

Union Vibes



Jack Christian

University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

Abstract

“Union Vibes” considers my experience alongside national conversations about higher-ed labor organizing and the conundrums presented by the ossified Texas State Employees Union, which attempts to represent all public workers in Texas, but does almost nothing for almost nobody. I include reporting from the 2024 Labor Notes national conference in Chicago, interviews with union leaders and labor researchers, and conversations with my colleagues and local activists. Ultimately, I ask: Are the arduous steps necessary for robust organizing ultimately worth it in a place like Texas? If so, what might those steps be, and what would make such organizing meaningful when the prospect of collective bargaining remains mostly a pipedream?

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37514/ALR-J.2025.9.1.09>

Jack Christian is a lecturer in Writing Studies at University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. He is the author of the poetry collections *Family System* (2012 Colorado Prize, Center for Literary Publishing) and *Domestic Yoga* (2016, Groundhog Poetry Press). His essays about art, landscape, and labor appear in periodicals including *ArtForum*, *Bennington Review*, *Cleveland Review of Books*, *The Journal*, *The Millions*, and *Off Assignment*. Since moving to the Twin Cities, he has been publishing “ambiance reviews” on his Substack, *Day Dates*.

I.

In broad strokes the stories are similar; only the details differ: Coworkers start talking about forming a union. They recruit their colleagues. When they achieve critical mass, they confront the boss with their demands. Unless the boss acquiesces, a union vote is scheduled. If the vote is successful, negotiations begin. When a contract agreement cannot be reached, the newly unionized workers may strike to procure better pay and working conditions.

This is the formula. It’s easier said than done, but that’s how you do it. I didn’t need to attend the 2024 National Labor Notes Conference on union organizing to learn this. The week before, I heard it all in a classroom in the building where I taught at the University of North Texas (UNT), in Denton, 40 miles north of Dallas. I’d seen a flier that read “Labor April” at the top with the logos of several local activist groups at the bottom. There was a meeting that

very night. When I arrived, the classroom was half full of students. In it, I heard from a Young Democratic Socialist leader, two recently unionized Starbucks employees, and a UPS guy who had helped his colleagues join the Teamsters labor union. The meeting revolved around expanding Starbucks and UPS workers' success in unionizing to other local workplaces. The UPS guy talked the most. He said: "You can organize around stuff you and your coworkers already enjoy doing together, like playing soccer." He said: "If the guy who sells everyone their weed gets on board, that can be a big win." Finally, he said: "You have to be willing to lose your job."

That's always the catch. In theory I am increasingly willing to lose my job, but so far not in practice. My job teaching essay writing to college students is continually stripped of efficacy, but I cling to it hard as ever. I was conscious that attending Labor Notes was an extension of my ambivalence. By traveling solo to a union-organizing conference, I feared I was accomplishing the solidaristic equivalent of buying rock-climbing gear but still not going rock-climbing.

When not teaching, I wandered campus hallways alone. In the tower where I worked, fluorescent lights buzzed on as you passed beneath them and clicked off as you left. This, combined with catacomb-like office suites, produced the lonely suspicion that 1) you were the only person working, and 2) all your atomized colleagues thought the same thing. Sometimes I would see another faculty member, several light stations ahead of me, disappearing around a dark corner and again confront the insurmountable awkwardness of ever talking with this fading person about how they procure their weed, much less about union organizing.

The distance between what Labor Notes could offer and the situation where I worked felt equivalent to the distance between Dallas and Chicago if traveling by foot. I wanted to feel that distance nevertheless. I hoped the journey would clarify the seemingly impossible actions that would allow my colleagues and me to improve our lot, or at least to make a map.

2.

Most workers in Texas have little access to union support, but public sector employees have arguably the least. Beyond Texas being a Right to Work state, Texas, along with seven other states, has also banned most state workers from collective bargaining. This means that even where unions do exist, they cannot compel the state to negotiate with them. Public employees are thereby reduced to what people at Labor Notes refer to as *collective begging*. In this situation, a union's efforts are often as valiant as their gains are minimal. Active members come to feel, in the words of a North Carolina high school teacher I met at the conference, like "professional donut passer-outers." They procure for their members improvements such as slightly longer planning periods, or somewhat more humane sick-leave policies.

