive.

EWs are most likely to react harshly to clients in work situations in which they lack resources to provide to clients in need.¹⁷ Clients, frustrated by the limitations of the welfare system, react angrily, and EWs, also conscious of the chinks in the system, are furious that clients blame them for the late check. An EW who expressed sympathy for hungry, homeless clients explained that she found the limitations of her concern when she worked with an AFDC caseload:

When someone comes in and says they need this money, and, as workers, we make a genuine effort to get them this money and a document bounces, that doesn't mean that we did it intentionally. That doesn't mean that we should be called out of our name because an accident happened, but they do that. . . . Sometimes it's our fault that it happens, sometimes it's a supervisor's, sometimes it's an accident and couldn't be prevented.

I'm not going to baby a client. I'm not going to cry just because a person cries that they're broke.

EWs who answer phone calls from distraught clients desperate for money have developed a similar lack of sympathy that translates into disbelief that the clients are really in need. When confronted with a call from a woman who said that her children had been without food for a day, one EW said, "I don't always believe them. We have to be polite to them, just provide the list of referrals." Providing clients with checks that are inevitably late and insufficient, EWs experience clients' anger and desperation daily. Not being in a position to aid clients, EWs decide that clients' demands for aid are unreasonable or simply unbelievable.

EWs' jokes and comments about client services in union meetings suggest that they too are cumbersome and of no value. The instances of EWs' harshest condemnations of clients and welfare services, however, are saved for the public arena. In the newly instituted state Homeless Program, EWs interview clients and grant emergency funds and hotel vouchers to people who can document their identity. Most of the applicants do not have any identification, so the EWs have been assigned an impossible task. A group of EWs, furious at an added client service that they see as absurd, threatened to call the press and report that the homeless were using the new grant program only to buy drugs. They reluctantly agreed to withhold their press release only when their union representative convinced them that it would cause problems. Although EWs sincerely dislike the homeless clients, their press release was also a strategic attempt to use the public's concern about drugs to sabotage a program that placed unrealistic demands on them.

Some EWs who are experienced union activists realize that client advocate groups can make good allies, but they are unwilling or unable to publicly support clients' agendas. For example, EWs' desire that a caseload maximum be set clashes with the concerns of client advocacy groups who want to extend welfare coverage. Advocacy groups are concerned that if the caseload standards are adopted without concern for clients' needs, the county may not hire enough EWs to provide services. An EW who is a union officer expressed ambivalence about working with these advocacy groups:

I think organizing with clients' rights groups is a good idea. . . . I refuse to work with a clients group who wants to keep people on welfare. . . . I won't try to defend the amount of time a person can receive welfare benefits because that's my own personal belief. I don't believe welfare's set up so people can receive welfare for the rest of their lives. People should use the system fairly.

This EW sees value in organizing with clients but cannot support the advocates' central goal, extending welfare services and benefits to cover more people for a longer time. EWs' work experience, which makes providing services to clients so loathsome, ensures that linking a movement to extend client services with the EWs' struggle for a caseload standard will be highly problematic. Even as a savvy union activist, this EW finds the alliance personally unappealing.

EWs' negative use of clients to fight their highly regulated duties is a genuine expression of hostility and a strategic attack against onerous work. EWs' potential client advocacy, like that of the social workers, has been constrained by the structure of their work, which regulates all contact. Unlike the MSWs, the EWs have client duties that offer them no discretion from supervision; indeed, their client duties are the most obviously regulated portion of their work. Receiving no workplace benefits from extending economic services to clients, EWs reject even the instrumental grievances of the social workers to extend client services. EWs hope that by discrediting clients' needs for services in the public arena, taxpayers, politicians, or even their managers will listen to them and reduce their overwhelming caseloads. Union representatives discourage EWs from taking these complaints beyond the work site, and most criticisms of clients do not become public. However, EWs' struggles against their working conditions are aggressively deployed against county managers and not limited to the workplace.

Most of the EWs' grievances, both formal and informal, are a defense against unreasonable caseloads and overtly racist harassment from supervisors. Predominantly people of color, probationary EWs in the first six months of work routinely receive a harsh initiation from supervisors, predominantly white, who deliver racial slurs.¹⁸ EWs see the grievance procedure as "too slow" and supportive of the "status quo" when attempting to resolve complaints about both caseloads and racial intimidation. Without the MSWs' legitimated argument for discretion, based on the county's need of "professional" services, EWs take their grievances to managers in work actions and into the state arena. EWs, who rely on a broad combination of the formal grievance procedure, work actions, and state worker activism, alienate social workers who don't want to damage their "working relations with managers."

