

# RADICAL TEACHER

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## Mobilizing to Re-value and Re-skill Foodservice Labor in U.S. School Lunchrooms: A Pathway to Community-level Food Sovereignty?

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FIGURE 1: UNITE HERE LOCAL 1 PROTEST IN CHICAGO

COURTESY OF KYLE SCHAFFER

## I. Introduction

The dominant agri-food system, and the labor policies that support it, render food chain workers some of the most economically insecure (and ironically food insecure) populations in the country.<sup>1</sup> Advocates of food sovereignty believe that the individuals who produce, distribute, and consume food should have the right to define the policies and priorities of their food systems. Recent strikes at fast food restaurants and emerging activist research (see for example *Behind the Kitchen Door*<sup>2</sup>) suggest that a growing number of food service workers have begun to organize in support of food sovereignty. These worker-led movements are using collective political power to address social and economic injustice in the food system. Their efforts are part of a radical food politics that views re-skilling and re-valuing labor across the food chain as the foundation of a food system that builds human, ecological, and economic health.

The systemic exploitation of food chain workers (and the natural environment) is the product of social choices, embodied in institutions, ideologies, and political-economic structures. One such institution is the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), which was originally founded in 1946 with the dual purpose of supporting domestic agriculture and children's health. It is now an \$11 billion taxpayer-funded industry that embodies the tensions between reformist and mainstream views of food provisioning. A growing movement in support of "real food" (i.e. locally grown and scratch-cooked foods) seeks to disrupt the NSLP's historical reliance on large-scale farmers and food processors whose products travel through complex commodity chains.

The processed food industry is responding to the desire for real foods by marketing their "clean label" products (i.e. high quality processed foods made without artificial or other unwanted ingredients) and value-added locally grown foods (that largely travel through conventional supply chains) as a simple and cost-effective solution. This strategy, which I term "real food-lite," relies on the substitution of inputs rather than deeper reforms to the food system. School food authorities are predisposed to accepting industry-based solutions like clean label products since they fit within the existing heat-and-serve paradigm. In other words, the constraints of technological and institutional "lock-in" hinder transitions away from heat-and-serve meals and ultimately prevent more sustainable food systems from developing.

School foodservice workers are largely overlooked and undervalued by policy and academic circles, but eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork and archival investigation have led me to a very different conclusion about the importance of cafeteria staff.<sup>3</sup> Frontline workers are critical to the success of the NSLP as it exists today—but even more importantly, they have tremendous potential to drive positive changes to the school food environment. This article focuses on one such example of workers using their personal and collective agency to advocate for both higher quality meals for U.S. schoolchildren and higher quality

jobs in the foodservice sector. Underlying my analysis is the understanding that school foodservice is a form of reproductive labor,<sup>4</sup> which means that it encompasses "various kinds of work—mental, manual, and emotional—aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined care necessary to maintain existing life and to reproduce the next generation."<sup>5</sup>

School cafeteria workers have long been a subject of public satire, as in comedian Adam Sandler's song "Lunch Lady Land," where he sings, "Woke up in the morning, put on my new plastic glove. Served some re-heated Salisbury steak with a little slice of love. Got no clue what the chicken pot-pie is made of." His lyrics (albeit crudely) bring into question the lack of transparency in the agro-industrial food system and the lunch lady's culinary autonomy. Rather than expressing some truism about school cookery and those who perform this work, Sandler's caricature pokes fun at the negative outcomes (i.e. poor food quality and disempowered workers) of a particular mode of school feeding that provides children with meals that are "scientifically nutritious" yet rarely satisfying. The cultural portrait of the lunch lady presented by Sandler and other popular representations (e.g., the television show *The Simpsons*) doesn't conjure up an image of political activism. Cafeteria workers belonging to UNITE HERE—the largest organization representing foodservice workers in North America—are building a new public image. As of October 2013, school cafeteria workers in Chicago, New Haven (Connecticut), and Philadelphia have begun mobilizing to dismantle the structural constraints of the heat-and-serve paradigm.