At UNT, we didn't even have collective begging. We had campus leadership that issued edicts against faculty speaking out, a dean who wouldn't reply to emails regarding untenable working conditions, and department chairs who hoarded resources for cabals of old-guard faculty at the expense of everyone else. Before the pandemic, we had happy hours that devolved into gripe sessions. After the pandemic, we drank alone. Instead of solidarity, we had isolation, hostility, and pettiness.

In the weeks before the conference, I procrastinated on grading essays by reading labor journalist Hamilton Nolan's 2024 book *The Hammer*. Each chapter describes a recent battle to unionize, from longshoremen in South Carolina to food processing workers in Oregon. When I was halfway through the book, I sent Nolan an email full of praise and stuffed with questions about why he didn't include a chapter on union organizing in higher education. He responded that organizing in higher education was probably the area of work most often written about, and that he wanted to focus on overlooked efforts elsewhere, such as in the service industry. Fair enough, I thought, but what about those of us traipsing empty campus hallways in Texas?

In Texas, the only public employees allowed to collectively bargain are police and firefighters. The law forbidding the rest of the public sector came about in the same decade that Texas led the conservative backlash against the New Deal. This is Texas's true legacy, not as a bastion of freedom but as a laboratory of oppression. After all, Texas broke away from Mexico and became its own republic explicitly to preserve slavery. Then, as the union's 28th state, Texas continued to enslave African Americans well past Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation until June 19, 1865, two months after the Civil War's official end—the day now celebrated as Juneteenth—when union troops arrived in Galveston and announced that more than 250,000 people enslaved in the state were free by executive decree. While there is a hint of reparation underlying the new national holiday, it is Texas' history of oppression that has continued to metastasize in ways including newly installed razor wire in the Rio Grande, the stripping of protections such as state-mandated hydration breaks for outdoor laborers, and the criminalization of abortion.

These crimes reveal Texas' land-of-opportunity myth as a lie meant to obscure cruelty. Fully acknowledging this, however, is tricky for anyone like me who relocates to the state for a job. It's not a coincidence that, as academic jobs disappear nationwide, Texas could offer me a full-time position on the edge of one of the fastest growing metro areas in the country—a college town where I could afford to buy a house, where I could ride my bike to work, where I could walk my kid to school. My good luck in landing my job came with tacit acceptance of Texan myth.

The road does not go on forever. Eventually you have to go to work, which means that mostly I think about the state's contradictions while wandering the hallways outside my office. Texas' wide-open spaces contain a portal to the hallway. (This strange idea is taken up by, of all people, David Byrne, lead singer of The Talking Heads, who wrote and directed the 1986 movie *True Stories*, which takes North Texas as its subject and suggests uncanny portals between the ranch and the shopping mall.) I think of these campus hallways as the container of my own subjective Texas. This is the bait and switch of Texas, the original Texas two-step. It was at times delightfully melancholic to become middle-aged in Texas. It was at times unbearable.

3.

I offer this commentary not only to detail my own unlikely frontiersman ennui, but also by analogy to characterize UNT's existence as a Tier 1 research institution. The school, a supposed model for higher ed success for this century, lacks the infrastructure, funding, culture, and history of Tier 1 research institutions elsewhere, but it has made up for this by excelling at

crunching numbers: x amount of research grants, y amount of advanced degree programs. So that, on paper, UNT is not just Tier 1, but is outpacing its peers. I think of the scene in the movie *Giant* where the newly minted oil tycoon played by James Dean flies over Rock Hudson's car-driving family in a private plane, and it is easy to picture the belly of that plane emblazoned with the Texas university system's Lonestar seal. Texas's huge population of college-aged people has allowed higher ed to boom like oil. And, because oil is the standard for everything in Texas, education is treated, as much as possible, as a commodity like oil.