Closely monitored in their work, EWs may also be openly harassed by supervisors. EWs who are active in the union or who display any insubordination to a supervisor quickly become targets for poor evaluations and dismissal. First-level supervisors, who have close contact with EWs and prepare evaluations, typically express this pointed harassment through racist comments. One EW and union activist who

endured a year of racial slurs from her supervisor described the abuse and her reaction:

My supervisor was making racist comments to me . . . every dirty thing she could think to say to me. She would walk over and say it to me . . . in open groups of people. She would make statements about Black culture. . . . It hit me one day. I was mad. . . . I looked at her, "Are you sure you're saying what you're saying?" This woman told me that I made her sick and that she could just throw up all over me. I went off 51-50 and told her, "You better call the sheriff's department first and then you better call the ambulance because if you don't retract what you just said, I'm going to pick up this stapler and knock the hell out of you."

In response to racial harassment in the workplace, many EWs have turned to the Civil Service Commission, the Equal Opportunity Commission, or directly to county politicians, such as the board of supervisors. An activist EW has implemented letter-writing campaigns to local and federal politicians protesting racial discrimination in the workplace.

MSWs and EWs, serving together with managers on county committees concerning workplace issues, demonstrate their clashing style. During a report on a health and safety committee meeting, the MSW representative admitted that he felt unable to confront the management "experts" on the committee. He said,

It was difficult for us [the workers] to ask appropriate questions to the county officials about work environment because none of the workers are experts. . . . There are big black chunks of insulation coming through the [air conditioning] vents. They said that they were too big to be a respiratory problem, it's not a health issue. . . . No one is trained on the committee; we need more information.

Demonstrating respect for the managers' expertise and indicating little understanding of the managers' and workers' different interests, this MSW touched off a torrent of advice from an EW listening to the report:

Big black chunks? You should put the officials on the defensive. Ask for documentation for everything. . . . How do you know this clown is an expert? Even if you don't know, ask questions. If you don't, they will lead you. Get OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] involved . . . have them write a nice little letter.

EWs combine aggressive tactics against managers, whom they consistently identify as their enemy, with state sector resources such as OSHA.

Although EWs' and MSWs' union activism often remain separate in different work sites and with different managers, these groups of workers have ample opportunity to conflict when dealing with top county managers or voting on joint actions. EWs see the MSWs as inactive and often willing to let a few union activists fight their battles for them. Citing the vacancies in the social workers' seats on the union's executive board as an example, EWs believe that the MSWs are currently in decline in the union. Social workers, angered by the EWs' confrontational style, claim that EWs are "too emotional" and "too angry." One long-time social worker commented about EWs, "You can't tell your adversary [manager] that he's full of shit and expect to work with him." Although there is currently no sign of a formal split, several years ago some MSWs attempted to break off from the Mandana chapter and start their own representative body exclusively for social workers.

EWs' union activism, which extends from formal grievances against caseloads to utilizing state watchdog agencies, takes place without the solidarity of MSWs and any alliances with clients or their advocates. Eligibility work, by eliminating all of the EWs' discretion and leaving them to cope with needy, angry clients, effectively undermines all of EWs' potential advocacy. Lacking any interest in even maintaining existing client services, EWs cannot even establish working relationships with client advocate groups, much less participatory unionism with clients. Providing no services that require discretion under the existing structure of eligibility work, EWs have no argument management considers legitimate to stave off repressive caseloads and close supervision. EWs consequently take their complaints, against demanding client services and racist supervisors alike, to the public arena. Taking a confrontational stance against welfare administrators, EWs alienate MSWs who are heavily invested in a defense of their workplace privilege. Because EWs are unable to make coalitions with clients and fellow state workers in their use of state resources, their public-sector unionism does not realize its promise.