FIGURE 2: UNITE HERE LOCAL 1 PROTEST IN CHICAGO. COURTESY OF KYLE SCHAFER.

## II. "No more frozen food!"

"We want to cook! Nosotros queremos cocinar!" rang the voices of over two hundred school lunchroom workers as they gathered outside of the Chicago Board of Education in early April 2012 to launch their campaign for "Real Food, Real Jobs." Their demonstration, coupled with the release of their report "Kitchens Without Cooks: A Future of Frozen Food for Chicago's Schoolchildren?" signified the emergence of a radical school food politics in Chicago Public Schools (CPS). At the time of the demonstration, the

CPS Board of Education planned to serve frozen pre-plated meals at all newly constructed and renovated K-8 schools.

These TV dinner-style meals—then served in about 25% of the cafeterias—were the subject of undercover activism by Sarah Wu, a CPS teacher who ate school lunch nearly every day during the 2010 school year and anonymously blogged about it on her website [Fed Up With Lunch: The School Lunch Project](#). These daily snapshots revealed a system of food provisioning that reinforces the social acceptability of wasted food and wasted packaging materials. The single-use plastic containers also introduce endocrine disrupting chemicals (e.g., phthalates and parabens) into children’s diets, which could lead to negative public health implications in the long-term. These frozen pre-plated meals are disproportionately used in urban areas and in elementary schools, which not only hints at the environmental racism inherent in the system, but also provides cause to worry since young children are especially vulnerable due to their body size and phase of development.



FIGURE 3: A TEX MEX MEAL SERVED IN CPS CAFETERIAS. COURTESY OF SARA WU.

These hot and cold meal packs are not a new phenomenon—they were widely introduced in the wake of the “right to lunch” movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. A coalition of civil rights and anti-hunger activists had succeeded in lobbying the federal government to make free and reduced-price meals available to all eligible schoolchildren. Many municipal and state-level school food authorities struggled to comply with the new federal law, as older buildings often lacked kitchen facilities and the authorities had neither the time nor the money to build production kitchens in every school. To facilitate the rapid mass expansion of the NSLP, the federal government eased restrictions on private contractors and promoted centralized and mechanized food production technologies like the meal pack.

On the one hand, this policy shift succeeded in helping large numbers of underserved children in high-poverty urban areas gain access to subsidized school meals. On the

other hand, the mass industrialization of school foodservice deskilled a traditionally female profession of cooks and home economists and led to the proliferation of part-time positions that preclude foodservice workers from earning a livable wage. This policy shift also affected other areas of the school food chain—as control of ingredients became increasingly centralized in manufacturing facilities and distribution centers, local and regional producers were effectively squeezed out of NSLP procurement channels.



FIGURE 4: AN INDUSTRY CONSULTATION IMAGE COURTESY OF BRIDGEPORT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Many contemporary school administrators refer to their foodservice departments as “support services,” which suggests that feeding children is secondary to the primary aim of educating children.<sup>6</sup> This viewpoint—coupled with inadequate federal and state meal reimbursements—leads financially strapped school food authorities to look for short-term cost savings. Foodservice directors often hold competing ideologies about whether cafeteria employees should be treated like the rest of the educational staff (in terms of raises, wages, benefits) or treated like private sector foodservice employees. Sylvia Elam from Kentucky describes the conundrum: “You just cannot have employees just because you want to be nice to them and give them benefits. Again, just like any other private industry that has standards, based on the number of meals, or meal equivalents you produce, there [are] an X number of hours that you can have.” This metric—meals per labor hour (MPLH)—is one of the primary tools used to measure the productivity of school cafeterias and to depersonalize staffing decisions.

School foodservice employees who qualify for public sector benefits are a particularly costly form of labor, which tends to make unionized school districts hyperaware of their MPLH. The two most commonly used strategies for increasing MPLH are redesigning production systems and increasing the use of convenience foods—the frozen meal pack is a classic example of both processes working in tandem. These commercially prepared foods reduce the need for full-time workers, which allows for even more cost

savings since part-time workers typically do not qualify for medical or retirement benefits. These tactics may give a temporary boost to a school district's bottom line, but eliminating workers' ability to earn a livable wage has negative long-term effects on community economic security and the school district's tax base.