I witnessed one memorable manifestation of this approach when, at the end of my first year, the then-provost hosted me along with several other faculty who had signed up for a brown bag luncheon and chat session. This informal gathering was, to my knowledge, our only opportunity to interact with the provost. We supplied our own lunch and drink. The provost provided dessert. We met in her opulent office in the central campus building, which features a steeple with a green lantern that is lit whenever the football team wins. Dessert consisted of muffins from the campus food court, which the provost cut into quarters with a plastic knife so that there would be enough muffin for each of us.

After we swallowed our muffin wedges, the provost gave a presentation: "Research 1, Our Way." Full-color print outs depicting the various metrics that measure Tier 1 research institutions were distributed around the luncheon table. Beneath each was a graph that showed where UNT was currently, where it had been, and where it was going. Each "where are we going" graph featured a large green dot, rendered precisely in the school's garish shade of green (Pantone PMS 356 C). These dots were familiar on campus. They mirrored ubiquitous sidewalk stickers in front of residential buildings asking students, "So, what's your green dot?" as if the entirety of their experience might render them a point of data, which for the provost it already had. The reduction of the entirety of research, teaching, and learning into data points also inadvertently advertised the need for strong higher ed unions, impossible as they may be currently in Texas.

By the provost's own admission, which she regarded as a triumph, UNT's rise happened mostly through scrupulous number crunching she had implemented upon arrival. This meant that, ultimately, the provost's green dot was an accounting trick. Those of us around the conference table knew then: This provost was going places. And soon, she did leave, to become president of University of Texas at Arlington, another state-funded, DFW mega-university that had also recently become Tier 1.

Relating this anecdote helps me to connect Texas' general bait and switch to UNT's specific bait and switch, which is also by now our entire economy's bait and switch. The fact that UNT is sometimes seen as a model of success in contemporary higher ed, growing its student body by 10 percent year after year, even through the height of the pandemic, bolsters the suggestion that Texas is coming to a place near you, and that you, wherever you might be and in whatever field you might persist, are probably a little Texan already.

I imagine both of us, you and I, wandering our separate hallways. A faint green flash as a fluorescent bulb blinks off.

4.

The 2024 Labor Notes Conference took place in Rosemont, just outside Chicago, in the shadow of O'Hare International Airport. Over 5000 people attended. On my first day, I visited a panel discussion led by K-12 teachers from Massachusetts and Oregon who had undertaken illegal strikes and prevailed, a session on union-building in right-to-work states, and a roundtable discussion including labor journalists Hamilton Nolan and Kim Kelly. Most pertinent to my situation, on the second afternoon I attended a presentation by members of Communication Workers of America-Tennessee (CWA-TN) about "building campaigns that can't lose" as a tactic for organizing non-majority unions in states where public employees are barred from collective bargaining. The first evening, I joined a Free Palestine protest in front of the convention center in which the Rosemont police detained, and later were forced to release, a teenaged attendee after the crowd surrounded the squad car while chanting "Union Power." The next day I walked a picket line to support workers at Portillos, a Chicago-based Italian beef chain that made absurd profits through the pandemic and shared almost none of this money with employees—employees, who, two weeks later, would vote to join the Iron Workers.

This was all stuff my UNT colleagues and I avoided talking about, much less strategizing toward, as if even our whispers might get us fired. At Labor Notes I learned about the pervasiveness of this assumption, which, in turn, suggests how the boss's logic infects our psyches. Again and again, I heard organizers discuss combating the apathy produced by such beliefs. I heard it so often that the salient feature of the conference became the repeated tale of prevailing in this combat. This reminded me of church conferences I attended as a child, and I began to think of Labor Notes as a kind of worker's church, where, like at a church conference, repetition proved the accelerant of fervor.

At the last meeting I attended, an enormous session for higher ed workers, I heard educators from California, Massachusetts, New York, and New Jersey discuss the wage increases, workload protections, and benefits they had won. When we broke into small groups to share our thoughts, I could only say I wanted all of what had been described but that at universities across Texas, we have none of it. My groupmates shook their heads. They felt my pain. They were glad it wasn't precisely theirs.

5.