CONCLUSION

The argument, made by O'Connor and others, that as public-sector work becomes more rationalized and less discretionary state workers will become activists unified with their clients, is challenged by the case of Local 222. Although both social work and eligibility work are generally less discretionary than casework, and thus objectively proletarianized, workers do not experience solidarity with one another or their underclass clients. The fragmentation of welfare workers' duties, working conditions, and rules has undermined these workers' recognition of

their common interests. Social workers' and EWs' daily experience of work in the welfare agency reminds them of the disparities in the privileges they receive, their different relationships with supervisors, and their contrasting responsibilities to clients. Furthermore, this divided work constructs two distinct views of welfare clients held by MSWs and EWs, both of which exclude clients' full participation in union grievances and actions. Rather than leading toward a convergence in identity and a solidarity movement, state service work after the fiscal crisis has created a myriad of divisive experiences for workers.

This chapter has emphasized the alienating effect of work organization on state employees, but for clients the reorganization of state services has had perhaps even more profound consequences. Clients, rather than working with a single caseworker, are shunted between unresponsive, impersonal eligibility services and the MSWs. Even within eligibility services, clients must negotiate various aid programs, all administered by different EWs. The client who is unable to decode the required regulations to apply for and maintain her welfare may have difficulty determining even who will be able to help her. Similarly, within the MSWs' social services, client "dysfunctions," such as substance abuse, truancy, or schizophrenia, are separately categorized and made the responsibility of a series of different personnel. Welfare clients, whose political organization has always been tenuous, find themselves individually sliced up between various welfare programs.

The argument that clients and workers, as state dependents, both have a common material base and paradoxically are controlled by state services holds true here. However, for state clients (as we have seen for workers), oppression is experienced as coming not from a unitary "state" or even a single welfare program, but from a multiplicity of services administered by transitory employees. Solidarity struggles, even among clients, are unlikely considering the wide variety of regulations, aid programs, and county institutions. It would be virtually impossible for clients to unite in opposition to punitive welfare regulations such as "man in the house rules," as they did in the 1960s, because few rules apply to all clients. Client advocacy groups are active in Mandana County, but not surprisingly, clients' direct participation has diminished greatly since the preeminence of welfare rights organizations in the early 1970s. Any struggle to expand state welfare services or to make services more responsive to a class of state dependents is seriously constrained by the fragmentation of clients' experiences.

Given the pervasive divisions between state service workers and among clients, public-sector unionism will have to chart a course outside the organizing and activism that drew on workers' and clients' shared experience in the 1960s and 1970s. Though there have been

calls both inside the labor movement and from analysts of public-sector unionism for unions to recognize their bonds with clients that are based on inclusive criteria such as race, state citizenship, and gender, unions have been slow to respond. The barriers to workers' and clients' alliances appear from this analysis too great to be overcome with consciousness-raising around gender or racial politics. However, it is clear that an alternative to traditional organizing must be found if workers or clients are to wage effective opposition to state domination.

AFTERWORD: LETTING THE FIELD SPEAK TO YOU

"Letting the field speak to you" is a phrase that was thrown around a lot in the early days of our research as we struggled to orient ourselves to unfamiliar settings and faces. This was a reminder that we needed to be sensitive and responsive to the things people told and showed us in the field. Later we advised each other, somewhat more ironically, to "let the field speak to you," when trying to formulate sociological questions relevant to our site. The irony came out of our sense that this phrase misleadingly makes field work sound obvious and comfortable. It suggests that the participant observer is in some symbiotic relationship with informants and setting that will neatly translate into cogent, compelling analysis. Nothing is further from the truth. And in fact, the more we abandoned our preconceptions about the field and set theoretical or political agendas, the messier it became.

In the beginning everyone you speak with, every meeting you attend, and each interaction you observe in the field is potentially fascinating. I joined a group of union activists (about fifteen people) as quietly and unobtrusively as I could. I introduced myself to the unionists in vague terms, as a graduate student "interested in learning about unions." Asking a few orienting questions and listening a lot of the time, I kept a low profile during my first weeks in the field. In this beginning stage I was listening to the field uncritically and unselectively. I was euphoric about each new discovery, thrilled to be let in on budget meetings and chit-chat in the elevator. I spent several hours sitting in a snack bar, in one of the office buildings where I did my field work, listening to random conversations, watching what people ate, breathing in the buttery fumes of microwave popcorn. I was convinced that this immersion in office culture would yield results.

This hope that all interactions in the field will be grist for one's analysis is, in part, a result of the fact that many of us asked very broad, undefined questions when we started researching: "What are women doing in the Cambodian community?" "How democratic is this union in

its recognition of women?" I was ready to abandon my questions about union democracy if something more interesting came up. This suspension of my expectations, to be open to discovery, surprise, or exciting twists, was helpful, if not absolutely necessary at the beginning of my research process. Though I never considered looking at union activism as anything other than political action, most of my other assumptions were put aside at various points, in some cases to be reintroduced later.

