Cleaning Up the Service Sector:
The Justice for Janitors Campaigns in Washington, D.C. and Atlanta, GA

By: Alyssa Russell

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Thesis Advisor: Joseph A. McCartin

Honors Program Chairs:
Professor Amy Leonard and Professor Katherine Benton Cohen

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Introduction

Private sector union membership has steeply declined throughout the years as the complex and intertwined phenomena of deindustrialization, globalization, and the reorganization of corporate forms and behavior have changed the labor markets in the United States. The 6.7 percent private sector union membership rate in 2015 would suggest that unions are doing little to expand or even simply maintain their membership.¹ This assumption, however, is far from the truth as unions continue to push for new ways in which to organize workers, even those previously seen as ‘unable to be organized.’ Historically, low-wage workers, predominantly women and people of color, have been excluded by the traditional labor movement, which has focused building its membership with mid-wage industrial sector jobs predominantly held by white men.²

New organizing is taking a more inclusive approach in gender, race, legal status, and income. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) supported a movement in the 1990s that worked toward this new way of organizing. The Justice for Janitors campaign (which will also be referred to as J4J) sought to re-unionize a sector in which unions were forced out due to many factors, including the sub-contracting of labor to non-union shops and the influx of an immigrant workforce of janitors who had never

² Readers should note that labor organizations such as the International Workers of the World (or the Wobblies) and others have attempted to organize low-wage workers including women and people of color, in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. However, these organizations struggled to organize these types of workers without adequate government protections and have not had the same institutional stability that other labor organizations, such as the American Federation of Labor (AFL) have had. Melvyn Dubofsky and Joseph A. McCartin, Labor in America: A History (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2017), 178-183 and 186-190.
belonged organized before. Starting in 1985, J4J began to organize janitors in numerous cities, first in the United States, and eventually expanding internationally.³

My thesis will examine the loss of the Atlanta J4J campaign and the success of J4J’s organizing model in D.C. These two campaigns had such drastically different results and understanding what led to these distinct outcomes suggests that there were external factors that influenced the campaign in Atlanta in a detrimental manner. Because the same union, SEIU, organized these campaigns with many of the same methods, the extrinsic elements of these campaigns are extremely important to understand. This thesis will seek to identify what these factors were and assess their influence in these two campaigns. My thesis will argue that the defeat of J4J’s organizing model in Atlanta and the success in D.C. stemmed from the interaction among activists, the local government, and corporate targets. The most vital difference between those two movements was the planned timeline for each of these campaigns. The interaction among the activists, the local government, and corporate targets involved in each of these campaigns damaged Atlanta’s campaign and supported the D.C. J4J movement.

These two campaigns, Atlanta and D.C., have never been discussed in a historical context. It is important that the narratives of both of these campaigns are properly documented for future studies and to contribute to the broader study of labor history, which this thesis seeks to do. Additionally, this thesis will examine why the Atlanta

campaign ultimately fell short while the D.C. campaign achieved its goal of winning a master contract. Understanding why these campaigns differed in their outcome will be helpful to future labor campaign leaders that look back to J4J as a labor organizing model.

The cases of Atlanta and D.C. will serve as examples of how J4J was able to achieve success and where it fell short. These cases are extremely important to understand as how they fit into the broader narrative of labor history. J4J’s Atlanta and D.C. campaigns are also important to understand in the framework for future labor organizing and broader social movements as well. The Justice for Janitors campaign has served as a model for many current labor campaigns including the widespread Fight for $15 campaign led by the same union, SEIU.4 Black Lives Matter has also used some of the tactics, such as blocking roadways that Justice for Janitors first utilized in their campaigns.5 Understanding the factors that undermined the Atlanta campaign and which factors allowed for the D.C. campaign to succeed will allow for labor organizers to design their campaigns in more strategically successful manners. Before exploring the Atlanta and D.C. campaigns, however, it is important to first understand the context in which the Justice for Janitors campaigns were launched, for the campaigns emerged at a particularly important moment in the history of the U.S. labor movement, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and the janitorial industry more broadly.