At this point, it may be surprising to learn that my desire to belong to a union fomented at the same time that UNT already had a union to which I did not belong. I am speaking of the Texas State Employees Union (TSEU), which, according to their website, "represents state workers from nearly every agency and state universities across Texas," including employees in human services, health care, and juvenile justice, as well as across higher education (Who is TSEU?). At UNT, members of TSEU that I could actually find had only bad things to say about it. The three people I met all told me it was not worth it to join TSEU. "They are mostly an ineffectual lobbying group at this point," said one. "They don't really do anything, and they won't ever call you back," said another. "I tell myself it's worth it for the monthly magazine I receive in the mail," said the third.

I had worked at UNT for two years before I learned of TSEU's existence. By then, I had already landed on my department chair's shitlist. During my lunch with the provost, she asked us each to tell her what she could fix for us if [she] had a magic wand." In response, I explained that my office had been taken away, leaving me with no place to lesson plan, grade papers, or meet with students, even as old-guard faculty in my department retained two offices, one for administrative work and one for research. The provost said she was sorry to hear this, but that there was likely nothing she could do, so it came as a surprise weeks later when one old-guard faculty said I could share her unused second office. The week after that, my department chair called a meeting for all the non-tenure track faculty in which she chastised us for "not obeying the chain of command"—as if we were Marines. She didn't mention me by name; she didn't need to. From that point on, I was made to feel unwelcome and unwanted in overt and subtle ways: I was tasked with teaching more in-person students than anyone else in the fall of 2020, when almost everyone else's classes were moved online. And, I soon became, and remained, the lowest paid full-time member of the department, even as other colleagues' similar salary compression was partially remedied. This meant that I first learned of TSEU at the moment when the \$32/month union dues were exactly the kind of non-essential bills my partner and I were going about eliminating as inflation topped eight percent and my salary grew by exactly \$545 in half a decade. By then, I was more than certain TSEU couldn't help me.

Even so, I believe that had TSEU ever recruited me by handing me a donut and a brochure, I would have joined. I had belonged to a union when I taught in Massachusetts, and that union provided me with cost-of-living increases, assurances of academic freedom, restrictions on class sizes and course preps, none of which I enjoyed in Texas. If I had an inkling that an organization was at least trying to stick up for me and for all of us, and that I could join in this fight, I would've done so. In reality, a toxic boss, inhumane work culture, and the Covid-19 pandemic rendered me too scared to do anything, so that by now I think of TSEU as just another broken thing in Texas. Its phantom existence creates a situation in which the arduous steps of forming a union are impeded by the fact that a union already exists.

Texas' passage of the 2023 senate bills 17 and 18 demonstrate TSEU's contemporary impotence. SB17 catalyzed the dismantling of university DEI offices and multicultural centers and has led, at UNT, to the outlawing even of faculty affinity groups, such as the Black Faculty Network. SB18, meanwhile, made it easier to fire tenured faculty. TSEU held several rallies against these bills. Letters were written. Phone calls were made. But, both bills passed and went into effect on January 1, 2024. In their January 2024 "Update," TSEU claims that its members and allies helped to strip down SB18 given that tenure was not eradicated. But, a simpler explanation would be that even the most fascist state legislators understood the enormity of the financial hit the state would take if it outlawed tenure. And so, the legislature went ahead with an incremental measure, one that lessens the power of tenured faculty without producing quite as glaring headlines as full-scale obliteration would create. By TSEU's own admission, they were unable to stop or even significantly alter SB17 (Update).

So, in the short term, it's hard to see what value TSEU provides, other than as a black hole for members' agitation. This is a sad unwinding of an organization that has fought for nearly as long as I've been alive—since 1979—against Texas' advancing kleptocracy, holding the line for workers in multiple sectors, winning pay raises, and protecting pensions. In the 1980s,

TSEU was central to imagining a new, progressive Texas taking shape in Austin and elsewhere that catalyzed reforms to the state's history of racism and stratification: a state that actually might've stayed blue after electing Ann Richards, instead of sending George W. Bush, Rick Perry, and Greg Abbott to the governor's mansion; a state that might've kept Donald Trump from the Whitehouse.