The dearth of livable wage jobs in the foodservice industry is a particularly problematic phenomenon in urban areas with large percentages of single-parent households. In New Haven, for example, nearly three-quarters of cafeteria workers are primary providers, so any reduction in their wages affects the economic security of an entire family.<sup>7</sup> At the national scale, opportunities for workforce development and professional advancement declined alongside the rise of heat-and-serve meals. Marilyn Briggs—a foodservice director from Sacramento, California who began her career in the 1970s—explained the evolution she observed:

*We used to teach lots and lots of classes about basic skills of food preparation: how to bake bread, how to work with raw meat products—even butchering skills, and desserts, all kinds of from scratch products, and fruit and vegetable preparation. That has changed now; with central kitchens it's a whole different way of operating, a whole different set of skills. With reheating, even fewer skills are required. So, I definitely see a difference from when we were learning the skills for actually preparing the food in a school kitchen... Very rewarding, you actually have a product at the end of your hard work and can see that the children are enjoying the food that you prepared. You can feel creative, because you can add your own touches and help the district to create new recipes.*

Dropping the focus on MPLH and increasing municipal, state, and federal financing for the NSLP would allow interested school districts to move away from processed convenience foods toward on-site cooking with healthy ingredients. A return to fresh cooking in schools would provide more hours and new pathways for career advancement, especially for the many part-time employees that urban school food authorities employ. On the contrary, bringing real food to urban schools via pre-pack meals (e.g. [Revolution Foods](#)) is a form of what I term “real-food lite.” As an extension of the heat-and-serve model, it is a profitable niche market for the agri-food industry, rather a pathway for sustainable community development.

### III. “Let us cook!”

The workers in Chicago (Local 1), New Haven (Local 217), and Philadelphia (Local 634) are using the power of organized labor and building community coalitions to advocate for real food *and* real jobs in the Nation's schools. By “real food” they mean a return to fresh cooking. By “real jobs” they mean a livable wage that respects the reproductive labor they perform. At the start of the UNITE HERE campaigns, all three cities relied on a hybrid model

of food production: “warming kitchens” where pre-made meals are reheated and “production kitchens” where meals are cooked on-site. Cafeteria workers in the warming kitchens often report feeling disempowered and demoralized by their inability to improve the quality of the meals they serve. As one frontline server remarked before trailing off, “The students are always complaining about the food and they ask me if I cook it...” In contrast, workers at production kitchens often have the ability to make minor modifications to standardized recipes and to develop additional menu items that suit the taste preferences at their particular schools.



FIGURE 4: UNITE HERE LOCAL 1 CAFETERIA WORKERS DEMONSTRATING IN CHICAGO FOR THE RIGHT TO COOK IN SCHOOL CAFETERIAS. IMAGE COURTESY OF KYLE SCHAFER.

Cafeteria workers have taken up the slogan “Let us Cook!” partly because they hope to satisfy students' individual needs, preferences, and personalities—or to engage in what sociologist Marjorie DeVault would term the “larger work of feeding.”<sup>8</sup> Through years of frontline experience, foodservice workers learn the nuances of their school populations and can often predict which menu items are likely to be popular and which are likely to go uneaten. Despite this unique perspective, only about a quarter of the UNITE HERE workers reported having had the opportunity to provide input on the meals they serve.<sup>9</sup> Through their organizing efforts, the cafeteria workers hope to win the right to prepare freshly cooked meals in every school. They want to serve food that they can be proud of—in other words, meals they would feed their own children.

