

“Hands Off Pants On”: The Collective and Radical Art of Shedding Self-Doubt

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I attended my first union researcher retreat in 2012. Sitting in a cavernous lodge in Northern California, we pulled our chairs into a close circle. We had made the pilgrimage to this place to share campaign victories, lessons, sharpen our technical research skills, and delve into the latest in media and communications strategies to support worker organizing. I felt the easy familiarity among the seasoned union research staff who gathered from across the country. I remember having to pinch myself. I could hardly believe that this place and these people existed.

When I was in the sixth grade, I read Harry Potter and was an immediate fan. The night before starting middle school, scared out of my wits, I had the most vivid dream. I had received a letter telling me I had been accepted to a secret wizarding school—a whole new community where I could belong, where things made sense. When I woke up, I was crushed that it had just been a dream. Nevertheless, I carried with me a hard kernel of certainty that there was a community out there for me.

Leaning forward in my chair that evening at the research retreat, I felt that I had found my Hogwarts. Until a month prior, this world of campaigning to build power for working people had been foreign to me. I was working as a barista in a coffee shop at Indiana University/Purdue University in Indianapolis. I was a newly minted shop steward and a member of the negotiating committee that helped organize the first university cafeteria in the state to join UNITE HERE. We had just settled our first contract, a major victory amid the passing of Right to Work in the Indiana. I felt humbled to be in this new world of union researchers.

At that research retreat, the question posed to us was, “What do you think the labor movement needs to do to be relevant?” We were encouraged to brainstorm, think big, and dream. My heart lurched with trepidation. I had an idea to share, and just as quickly, the self-doubt crept in. The voice in my head called out for caution and self-preservation. I remember scanning the room, recalling the mental inventory

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I took on the first day of the retreat when I calculated the ratio of women and gender nonconforming people to men in the group, finding it roughly 1 to 3. Why? Because it helped me assess my safety. Not my physical safety but rather my emotional and intellectual safety. It helped me calibrate what questions I would ask, in what tone I would speak, and what ideas I would share. My experience is not unique. People constantly navigate race, gender identity, social class, language, and immigration status, among other identities. Moreover, navigating amid racism, homophobia, misogyny, xenophobia, and other forms of violence means the stakes can be very high. Negotiating among our intersecting identities and structural “-isms” shapes both our interior monologue and how we present ourselves in different spaces. We live in the tension between protecting ourselves and striving to fill the very real human need of connection and community.

In the minutes after hearing the question I weighed the risks versus rewards of saying the thing that was burning in the back of my throat. “I think bringing together the feminist movement and the labor movement is important. Women make up at least half the workforce and the majority of the service sector. I think there is power in that.” Not an earth shattering idea. Nonetheless, the thrill of saying it aloud and waiting for a reaction is seared into my memory. I recall the relief I felt when the discussion leader nodded and asked a thoughtful follow-up question. In that moment, I felt heard, seen, and valued. I gave myself a mental high five for speaking up. I realized I was not just relieved that my idea was not laughed at but also that I had not let myself down by staying quiet. I remember thinking, “I can see myself here in this community.” I felt an expansiveness of possibility, for both the work and for the person I was to become.

That conversation was over six years ago. In the summer of 2018, I served with two UNITE HERE Local 1 rank-and-file leaders on the U.S. workers delegation to the 107th International Labor Conference to discuss a new global Convention on Sexual Harassment and Gender-Based Violence in the World of Work. At the conference, we shared with global trade union leaders about our “Hands Off Pants On” (HOPO, for short) campaign to fight sexual harassment in the hospitality industry (UNITE HERE Local 1, n.d.-b). I had the same feeling of incredulity and sense of awe as I did when I was sitting in that cavernous room during the research retreat. At that moment I wondered if the woman I was during that first retreat would have believed me if I had told her how far I had traveled. I think her eyes would have gone wide, and a grin would spread across her face as she said, “How the hell did *that* happen?”

The #MeToo movement is helping to crystalize moments of shedding personal and collective self-doubt. The factors that lead up to the decision to listen or not to that voice of self-doubt is shaped and structured by our environment, our families, our culture, our partners, friends, teachers, coaches, the media, and our religious upbringing. Experiences of shame, isolation, and of not feeling “good enough” are often embossed onto our minds and bodies for years.