Instead, over the last 20 years, TSEU's gains have become increasingly paltry, especially for university employees. In the late 1990s, university employees began to be carved out from state-wide raises. They are left out in 2005, 2007, and 2009 (History). More recently, in 2023, the state legislature refused pay raises for all public educators despite having a record-breaking \$33 billion surplus. TSEU's own public-facing record-keeping stops abruptly in 2015 (History). Since then, no new entries have been added to the website. And, while it's a truism amongst labor organizers that it's better to stage effectual campaigns than to have a slick website, it's also hard not to see TSEU's ten-year neglect of its own webpage as a sign of atrophy.

A union that is too narrowly focused can be attacked in ways designed to keep it from building coalitions. TSEU has the opposite problem. In a union representing all manners of public workers, the state has seemed to exploit the structural weakness of an organization spread too thin. The union runs the risk of losing on every front. In this way, TSEU mirrors Texas' vacuity. Pockets of neglect grow until they create the situation I experienced in which current union members perform outreach by telling prospective members not to join.

This reality calls into question the bit of wisdom Nolan offered me when I cornered him at Labor Notes. I introduced myself and quickly began to lament Texas higher ed employees' sorry situation. What's it going to take to turn things around, I asked as if he might offer some insight. Nolan seemed to sense that it would be hard to ditch me unless he acted fast. As he stood and walked away, he said, "It's always gonna be piecemeal." In the grand scheme he was of course correct; solidarity is more an asymmetric network than a coherent grid. Reflecting on TSEU's history, however, leads me to conclude that their broad campaigns for all public workers have been too diluted. For university faculty and others for whom TSEU has not delivered, it is fair to wonder if public sector labor organizing in Texas has been piecemeal enough.

6.

When planning this essay, initially I hoped for a silver bullet: something sleek and solid within the foreboding formlessness, a nascent movement or emerging leader whose efforts I could maybe amplify. I read a position paper by a researcher with the advocacy group Every Texan, who, on the heels of the pandemic, made the argument that K-12 educators are first responders and should therefore be granted the right to collectively bargain. But, when I talked to her on the phone, this researcher described her paper as "mostly a thought experiment" meant to help educators imagine new possibilities. She and the couple of K-12 union leaders I spoke with were certain that it would take a massive, pro-labor overhaul of the state legislature before collective bargaining for more public workers could ever be achieved.

While collective bargaining remains a pipedream, I wondered who might be attempting to strengthen TSEU from within. I imagined a person or small group seeking to make the union

a powerful force for collective begging at least. I thought that at Labor Notes I might track down this theoretical person, and that at Labor Notes we might learn that we had each traveled from Texas to Chicagoland with similar hopes.

The crazy thing is, I did meet the person I sought when a TSEU organizer at a major Texas university happened to sit down next to me at the Caddyshack-themed hotel bar on the conference's first night. This was the very person an AFSCME organizer had told me was starting to organize around savvy reforms in the attempt to make TSEU more formidable on his campus. One of Labor Notes' initiatives is to train younger organizers to reform their ossified unions from within. This was the guy who was attempting that on his campus for TSEU.

He just sat down next to me, and we began to complain about all things Texan. We complained about our colleagues' misguided individualism. We complained about the lack of shared union history to draw upon when attempting to form a functional union. We complained about the ever-present fear employees have of being labeled a bad apple. He complained that for all my complaining I had not bothered to join TSEU. I complained that TSEU sucked so bad I couldn't justify the \$384/year it would've cost me to join. We complained about TSEU's board of directors being comprised entirely of retirees.

He had a broad mustache and wore a ball cap. We were on our second beers before I put together that he was in fact the person I'd wanted to track down. By the time I did, we had overshared to the point that I understood it would be dubious for me to profile him. He had talked shit about TSEU's leadership. He had copped to feeling defeated and hopeless.

Also, he told me that his university position was becoming remote. He would be moving to the east coast over the summer. He felt relieved to be leaving. He hoped eventually to find a different job in his new city and to quit his remote Texas university job as soon as possible. If whatever new job was unionized, he would be glad, but he would probably never again attempt to lead a union.

7.

I left Labor Notes more enthusiastic about union organizing than ever, and also more disconnected from the possibility of it. If anything, the conference exacerbated my feeling that all I had was my own struggle. Powerful unions were *over there*, and I was in Texas. The service industry and manufacturing unions making strides in the state didn't apply to me. The union that I could join was arguably worse than having no union at all.