The vast majority of UNITE HERE cafeteria workers believe that their students would throw away less food if they were allowed to prepare school meals from scratch using fresh ingredients.<sup>10</sup> Under the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010—which came into effect during the 2012-2013 school year—a federally reimbursable school lunch must include either a fruit or a vegetable. Children are, however, not actually required to eat the fruit or vegetable. This well-meaning policy leads to large volumes of food waste if children do not like the fruits and vegetables on offer. However, when cafeteria workers have culinary autonomy they can work with students to develop healthful menu items that the children will consume. As one high school cook explained, “We've asked them, ‘What would you like to have? What kind of vegetables do you want?’ They really like the green beans and they like the peas. They love anything I can roast. They love roasted zucchini

sticks. They love roast squash...So we roast a lot of vegetables."<sup>11</sup>

Empowered cafeteria workers' can foster positive public health outcomes through the gradual shaping of children's learned food preferences. For example, one elementary school cook uses her culinary autonomy to create games that encourage young children to try unfamiliar foods:

*The other day they had oatmeal on the menu at breakfast, and [the children] didn't want to try it. And so I started playing a little game with them. I said, "Taste your oatmeal. Tell me what you taste" ... And we have recipes that we have to go by, but they [the management] told us occasionally we could put something to enhance the flavor, that won't add calories or affect it. So in my oatmeal I started putting a little vanilla flavor. And after about five tries the children guessed it, because it's just mild.*

According to literature on the development of taste preferences, repeatedly inviting a child to taste a small amount of a rejected or disliked food, without great emphasis on how much they eat, is one of the best strategies for promoting liking.<sup>12</sup> Moreover children's food preferences are affected by the contexts and consequences of eating various foods,<sup>13</sup> which means that positive interactions with cafeteria workers can lead to the acceptance of a wider array of nutritious foods. Therefore, the UNITE HERE cafeteria workers believe that an investment in the frontline staff is an investment in children's lifelong health and well-being.

#### IV. "Let us keep kids safe!"

Most jobs in school cafeterias are not particularly lucrative, so savvy foodservice directors hire employees who will be propelled to perform high quality work out of sheer dedication to the children they feed. Melba Hollingsworth, who spent her career directing child nutrition programs in Louisiana, stated in her 2012 oral history, "You have to look for those folks that have that nurturing skill built within them because those are what make these programs happen, because they will go beyond and they will make it happen, no matter how many regulations, no matter how many other things that will happen." Similarly, Kathy Talley, who spent twenty years doing nutrition education and training at the West Virginia Department of Education, explained that it is the "solid core of caring and concern for the children" that carries the NSLP through difficult situations. However, in the time I spent observing and interviewing foodservice workers, I found that this "solid core of caring" often makes workers reluctant to leave tasks undone for fear that the children will be negatively affected. When foodservice staff works off the clock or skips scheduled breaks, management perceives staffing levels as adequate, even when they may not be. In short, the "solid core of caring" makes it difficult for workers in individual schools to take action against exploitive working conditions.

UNITE HERE survey results indicate that the majority of school foodservice workers view themselves first and foremost as caretakers.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps this is because so many of them have social or even familial relationships with the children they feed. For instance, over half of the New Haven cafeteria workers have children or grandchildren in the public schools.<sup>15</sup> Their efforts as caretakers ensure that neither the nutritional needs of food insecure families nor the emotional needs of children are overlooked. Like many of her fellow cafeteria workers, one woman from Arkansas recalled, "We had a little boy that I can remember; he was homeless... And we would always make sure, and I know this is illegal, but we always made sure we put extra food on that child's tray because we knew he didn't have anywhere to live."<sup>16</sup> Similarly, a retired school foodservice director from Louisiana explained how the caretaking efforts of her cafeteria staff provided a safety net for food secure families:

*People just don't realize that it's not just a school lunch program; it's actually taking care of some needs of children that may not have food at home... Oftentimes we'd [the cafeteria staff] go home on a holiday and we'd wonder, "I know little Johnny comes to school a little shabby every day, is he going to eat, how is he going to manage?" ...We often would send things home with them on holidays. We would become a surrogate mother or an aunt, or auntie as they would say here, and so those things are really significant."<sup>17</sup>*

It is important to note that not every cafeteria worker fully engages in this type of reproductive labor, but those who do typically take great pride in their efforts because they feel that they are providing a necessary community service.