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Background on Early U.S. Labor Organizing and Law

The labor movement in the United States traces as far back as the nation’s founding. Journeyman’s societies popped up across the country in the early and mid-nineteenth century to represent small congregations of workers based on their local industry. Larger labor conglomerates such as the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) were founded in the 1869 and 1886, respectively, representing only skilled workers and creating the organized labor structure that is seen to this day. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that non-craft workers were represented on a mass scale by unions. Non-craft, or un-skilled, workers were not incorporated in a systematic way until the creation of the Congress of Industrial Workers (CIO) in the 1930s and was continued with the merger of the CIO with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1955. Prior to the emergence of the CIO, workers in the United States had been attempting to gain rights in the workplace through various means including strikes, boycotts, and work stoppages without any protection of their efforts form the law.

The federal government did not begin to expand workers rights and protections in the workplace until the twentieth century, and in the first decades of the century, its efforts were halting and often ineffectual. During World War I, President Woodrow

6 Dubofsky and McCartin, Labor in America, 56-58.
7 Dubofsky and McCartin, Labor in America, 108.
8 Dubofsky and McCartin, Labor in America, 134.
9 A skilled worker refers to someone who has been trained in a certain profession and has a certain skill involved with the work he or she does, such as a carpenter, welder, accountant, etc.
10 An unskilled worker refers to someone that is not trained in a certain profession and the job can often be done without any prior training or knowledge about a certain subject. Janitorial work falls into this category, as do many other service jobs, such as in fast food, retail, etc.
11 I am choosing to focus on federal legislation rather than state legislation because it affects workers throughout the entire country and shows what representatives throughout the entire
Wilson created the National War Labor Board (NWLB), which was made up of union leaders and employer representatives in order to prevent strikes from interfering with the United States’ participation in the war and to encourage cooperation between employers and workers.\(^{12}\) The NWLB was an important development in the federal government’s relationship with the labor force because it was the first instance in which the government promoted fundamental rights and protections, including an eight-hour workday with extra pay beyond those set hours, equal pay for equal work that women performed, and a living wage to workers.\(^{13}\) Although the NWLB dissipated with the end of the First World War, the same policies would reemerge with legislation and presidential action over the following decades.

The Norris-LaGuardia Act of 1932 ushered in an era of major labor legislation following the beginning of the Great Depression. The act, also known as the Anti-Injunction Bill, was passed under the Hoover administration\(^ {14}\) and heavily restricted the cases in which an injunction could be ordered against striking workers\(^ {15}\) and promoted collective bargaining as public policy, although it did not explicitly endorse the right to

\(^{12}\) Dubofsky and McCartin, Labor in America, 193.


\(^{14}\) Norris and LaGuardia, the two co-sponsors of the bill, and President Hoover were all Republicans and supported this bill largely because it largely restricted the rights of the federal courts to interfere in labor disputes. Paul F. Kelley, “The Norris-LaGuardia Act: The LMRA’s Older Cousin” (paper presented at American Bar Association Section of Labor and Employment Law 5th Annual Section Conference, Seattle, Washington, November 5, 2011), http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/labor_law/meetings/2011/ac2011/072.authcheckdam.pdf.

\(^{15}\) Employers often sought injunctions against unions or groups of workers to force them to quit striking. By restricting the instances in which injunctions could be ordered, employers were supposed to no longer be able to easily use this tool to stop workers from striking. “The Use of Injunctions in Labor Disputes,” CQResearcher, accessed March 4, 2017, http://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/document.php?id=cqresrre1928020400.
organize a union. The next administration, under Franklin Delano Roosevelt, would pass even further groundbreaking legislation that would bolster the rights of workers in the workplace. The National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) of 1935, also known as the Wagner Act, brought monumental changes to the labor force because it officially guaranteed the right of workers to organize a union within a workplace without interference from employers and provided for an explicit ban on company-controlled unions. The NLRA also established a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) made up of seven independent members to set policies for the labor market, “investigate, mediate, and settle labor disputes” and supervise union elections. The NLRA, however, did not grant additional protections to all workers with domestic, agricultural, construction and garment workers all excluded from the act. Today, the legislation is still the foundation from which unions draw their right to organize workers without employer interference and on which the NLRB acts.

A second piece of legislation passed in the New Deal era extended workers rights. The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) passed three years later in 1938. The FLSA furthered labor protections by establishing the first federal minimum wage, outlawing child labor under the age of 16 in certain industries, and creating a standard 40-hour work

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16 Dubofsky, *The State and Labor in Modern America*, 104.  
20 These four groups of workers were originally included in the first draft of Wagner’s bill but were later taken out as a compromise with Southern Democrats who were not willing to give these protections to low-wage workers that were often women and/or people of color. Dubofsky, *The State and Labor in Modern America*, 122.
week with a guaranteed overtime pay rate for workers that worked 40 hours each week. These protections still exist and are fundamental to how workers are paid to this day.