In organizing, we are trained to identify what holds us back to move ourselves and our coworkers to take collective action. We are taught to confront fear head on. I believe there is a certain subset of fear that is truly self-doubt. It can be extremely difficult to identify and speak aloud. The voice in one’s head says, “Who do you think

you are?” “You’re not good enough,” “What if you’re wrong?” “They have more education, experience, (fill in the blank) than me,” “What if I misunderstood?” “What if I misread the situation?” “You brought this upon yourself,” and “You should have known better.”

When that voice is loud for me, I feel disconnected from people, even those I love and trust. I feel small, isolated, and alone in my perceived shortcomings. When I started paying attention, I realized it is a narrative, which often plays in my head. It is particularly loud when it comes to experiences of sexual harassment. The voice is an internalized monologue that mimics destructive cultural tropes, which shift the responsibility to women for avoiding being raped or harassed by altering their route home; being careful with how they dress, speak, sit, or make eye contact; or any other number of excuses the culture at large has for sexual harassment and sexual violence.

It was not until embarking on the HOPO campaign that I ever told anyone about being groped on an airplane when I was in high school. I pushed it to the back of my mind. I believed it had been my fault. I felt shame because I had frozen and had not yelled or fought back. It was only after our union President described an experience she had as a young waitress and confided that she had never before told anyone that I shared my story. Although my voice trembled when I spoke about my experience for the first time, I no longer felt alone. I felt the power of “me too” before the hashtag caught hold.

My union has shown me how to overcome self-doubt and fear. Every day, people in our union decide to take action because the values they place on the life they want for themselves and their family is stronger than self-doubt and fear of failure. They transform fear and anger into action, taking very real risks to their economic security. In the union, we are able to take on self-doubt—typically something that happens alone—out loud and alongside others that are in the movement with us. We take on what is usually an isolated, individual struggle as a community.

Before we launched our HOPO campaign, we had survey data. Before we had survey data we had a team of women, committed to having conversations with other women about sexual harassment. We had a theory, based on a number of stories we had heard over the years, that sexual harassment from hotel and casino guests was a problem. A particularly egregious story of a young server at a casino was the spark that ignited our drive to understand just how widespread the problem was for our members. UNITE HERE Local 1 represents more than fifteen thousand hospitality workers, the majority of whom are women, primarily people of color, and immigrants. The team that conducted the survey with me was a team of five rank-and-file members. Each of them felt called to be a part of the project and take a three-week leave of absence from work to be a part of the team. Over the course of our work together, our commitment to each other and the women we surveyed deepened. The confidence with which we spoke about our own experiences, the fighting spirit we developed, and our commitment to change things for the women who would come after us were palpable.

Each day of conducting the surveys, we confronted self-doubt, both personally and as a group. We drew strength from our core belief in the importance of the issue, the validity of our own experiences, and the vision that we could do something about it

together. The conversations and stories were emotion-filled, and often time our survey team would come back from the day emotionally spent. We heard stories of harassment and violence by guests. Many accounts had never been told before. Debriefing as a group, we realized that when we shared the weight of the stories collectively, something changed. A hot, clear anger blossomed. Individually, it may have been too much to bear, but as a group, it bolstered us. It fueled our charge, drove us to continue, and clarified our vision for change.

The most challenging part of the survey project was confronting the “normalizing” of sexual harassment. I distinctly remember when one of the surveyor’s confidence seemed shaken. When I asked what had happened that day, she talked about hearing from a number of housekeepers that day about guests exposing themselves and making gross remarks. However, the women had either laughed off the experience or shrugged and said, “What can you do?” My teammate expressed frustration in hearing these women’s reactions. As we talked about it, she realized that echoes of her own experience of feeling invalidated had come to life again. It was critical to our survey team’s success that we identified these flare ups of self-doubt. We had to bring them to light and hold space for them as a group. By sharing her frustration, sadness, and discomfort with the group, it became not hers alone to bear. As a group, we confronted the self-doubt. We called out the cultural and systemic forces that make it necessary for survivors of harassment and sexual violence to characterize their experience in particular ways.