Cafeteria workers also provide emotional support that is critical to children's safety at school. Many of the foodservice directors and frontline staff that I interviewed explained that because the cafeteria staff is seen as non-threatening, children are more likely to confide their troubles to a foodservice worker than to a counselor, teacher, or principal. The value of this emotional labor—performed by what many school boards consider to be "support staff"—was recently a subject of intense debate in Philadelphia. In early June 2013, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) announced the layoff of over 1,200 noon-time aids. These employees, also known as "student safety staff," are members of UNITE HERE Local 634. They labor alongside cafeteria workers to keep children safe during mealtimes and between classes.

At the time of the mass layoff, inadequate staffing levels were already affecting the safety of Philadelphia schoolchildren. UNITE HERE survey results indicated that forty percent of the SDP cafeteria staff and noon-time aids had recently witnessed a violent incident that could have been diffused or even prevented if more student safety staff had been present.<sup>18</sup> Such a drastic reduction in the number of dedicated school safety staff would likely make the already understaffed schools even more dangerous in

subsequent years. To protect their communities and their livelihoods, UNITE HERE workers joined with parents, clergy, SDP students, and (eventually) over fifteen elected officials to protest the labor cuts. They staged a series of demonstrations and a hunger strike during the summer of 2013 that drew national attention to the role that cafeteria workers play in keeping children physically and emotionally safe. Their activism proved successful when nearly all of the laid-off school safety staff was recalled to work before the start of the 2013-2014 school year.



FIGURE 5: PHILADELPHIA WORKERS MARCH IN SUPPORT OF SCHOOL SAFETY STAFF. IMAGE COURTESY OF UNITE HERE LOCAL 634.

## V. Mobilizing for Food Sovereignty

At the time of my writing in October 2013, workers in Chicago, New Haven, and Philadelphia are continuing to mobilize themselves and their communities in support of “Real Food, Real Jobs.” They have achieved varying levels of success thus far. The Philadelphia campaign focused on the immediate concern of school safety, whereas the Chicago and New Haven campaigns emphasized a return to fresh cooking in their cafeterias.

The Chicago workers enjoyed an early victory at the negotiations table. On May 2, 2012—less than a month after the CPS lunchroom workers’ first public demonstration—the Chicago Board of Education (BOE) committed to scrap their planned expansion of warming kitchens and to eventually phase out the use of frozen pre-plated meals. However, the cost-cutting undercurrent that plagues the NSLP (and public schools more generally) is preventing the Chicago workers from realizing the city’s planned transition to a fresh food paradigm. A transition away from pre-plated meals requires additional labor at on-site kitchens—yet amid district-wide job cuts during the summer of 2013, CPS planned lunchroom layoffs that would affect 10-15% of the foodservice staff. These labor reductions would preclude Chicago’s transition to freshly prepared school meals. Instead the BOE may choose to satisfy critics like Sarah Wu by taking the route of “real food-lite” to improve the quality of school meals. The CPS cafeteria workers, in contrast, believe that the route of “Real Food, Real Jobs” is best for both the health of schoolchildren and the strength of their Chicago communities. They are asking the public (this means you!)

to sign their online petition to let CPS know that you can’t cook food from scratch without lunch ladies!

After several months of organizing and building their vision for New Haven Public Schools, members of Local 217 launched their campaign on May 8, 2013. They marched into the mayor’s office chanting “Fresh food, Real jobs!” and hand-delivered a copy of their report “Healthy Kids First: Why cafeteria workers want to cook fresh meals in New Haven Public Schools.” Since then they have built political support for their campaign through grassroots organizing and appearances both on the radio and at the local university (which is well-known for the success of its own Real Food, Real Jobs transition). New Haven’s contract negotiations committee—comprised of cafeteria workers who elected to take on this leadership role—is moving beyond the mandatory bargaining subjects of wages and benefits. They are using their contract negotiations with the City of New Haven as an opportunity to win a legally binding commitment to re-invest in quality food and quality jobs. They hope to create a task force made up of workers, management, and City officials that will have the authority to collectively design and oversee a return to fresh cooking.