The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, passed by a Republic-controlled Congress despite President Harry S. Truman’s veto, restricted some of the union rights guaranteed to unions in the NLRA and bolstered the rights of employers and management. Many employers felt that the NLRA gave unions too much power and had allowed them to “dominate the economy,” and pushed for some legislation to limit the power of unions. Under the Taft-Harley Act, employers were free to promote their own views about the union in their workplace while unions were banned explicitly from coercing employers to discriminate against certain employees if they refused to join a union, even if a majority of workers chose to unionize. Importantly, the Taft-Hartley Act banned unions from engaging in secondary boycotts. This mandate meant that unions could only strike against their primary employer, preventing them from striking against an entire industry, related employers, or in an act of solidarity with another workplace. The Taft-Hartley Act also banned unions from organizing a “closed shop” in a workplace, i.e. a workplace where the majority of workers could compel their colleagues to join the union as a condition of employment. The Taft-Hartley Act allowed states to weaken union security in organized shops if they chose to do so, through the passage of “right to work” laws. These state laws forbid unions from negotiating contracts in which workers were required to pay for

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the costs of the union’s representation. The spread of such laws throughout the United States in the later half of the twentieth century, especially in the South, created an increasingly hostile environment for unions to organize workers.

Since the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, there has not been one piece of federal legislation passed that affects national labor policy or sets different rules regarding unions in the country. Due to this inactivity, many scholars believe that labor policy is outdated because of policy drift. Policy drift occurs when legislators refuse to address a policy issue with legislation or cannot agree on passing legislation about a topic. Because no new legislation is being passed on a certain policy issue, such as labor, previously passed legislation can become outdated as conditions in the United States change. One example outside of the realm of labor policy that is often cited as an example of policy drift is immigration legislation. Because immigration policy is such a hotly contested topic, there has not been any legislation regarding U.S. policy on immigration quotas since the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. Some political scientists and historians who study labor policy argue that labor laws are antiquated because there has been so little legislation passed regarding labor issues in the past half century.

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26 A right to work law prohibited workplaces from being closed shops, meaning that if a workforce at a certain location chose to join the union, not every worker would have to pay union dues although they would receive the benefits the union could provide to all workers. Many anti-union forces choose to frame this subject as giving more individual freedoms for workers to decide whether they would like to join the union or not, and preventing them from being compulsorily obligated to join if a majority of workers chose to join a union.


History of the SEIU

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the union that orchestrated the Justice for Janitors campaign in the 1980s and 1990s, began in the early twentieth century and was founded by janitors. The early beginning of the SEIU can be dated to April 6, 1902 when a group of janitors in Chicago came together to form a union. These janitors were working from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m. every day, with no days off, and made less than $20 per month. The one union of janitors quickly grew to a collection of five separate unions by 1903. In 1905, the Chicago janitor unions created the International Union of Building Employees and were chartered by the AFL. However, the International Union of Building Employees quickly collapsed. According to then AFL president Samuel Gompers, the union had been “instituted prematurely,” implying that either the janitors were not prepared to belong to a union or the leadership of the union was not strong enough.

Unfortunately, Gompers’s diagnosis was soon proved wrong. In 1912, William Quesse, a janitor integral to first organizing janitors in Chicago into a union, began reorganizing them again, despite greater opposition by employers. By 1916, the Cook County Real Estate Board agreed to broad contracts with wage scales and a lesser workload for all janitors in the area. Justice for Janitors would look back to this technique when designing their movement to re-unionize the janitorial industry in the mid 1980s.