We surveyed 487 women working in Chicago area hotels and casinos. Some women did not immediately identify as having experienced “sexual harassment” per say. However, when we asked about a range of behaviors from guests that constitute sexual harassment, the majority identified at least one behavior. In fact, 58% of the hotel workers we surveyed had experienced some form of sexual harassment by a guest (UNITE HERE Local 1, n.d.-c). Nearly half of the housekeepers we surveyed said a guest had flashed them, exposed himself or herself, or answered the door naked. These startling numbers became another way to confront both self-doubt and the doubt from would-be detractors. The numbers cut off at the pass the argument that it was “just a few bad guests,” or “just a few isolated incidences.” Armed with the statistics, we pushed for a Chicago city ordinance. We fought for and won what we call the HOPO law. We won panic buttons for housekeepers and anti-sexual harassment policy that explicitly addresses sexual harassment by hotel guests. Organizing and advocating for this ordinance created the space for more women hospitality workers to come forward and to validate their own experience. Over the last two years, our core group of HOPO leaders grew and expanded from our original team of five surveyors, as more people feel empowered by the collective action to speak out and identify with the campaign.

Some of those HOPO leaders are union leaders from the Chicago Federation of Labor, who lent their voices to amplify those of hospitality workers. We created a video of male union leaders reading the stories of hotel housekeepers and waitresses (UNITE HERE Local 1, n.d.-a). The video helped launch the campaign and changed the conversation. It transformed our fight to be not a “women’s issue,” but rather a workplace safety issue. This campaign has created space to have real, honest

conversations with the men in our membership. I will never forget a conversation with one of our top union shop stewards about the campaign. He said he wanted to ask question but was nervous. His question was, “What do you feel when someone harasses you?”

I was taken aback. No one had ever asked me that before. It took a moment before I could answer. “Small, powerless, angry but afraid to speak up. Like having a burning feeling in my throat. Like I’ve lost control of something.”

He was quiet for a moment. Then he said, “I know that feeling. That is how I have felt when I’ve been stopped by police for no good reason. Powerless and stripped of something.”

In that one moment, in that one conversation, I felt all the power of our union. This power comes from connecting with people from wildly different backgrounds, genders, countries, languages, ages, and experiences. The power is born when we decide we want to know each other, understand each other, and fight alongside each other. When we feel that our struggles and triumphs, our pain and joy are interconnected, we build power that no corporation or government can touch. I was humbled in that moment to be a part of a movement that cultivates relationships so strong that we can take on challenges that may otherwise seem impossible to tackle, like changing the culture that “the guest is always right.”

The journey of the HOPO campaign has been anything but a straight line. In the doing, the union won more than panic buttons and landmark legislation replicated in cities across the country: We created a new space to come forward. This is a space where hospitality workers are invited to shed personal and collective self-doubt. We are invited to listen, to validate, and to back up one another. Imagine the ideas, solutions, connections, and transformations brought into the world when those marginalized or silenced are finally, heard! Just as feminism cannot be a movement for economic and social justice if it only highlights the experience of wealthy white women, the labor movement must also continue to lift up the voices and experiences of working women and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning/queer) folks of color. Of course, neither movement is a monolithic bloc. But my sense is that both movements could benefit from being more intersectional. And now, in this #MeToo moment, those of us who identify as both feminists and unionists, we have the responsibility to help strengthen the bridge between the two movements. If we do, both will be the better for it.

For a strong, dynamic, inclusive labor movement, we need the quiet conversations, the raucous rallies, citywide policies, and international conventions. These are opportunities to create spaces where workers who have traditionally been marginalized and their allies can make the personal and collective choice to shed self-doubt. As workers and labor leaders, we need to challenge ourselves to connect with those we never thought we could, to see ourselves in others, to listen, to share our pain and rage. And to fight like hell, together.

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Sarah Lyons joined UNITE HERE as a committee member in 2010. She served as a community and political organizer for the Indianapolis UNITE HERE affiliate until 2012 when she joined the research team of UNITE HERE Local 1 in Chicago.

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