In light of this, the workshop led by CWA-TN that I'd attended toward the end of the conference, became the most salient and also most problematic to consider. The workshop was led by Melanie Barron, a CWA organizer who supports campus workers in the southeast and has made her career "building union infrastructure in impossible places." Barron focused on how employees in situations like mine could "step into power." The strategies she presented had names such as "Winning without Bargaining," "Campaigning as an Invitation to Struggle," and designing campaigns that manage to be "Small Enough to Win, Big Enough to Matter." The point was to bob and weave, to normalize ongoing protest, and to never put the union in a position to lose outright. Instead of advocating for a specific pay raise, a union in this situation was better off arguing for raise increases "on moral terms, and with no deadline," Barron said.

“You have to get beyond win or lose,” “you have to focus not on individual grievance, but on systemic grievance,” and, most importantly, you have to create a situation in which “anything good the state does you can claim as a win,” she said.

We did an activity devoted to adopting this mindset. In pairs, we considered our own working situations and tried to re-envision campaigns beyond the win/lose dichotomy and instead focused on an “open-ended demand rooted in human dignity.” With my partner, a guy who worked for Google in Boston, I imagined revising TSEU’s unmet demand for a ten percent across-the-board raise for all university employees, and instead focus on fostering more equality for contingent faculty, in the form of more job stability and more access to privileges enjoyed by tenure-track faculty. The rest of the worksheet helped me discern possible effects of this shift. Focusing on these lesser, but more realizable demands, might invite whole departments to advocate for our most exploited members. Potentially, this would lead to faculty becoming accustomed to advocating for fairness, for more powerful seats at the bargaining table, more inclusive relationships among different tiers of employees, and maybe even more equity between employees with different classifications. At the very least, it might lead to the more equitable sharing of office space and course assignments.

In the bigger picture, such changes could help set the conditions for a different relationship to my job and my colleagues, or, in Barron’s words: “New opportunities for worker protagonism.” This was the closest I got to joining Labor Notes’ formula with my own situation. By the end of the workshop, I felt closer to embracing the oft-repeated adage “YOU are the Union.” I could imagine talking with my closest coworkers about adopting this shift of mindset, eventually branching out to more members of my department.

It was both invigorating and sobering to consider myself not held apart from worker solidarity, but already on the path toward it. On the one hand, maybe none of my desires were as far-off as I thought. On the other, to consider myself already on the path was to acknowledge exactly how daunting—how long, how arduous—following this path would be. While CWA’s tactics *could* reshape workers’ relationships with each other and their institutions, these tactics suggested a shadow side as well, in which “struggle” might more accurately be called “toil,” and in which that toil would be never-ending and inadequate. Either way, it would mean working more, not less, and it would mean further dissolving whatever firewalls one erects between social life and work life.

The phrase “work-life balance” is not one I heard at Labor Notes. To some extent this is for good reason: Workers’ relationships to their employers are so unbalanced that workers need union intervention to achieve a better balance, and the phrase itself is mostly a management talking point. That said, in Labor Notes’ vision, one’s time becomes unaccountable. Instead, the definition of labor is stretched wide enough to include workers’ quasi-spiritual quest for fairness. Labor Notes is not, after all, arguing for the abolishment of capitalism. It is not arguing for government guaranteed income, nor is it advocating for government ownership of industry. In short, Labor Notes does not agitate for the end of exploitation, just less of it.

It is only inside our capitalist reality that this approach makes sense, and it is only in the context of the monadism fostered by capitalism that union membership could provide not only an apparatus for fighting the boss but also function as a place of belonging and deep meaning for individual members. Ultimately, Labor Notes does not seek to unseat the god of money so

much as it offers workers a more enticing sanctuary in which to proactively serve that god. Even so, this is the church to which I would most like to belong.

8.

In the end, this is the only choice: whether or not to belong. Labor Notes made me more determined to seek community in struggle than persist further into isolation. Although unions work to reform and not abolish capitalism, the communities of mutual support that they foster are anti-capitalist in essence. Maybe belonging for belonging's sake is a hard sell, but, while I remain daunted by the huge energy required for even minor victories, the chance to belong is the real and enduring win.