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30 It is also important to note that there were other movements across the country at this time by janitors such as a movement in San Francisco in 1902 by both janitors and cemetery workers and the New York City Janitors’ Society started in the same year. These movements, however, were not directly linked to the beginning of the SEIU. Stillman, *Stronger Together*, 2.
The union would face legal challenges in 1917 from the U.S. Attorney General Mitchell Palmer who was a strict anti-communist and adversary of trade unionists, but again would succeed in wage increases, a closed shop, and ending the practice of women mandatorily working alongside their husbands without additional compensation.\(^{33}\)

Quesse and the janitors in Chicago won an international union charter in 1920 and on April 23, 1921, became the Building Service Employees International Union (BSEIU).\(^{34}\) The union continued to face opposition, such as when Quesse and nine other BSEIU leaders were convicted of conspiracy against employers and were to serve one to five year sentences, only to be pardoned by Governor Small once the union helped re-elect him as governor.\(^ {35}\) Despite this resistance to the union, the BSEIU’s base grew quickly with over 70,000 members by the late 1930s. The BSEIU expanded into other sectors in the 1940s with the unionizing of healthcare workers and grew even larger.\(^ {36}\) By 1960, the BSEIU had over 250,000 members who were janitors, hospital workers, airport workers, employees in public schools, shoe repairmen, bowling alley workers, and nursery workers.\(^ {37}\)

In 1968, the BSEIU decided to drop the ‘Building’ from the title of the organization as the BSEIU was not primarily made up of building service workers any

\(^{33}\) Stillman, Stronger Together, 2-3.
\(^{34}\) Stillman, Stronger Together, 3.
\(^{35}\) Governor Small’s pardoning of the union employees that were convicted of conspiracy against employers seems very corrupt, especially since he chose to do this after the BSEIU played an integral part in his re-election. However, the union employees most likely should not have been found guilty of conspiracy against employers as they were only trying to convince workers to vote to unionize with the BSEIU, which was officially recognized as a legal action in the NLRA of 1935 but had largely been regarded as a right of workers by many local municipalities. Stillman, Stronger Together, 4-5.
\(^{36}\) Stillman, Stronger Together, 6.
\(^{37}\) Stillman, Stronger Together, 7-8.
longer, but was representing all types of service industry workers. The SEIU continued to expand when they were able to start organizing public employees in the 1960s and had 430,000 members by 1972. The SEIU president at that time, George Hardy, announced that he wanted SEIU to unionize an additional 500,000 workers and, as he retired in 1980 when the union had 635,000 members, he left the union with the advice, “If they’re breathing, organize them.”

John Sweeney, the SEIU president at the time of the Justice for Janitors campaign, was elected in 1980 and took up Hardy’s challenge to expand union membership. Sweeney, who had headed the enormous Local 32BJ in New York City prior to his election from the SEIU presidency, focused on organizing. From 1980 to 1984, the SEIU gained an additional 160,000 members from affiliations with pre-existing public employee associations that chose to join the SEIU. Sweeney continued the push to bring in more union members in 1984 by creating sector-based divisions within the SEIU. There were five overarching groups: Building Services, Healthcare, Clerical, Public, and Allied-Industrial. By dividing the unions into their sectors, Sweeney hoped that each division could focus on furthering the work of that specific sector’s unions. At this time, the Building Service sector began to work on rebuilding the janitors unions throughout the country and launched the Justice for Janitors campaign.

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Background on Janitorial Industry

The janitorial industry has changed dramatically over the past century yet many characteristics about the nature of the work and janitors themselves have remained largely the same. In 1900, there were only approximately 56,000 janitors employed in the United States. Over a century later, there were over 2 million janitors in the country. With the expansion of cities and building space, janitors are more prevalent throughout the country although their status in society has remained in low esteem over a hundred years.45

The people who chose to become janitors have demographically remained mostly the same. In 1900, janitors were made up of 35% immigrants, 15% children of immigrants, 20% native-born African-American, and 30% native-born white people. This racial demographic from 1900 is almost identical to the breakdown of janitors today, although immigrants are now mostly from Latin America and were from Europe at the beginning of the 20th century.46 The majority of workers have been and continue to be recent immigrants or their relatives and African-Americans. Another traditional demographic that has remained the same is age. Janitors were and continue to be middle-aged with the average age of workers being in their mid-40s.47 The only demographic change in the janitorial workforce was its gender breakdown. There are now many more

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women working as janitors today than in the past. In 1900, 14% of janitors were women while they make up 35% of janitors today.\textsuperscript{48}

The nature of janitorial work has remained the same over time. Janitors, although employed in the same building, rarely interact with other janitors during the majority of their work.\textsuperscript{49} The job is often isolating and can further impede unionizing workplaces since janitors are not able to either talk with one another for long periods of time on the job nor establish a mutual trust with one another since they often do not have relationships with one another. Janitors also do not often have a normal set schedule each day or week because they often act as the first responder when something breaks in the building they are cleaning.\textsuperscript{50}