Pursuing my original questions about women's political voice in their union, for example, initially would have forced me to ferret out information from people who didn't know or trust me. Because women's interests were not being explicitly discussed by unionists and there were no active local committees organized to address women's concerns, I found myself initiating conversations about gender that were foreign to male and female unionists' everyday experience. Part of my decision to redirect my question away from gender came from the time pressure we were all under to formulate questions and propositions about our field site. Submerged gender politics seemed too elusive given the time I had to study the union. I decided after the first few awkward conversations about women's workplace concerns, in which I was told patiently or indignantly that all unionists have to stick together, that I needed to sit back and learn what the unionists themselves considered important. Stubbornly probing for hidden struggles between men and women in the union would have made my interactions with informants intrusive and uncomfortable at this early stage.¹⁹

My early focus began to shift from gender not only because of its inaccessibility, but, more positively, because I found myself increasingly caught up in the principal drama in the union: the interaction between two strikingly different groups of activists who also happened to do different types of work. Eligibility workers and social workers alternated between looking faintly bored by one another in group discussions to being openly antagonistic in conflicts. Camaraderie and engagement tended to flow among EWs or among MSWs but not between them. For the most part both groups made visible efforts to tolerate each other, but occasionally, when this veneer collapsed, they burst out into angry, stubborn tirades. The emotional tenor of these interactions turned my attention away from the more pallid dynamics of women and men toward the unmistakable estrangement between EWs and MSWs. I sought new questions about union activism that would address my daily findings of this rupture between the unionists.

My first stage of research, which had resembled a wide-lens photography session, had to come to an end. Remaining in the field without a conscious, articulated set of expectations (even if they were revamped constantly) and questions, while exciting, at this point would have led to

analytical stagnation. I couldn't have made progress in interpreting my observations without committing myself to a more specific focus. Practically, also, it was necessary for me to adjust my perspective on the field if I was to sustain an interest in the project. While highly sympathetic to the aims of the union activists, my engagement with the study was maintained through a series of "discoveries" (many of which would be blatantly obvious to an insider) I made about the field site. Thus as the union and management became increasingly familiar to me and new observations declined, it was essential for me to balance my unqualified enthusiasm for participation with an outsider's perspective.

The explanations that I began to entertain more seriously came, in part, from outside my site. I read about the history of this union and others like it, theoretical perspectives on public-sector and service workers' union activism, and had discussions with others in my class who knew little about the union. Discussions with persons outside the field or engaging a different perspective pushed all of us to explain what was truly compelling about the welfare workers, Cambodian women leaders, or AIDS activists.

Faced with presenting my second set of field notes to my classmates (who by this time were impatient with the miscellany of the field), I began to more clearly define "what was going on in the union" between these two groups of workers. I attended to the subject matter of their heated disputes, as well as what bored them the most. I focused on the encouraging actions as well as the less successful fragmented strategies of MSWs and EWs. Discovering that clients, professionalism, and militant activism continued to emerge as important themes, I formulated my questions even more specifically: "Why are clients the focus of disputes between workers?" and "Why do EWs pursue more militant actions than do MSWs, who reject them in favor of arguments for professional privilege?"

The way that I interacted with people in the union or watched members in meetings also changed when I began to narrow down my research questions. No longer did I linger in the coffee shop; now I more systematically sought out representatives from these two groups of workers and asked them about different kinds of clients, about MSW training and licensing. In meetings I continued to listen to everyone's comments about everything from union bylaws to child-care provisions, but with an ear to filling in missing pieces of a puzzle. My awareness of the field and intention in listening to it became more selective and ultimately more fruitful for my analysis.

In retrospect, the dynamic between what I observed in the field and the explanations I formulated was that of a push-pull. However, the movements back and forth between participant observation and anal-

ysis were delayed and awkward. Rather than neatly going back and forth between these two modes in the beginning, I pursued one strategy of uncritical acceptance until chaos threatened. Even when I came to see the site in terms of a single set of questions, I still harbored a secret fear that I might discover an inconvenient fact that would destroy my carefully constructed argument. Ultimately we all made moves toward more or less rational, neat explanations for the richness of what we observed, but the process of getting there was anything but neat.