Back in Texas, I could recognize the ways in which activist groups around me were already attempting much of what Barron and her CWA-TN co-panelists had suggested in their workshop. A local group called No Bus Cuts had been protesting the city's replacement of buses and bus routes with an on-demand rideshare program run by a private vender. The Young Democratic Socialists who I met on campus the week before Labor Notes were helping local service workers build union campaigns in their workplaces. A coalition of still more activist groups, including TSEU, were continuing a long-running Raise the Wage campaign for the lowest paid university employees.

The more I learned about it, the more the Raise the Wage campaign became a litmus test for me. Raise the Wage seeks to support the lowest-paid university employees, in food service and elsewhere, who in 2023 made just over \$9/hour when a livable wage in North Texas was at least \$18/hour. These employees' wage increased nearly two dollars between 2020 and 2023, when it was barely \$7/hour. Neal Smatresk, UNT's then-president, got annihilated for celebrating this two dollar raise on social media. It was hard to see this paltry gain in the way Barron had urged us to think of it: a momentary victory.

Given what I've described, it may not be surprising that soon after Labor Notes I decided to leave Texas. I was offered and accepted a new position as a lecturer in the University of Minnesota system—on a campus whose faculty remain non-unionized despite its existence in a relatively pro-union state. Even so, I found it wildly more compelling to leave Texas than to stick around. In almost every way I could think of, it was better for my career, my health, and my family not to belong in Texas.

Before the semester ended at UNT, I met with the person whose example I hope to follow on my next stop. Over the years, my English department colleague Deb Armintor had become a local activist. She had served several terms on the city council as its most leftist, most outspoken member, an undertaking that earned her the moniker "Dangerous Deb." Since relinquishing her seat, she'd been involved in all the local campaigns I've mentioned, and more, including efforts to decriminalize marijuana, and advocacy for ending hiring discrimination against those with criminal records. We talked about how her activism got started. She described being denied tenure by the department chair who had preceded the department chair with whom I'd had the displeasure of working. That chairperson had denied her tenure case for no reason that she could see, and his decision was eventually overturned when she appealed. After prevailing, Armintor had a thought that was mirror opposite of my own: that she would "stay forever and fight these bastards on everything." And that was what

she had proceeded to do, in ways that took her increasingly away from our petty intradepartmental politics and into battle against systems of inequality in the local community and in greater Dallas-Fort Worth. She told me she didn't really have hope for ever making things better. Instead, she spent her time thinking about problems and how to solve them (Armintor). She was exhausted by this, but also, she had so many friends. Activism had become her manner of existence.

About the same time I talked with Armintor, UNT's Young Democratic Socialists held the last of their Labor April meetings. This time the classroom was packed. Nearly 50 students gathered to hear from a UAW member who had led a successful strike against the General Motors plant in nearby Carrollton, and from beer brewers involved in a strike against Molson-Coors in Fort Worth, a strike they, too, would soon win. The UAW speaker gave the brewers advice about tactics. The students volunteered to walk the picket lines with the brewers. The brewers talked about how the students could start to organize within a local grocery store chain where several of them worked.

That this all happened inside a classroom at a public university was the only connection between these dynamic private sector campaigns and lackluster public sector organizing that is needed by Texas public employees. But, it was a start toward envisioning how that divide might be crossed—bridged by people like Armintor, people working together, agitating, demanding. I imagined a similar meeting, to be held further down the road, about the struggle for improved conditions for faculty, staff, and students—a meeting that could take place with or without participation by TSEU.

When the Labor Notes April meeting was over, we filed out for a group picture in the same hallway I'd spent so many years walking alone. The brewers stood in the front with a banner urging a boycott of Molson-Coors products. The rest of us stood around them. In the resulting photo, the lighting is terrible, but the message is powerful: There are many of us, and we are standing shoulder to shoulder.

Weeks later I would drive a moving truck 1000 miles north in hopes of standing shoulder to shoulder with new colleagues somewhere else.

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