For most of the twentieth century, janitors were employed by the owners of the buildings in which they operated.\textsuperscript{51} When janitors had a problem in their workplace, they could speak directly with the building operator who was their employer; the same person who controlled the environment they worked in, also directly employed them. Because their employer was the building owner, janitors had to negotiate with only one person to negotiate with over wage, benefits, and workplace rules. However, beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, contract-cleaning firms emerged and proliferated throughout the country as building owners looked to cut costs amidst the oil crisis and the double-dip recession.\textsuperscript{52} Contract-cleaning firms hire janitors and contract their work out to real estate owners to clean their buildings, allowing real estate owners to shed the responsibility of employing janitors and giving owners greater flexibility in choosing their workforce.

\textsuperscript{48} Jentz, “Janitorial/ Custodial,” 712.
\textsuperscript{49} Jentz, “Janitorial/ Custodial,” 711.
\textsuperscript{50} Jentz, “Janitorial/ Custodial,” 711.
\textsuperscript{51} Jentz, “Janitorial/ Custodial,” 713.
\textsuperscript{52} Jentz, “Janitorial/ Custodial,” 712-713.
The change from real estate owners directly employing janitors to contract-cleaning firms hiring janitors that would be contracted out to real estate owners made it more difficult for janitors to form unions. Janitors began to work in multiple buildings owned by different real estate owners in the course of one day, meaning they no longer worked at one central location.\(^{53}\) Since janitors were not in one worksite around the same fellow employees, it was difficult for them to create a collective identity. In workplaces where all employees work alongside one another, as workers in factories or office environments do, it is much easier for these workers to forge a collective identity because they are able to talk and build relationships with one another as they work throughout the day. This lack of a collective identity among janitors made it more difficult for janitors to identify with one another and build a commonality, which is often necessary when starting a union. To make matters worse, contract-cleaning firms are often small, so there are many of them. These firms were often small, with only an average of 18 employed janitors at each firm.\(^{54}\) Janitors, with this new structure of janitorial work, now would have to bargain with the contracting firm, their employer, rather than the building owner, who ultimately had control over whether they worked in a certain workplace since they controlled whether there was a contract or not.

**History of the Justice for Janitors Campaign**

The SEIU concluded in a report in 1985 that the building services sector of its union was “crumbling with the potential for collapse.”\(^{55}\) This report outlined multiple problems with the unions in the building services sector, from the external economic

\(^{53}\) Jentz, “Janitorial/ Custodial,” 713.
\(^{54}\) Jentz, “Janitorial/ Custodial,” 712-713.
changes to shifts in the demographic of workers, among many others. The number of janitors unionized had steadily dropped due to the shift from real estate owners employing janitors to contract cleaning firms employing them. There was also a growing industry of commercial real estate in the largely non-union suburbs and the South. The majority of janitors throughout the country were experiencing declining wages, losing benefits, and a growth of part-time work with less full-time janitorial positions available. The report also found a growing number of undocumented immigrants employed as janitors, which the SEIU presumed would be harder to organize. This report outlined why the Justice for Janitors campaign was necessary to the building services sector of the SEIU, and why it would be a difficult endeavor.

The Justice for Janitors campaign, as historian Jennifer Luff aptly stated, “combined street theater and civil disobedience with legal and corporate strategies” in order to organize janitors into unions. The campaign was inspired by the events that occurred in Pittsburgh in 1985, when a janitor’s union held out against wage decreases and the elimination of vital benefits such as paid time off and healthcare. Stephen Lerner, the architect for the campaign, came up with a tactic that would “pressure building owners, not cleaning contractors, with demands for union recognition and fair

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56 The trend of more part-time and less full-time positions is important to note because workers are not guaranteed the same labor protections with part-time work that they are as full-time employees. Additionally, part-time work can come with more less stable work schedules and no guarantee of a certain amount of hours each week.

57 This finding was not necessarily true as many cities with large populations of undocumented immigrants employed as janitors that were very successfully organized into unions, as was the case in Los Angeles.

58 Stillman, Stronger Together, 19.


contracts” because building owners could easily replace contractors once they unionized.