## VI. Conclusion

Ultimately a radical food politics is a community-based politics that creates opposition to the dominant corporate foodscape. The collective power of frontline foodservice workers could act as a leverage point for the creation of a sustainable food system, built on the ideals of social justice, livable-wage jobs, and long-term ecological health. The UNITE HERE model presents one potential pathway toward realizing such a broad-scale transformation. School lunchrooms are nodes of potential activism scattered across rural and urban neighborhoods in all fifty states. Much is at stake—over thirty million American children participate in the National School Lunch Program each day, gaining not only physical but also emotional sustenance as they pass through the serving line. Policies and practices that revalue the role of reproductive labor and the staff that performs it will improve children’s diets and build food systems resilience and adaptability across community, regional, and national scales. Let’s mobilize.

Addendum:

There have been two major victories in the UNITE HERE K-12 campaigns since this article was written. Check out how 97 Chicago lunchroom workers won their jobs back and New Haven workers won a contract that will provide a “pathway to cooking” ([www.realfoodrealjobs.org](http://www.realfoodrealjobs.org)).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *The Hands that Feed Us*, report released June 6, 2012 by the Food Chain Workers Alliance.
- <sup>2</sup> Jayaraman, S. (2013). *Behind the Kitchen Door*, ILR Press.

3. <sup>3</sup> My research on school feeding began in New Haven, Connecticut, where I worked in the kitchens and cafeterias, attended union meetings and staff trainings, rode along on food deliveries, and accompanied the school district's foodservice director as he dealt with food brokers, tested new products, and met with policymakers. This ethnographic research was later supplemented by archival sources and oral histories, participatory observation at state and national industry conferences, and visits to cafeterias in over thirty school districts in diverse parts of the country. I later engaged with UNITE HERE to conduct participatory research during the launch of their campaign in New Haven Public Schools.

4. <sup>4</sup> This concept originally comes from the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, but feminist scholars began using the concept of reproductive labor in the 1970s to name and analyze women's unpaid domestic work. Later it was extended to analyses of wage labor.

5. <sup>5</sup> Laslett, Barbara, and Johanna Brenner. "Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives." *Annual Review of Sociology* 15 (1989): 381-404.

6. <sup>6</sup> On the contrary, many child nutrition professionals argue that education doesn't stop at lunch—food habits and conversational etiquette are socially mediated—and the lunchroom is a prime venue for learning.

7. <sup>7</sup> *Healthy Kids First: Why cafeteria workers want to cook fresh meals in New Haven Public Schools*, UNITE HERE report released May 8, 2013.

8. <sup>8</sup> DeVault, M. (1994). *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work*, University of Chicago Press.

9. <sup>9</sup> Data from the Local 1 and Local 217 surveys.

10. <sup>10</sup> Data from Local 1, 217, and 634 surveys.

11. <sup>11</sup> Darlene French, Interviewed by Jeffrey Boyce, Oral History Project, Child Nutrition Archives, The National Food Service Management Institute, December 13, 2012.

12. <sup>12</sup> Birch, L. L. (1999). "Development of Food Preferences." *Annual Review of Nutrition* 19: 41-62.

13. <sup>13</sup> Ibid.

14. <sup>14</sup> *Healthy Kids First: Why cafeteria workers want to cook fresh meals in New Haven Public Schools*, UNITE HERE report released May 8, 2013.

15. <sup>15</sup> Ibid.

16. <sup>16</sup> Hester Dye, Interviewed by Jeffrey Boyce, Oral History Project, Child Nutrition Archives, The National Food Service Management Institute, July 23, 2008.

17. <sup>17</sup> Wendy Mangiaracina, Interviewed by Melba Hollingsworth, Oral History Project, Child Nutrition Archives, The National Food Service Management Institute, January 29, 2009.

18. <sup>18</sup> UNITE HERE analyzed all reported incidents of violence that occurred in SDP from September 2012 through May 2013, which included: 1330 assaults, 973 cases of disorderly conduct with injury, 472 weapons infractions, 704 threats; and 13 rapes and attempted-rapes.



REHEATING MEAL PACKS. IMAGE COURTESY OF BRIDGEPORT PUBLIC SCHOOLS



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