The first Justice for Janitors campaign succeeded in Denver in 1987 with a focus on the cleaning crews working at various non-union locations in the city under much worse conditions than when these very same janitors worked in the unionized Denver airport. The second J4J campaign, in 1988, was a loss in Atlanta, which will be discussed in much greater detail later in this work. The Los Angeles campaign that began in late 1988 was the most successful of the J4J campaigns, with a master agreement won for all janitors in the city by 1991. The L.A. campaign is the most referenced J4J campaign not only because of its great success, but also because it proved that undocumented immigrants were willing to strike, even when threatened with great violence as occurred on June 15, 1990 with a police attack on strikers. The D.C. J4J campaign began in 1988 and was a longer battle than that in L.A., but was eventually won in 1998; this campaign will also be discussed in much greater detail later in this thesis.

Justice for Janitors carried out their campaigns in a unique manner. First, they often avoided NLRB-moderated elections because of the high turnover in the janitorial industry and the fractured employment with the great number of contractors and small number of employees at each firm. Second, the campaigns often launched heavy public

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relations campaigns to try to mobilize community attention and support for the janitors cause to unionize, and also to vilify the real estate owners who controlled the most buildings in each city. Lastly, the J4J campaign depended on ‘trigger’ agreements, which were agreements with contractors that they would recognize the union and endorse modest wage and benefit increases although the entire contract would not go into full effect until a majority of contractors would agree to a floor wage for all janitors and a set market rate for contractors.65 This ‘trigger’ agreement was vital to J4J organizing because it ensured that building owners would not simply be able to terminate contracts with unionized janitorial contracting firms and hire non-union firms. These factors marked the unique nature of the Justice for Janitors campaigns in every city in which they set out, including Atlanta and D.C.

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Chapter 1: Atlanta Divided Against Itself Will Not Win

“We’re raisin’ hell to get Justice for Janitors.” One of several men dressed in purple costumes resembling the dried fruit proclaims this mantra to the many passer-bys that the 1988 Democratic National Convention brings to downtown Atlanta. These men

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67 Hoelterhoff, “Gone With the Windbags,”
stood outside of Peachtree Center for hours in the humid 95-degree weather in mid-July to draw attention to the their unjust working conditions. This small protest would begin the busiest and most tumultuous week of the three-year long Atlanta Justice for Janitors campaign.

Setting the Scene

The Justice for Janitors campaign in Atlanta began in 1987. In accordance with J4J’s grand strategy, the Atlanta effort focused on pressuring the building owners in the downtown area to pledge their support of a master contract that would unionize all janitors in the area. The campaign, like other Justice for Janitors campaigns, differed from the traditional labor organizing method because it did not seek individual collective bargaining agreements with each janitorial contracting firm.

Atlanta’s downtown real estate in the late 1980s was dominated by one well-known figure, John Portman, Jr. Owner of eleven square blocks of downtown Atlanta, Portman made an easy target for the Justice for Janitors campaign, which focused their movement on the most influential building owners for them to enact change. Because of his enormous personal net worth of $200 to $300 million, Portman was among Atlanta’s most influential public figures. Portman was said to have been “responsible for shaping Atlanta’s skyline” because of his talent as an architect and wealth as any builder. He was also widely seen as being progressive on issues important to many Atlanta citizens. He was a lifetime member of the NAACP, and the first person to open an integrated

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70 “Atlanta Janitors’ Fight Spawns Nat’l Boycott.”
restaurant in the city in 1961.  

Atlanta had a rapid growth spurt in the 1980s, with approximately 225 new office buildings of 33 million square feet of space created from 1980 until 1988. The quick expansion of office buildings in the downtown area was attributed largely to John Portman, Jr., the man that would face a barrage of attacks by the Atlanta Justice for Janitors contingent.

**Confrontation from the Beginning**

Beginning in March of 1987, Justice for Janitors organizers launched a campaign approached in downtown Atlanta. The SEIU organizers chose to quarter their second campaign in Atlanta for many reasons. First, Atlanta did not have an established labor union for janitors prior to J4J’s establishment of Local 679. This lack of a previous janitorial union allowed Justice for Janitors to go into a place with no unionized janitors and start from scratch without any possibility of running into conflict with an existing janitorial union. If J4J won in Atlanta, they would be able to point to their strength in not only re-unionizing janitors, but in unionizing janitors who never had belonged to a union before. Next, most janitorial contractors owned other janitorial contracting firms in other cities that were unionized in other cities, but not unionized in Atlanta. Justice for Janitors planned on pressuring these contracting companies with their tactics, but ultimately believed that these janitorial contracting firms would agree to a master contract because they had companies that were unionized elsewhere and they likely were not morally opposed to unions. Lastly, Justice for Janitors assumed that the political establishment

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would be supportive of them in their efforts to unionize janitors. There were many Civil Rights Movement leaders involved in local government and the business structure in Atlanta, and Justice for Janitors expected that because these leaders were supportive of civil rights, they would side with the labor movement.73

The roughly 1,300 janitors that J4J hoped to organize tended to be African-American women, 35 years old or older, who made on average $3.50 an hour, with no health insurance, no sick leave, no holiday pay, no retirement fund, and little job security.74 The Atlanta J4J movement’s goal was to raise wages to a minimum of $5.25 an hour, have employer-provided health insurance, holiday pay, respect on the job, and establish seniority rights within the janitorial force.75 SEIU organizers, donning a red jacket with white lettering reading “Justice for Janitors” on the back, entered the downtown buildings janitors were working in and passed out leaflets about the unionizing effort to educate the employees of the on-going J4J effort. Management often interrupted exchanges between J4J organizers and janitors, even during times when janitors were on break.

On August 6, 1987, tensions escalated to their first breaking point when two SEIU employees were arrested because they refused to leave one of the offices in the Peachtree Center where they were organizing janitors.76 J4J organizers thought it was imperative to be able to meet with janitors in their place of work to talk with them about the union.

73 Stephen Lerner, the architect of the Justice for Janitors campaign for the SEIU, disclosed these reasons as to why J4J started their second campaign in Atlanta. Lerner in discussion with the author, May 2017.
Despite this arrest, J4J organizers persisted to enter buildings with subcontracted janitors that they were trying to unionize. On September 10, there were complaints from the Peachtree Center that SEIU employees, many of them African Americans, were taunting security guards with racial slurs when they were refused entrance into the building to speak with janitors.\textsuperscript{77}

The tenacity of J4J organizers to discuss unionization with janitors inside their workplace resulted in their banishment from central downtown buildings. Fulton County Superior Court Judge Clarence Cooper granted Portman’s Peachtree Center Management Co. a restraining order against the SEIU members that were soliciting janitors inside their workplace on September 24, 1987. The restraining order inhibited J4J organizers from entering the building, but they continued to talk with janitors outside the building, often passing out leaflets, and making their presence known to the company.\textsuperscript{78}

Support in Both Familiar and Unsuspected Places

The Atlanta Justice for Janitors movement formed alliances with other labor unions in the city and received support from high-profile members of the community. As mentioned previously, Claude “Thunderbolt” Patterson was an outspoken organizer for the Justice for Janitors movement. Thunderbolt was well-known throughout the South because of his skill as a professional wrestler, one of the few black champion wrestlers during the 1970s and 1980s. Thunderbolt’s involvement with the SEIU’s Justice for Janitors campaign was not his first encounter with the labor movement; he attempted to

\textsuperscript{77} Crowe, “Union Works to Organize Peachtree Center Janitors.”
\textsuperscript{78} Crowe, “Union Works to Organize Peachtree Center Janitors.”
unionize professional wrestlers but was blacklisted as a result.\textsuperscript{79} Thunderbolt was one of only four full-time J4J organizers; he was passionate about the effort to organize the 1,300 downtown janitors and was a well-respected man in his hometown community of Atlanta.\textsuperscript{80}

In October of 1987, J4J supported an unusual, yet influential union partner, the National Football League’s Players Association (NFLPA). The NFLPA was in the midst of one of its largest and most bitter contract battles with the league. Week 2 of the NFL scheduled games that were to be played on September 27, 1987 were cancelled throughout the league because of the contract battle. However, replacement football athletes\textsuperscript{81} that did not belong to the NFLPA came in to play games during Weeks 3 and 4. On October 3, 1987, some of the Atlanta Falcons players took to the streets outside of the stadium, the Saturday before Week 3 in which replacement players would take to the football field, undermining the efforts of striking NFLPA players. J4J members stood alongside Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), International Association of Machinists (IAM), United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), and other labor union members in supporting the striking football players. One journalist writing at the time noted that workers who were struggling to survive decided to stand in support of Atlanta’s star running-back Gerald Riggs, “a $500,000-a-year oppressed person” as he marched near


\textsuperscript{81}These players were not members of the NFLPA because they were not starting players and at times, not even players in the NFL. Many football players that had been rejected multiple times from the NFL, such as Mike Williams who started for the Atlanta Falcons during Weeks 2 and 3, despite being rejected from the NFL twice.
the Fulton County Stadium.\textsuperscript{82} Despite the stark difference between the NFLPA strike and the labor struggles that the working and middle class unions were going through at the time, these organizations and their members came together in support of the NFLPA’s strike and their common commitment to the idea that workers had a right to bargain collectively for a better deal from their employers.

A month after this public act of solidarity, the Justice for Janitors campaign was dealt yet another setback by the courts. Peachtree Center Management Co. took the SEIU back to Fulton County Superior Court on November 20, 1987.\textsuperscript{83} This time Justice for Janitors was targeted with an injunction that prohibited them from gathering on the sidewalk near the Peachtree Center building in “groups of more than six people” and “from shouting on the sidewalks or from using megaphones within 150 feet of the property.”\textsuperscript{84} The following day civil rights icon and current Congressional member, John Lewis, met with local leaders and labor officials to pledge his support of the Justice for Janitors campaign.\textsuperscript{85} He encouraged the approximately fifty J4J organizers present at the meeting in the historic Paschal’s Restaurant,\textsuperscript{86} “Don’t be sidetracked by a ‘so-called’ injunction,” and to carry on their efforts to unionize the downtown janitors.\textsuperscript{87} Three days

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{83} The Superior Court judge that presided over this case was Judge William H. Alexander, a different Superior Court judge than the last time SEIU and Peachtree Center Management Co. went to court with one another.
\item \textsuperscript{86} Paschal’s Restaurant was often a meeting place for leaders and activists involved in the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s. “The History of Paschal’s,” accessed February 3, 2017, http://www.paschalsatlanta.com/timeline.
\item \textsuperscript{87} Mallard, “Janitors Plan Downtown Demonstration - Group Asking Pay Raises Is under Court Injunction.”
\end{itemize}
later, on November 24, 1987, J4J held a demonstration at noon outside of Peachtree Center, where they had received an injunction from gathering near and protesting loudly.\textsuperscript{88} Fifty J4J members formed them into groups of six, tied together by rope, and marched up and down the street with tape over their mouths. One protestor held a megaphone that had the microphone portion taped over, mocking the injunction that prevented them from using it. A police escort accompanied the J4J members and did not have to enforce any portion of the injunction as the protest was in accordance with the law. The protest made a loud statement to the Peachtree Center Management Co. that, although the protestors could not physically proclaim their message, they would continue to take steps to make sure both management and the general public heard their voices.\textsuperscript{89}

Justice for Janitors continued to organize rallies outside of buildings with non-unionized subcontracted janitors. On December 12, 1987, the day of Local 679’s Founding Convention,\textsuperscript{90} there was a rally to demand $5.25 an hour for every janitor that worked in downtown Atlanta and pressure sub-contracting companies to agree to hold union elections at the same time. The rally took place outside of American Hotel on Spring Street and included approximately 500 janitors supported by several local leaders. One leader was Reverend Joseph E. Lowery,\textsuperscript{91} a civil rights movement veteran who previously headed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Rev. Lowery

\textsuperscript{88} Mallard, “Janitors Plan Downtown Demonstration - Group Asking Pay Raises Is under Court Injunction.”
\textsuperscript{90} DVD “#02,” December 1987, SEIU Public Relations Record Box 4, Walter Reuther Library of Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.
encouraged the janitors to continue their effort to unionize all Atlanta janitors and attain the $5.25 an hour wage. 92

Community leaders supported the Atlanta Justice for Janitor’s campaign from the beginning. In addition to Rev. Lowery, former president of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), John Lewis, who was elected to Congress in 1986, was among the Civil Rights Movement leaders who publicly pledged their support to the movement. J4J had passionate organizers on the ground including professional wrestler Thunderbolt Patterson that were able to excite and mobilize a large majority of the 1,300 janitors in downtown Atlanta. The movement worked alongside other unions in the community and even supported the NFLPA in their strike in 1987.

Court Battles Persist

John Portman, Jr.’s Peachtree Center Management Co. continued its legal offensive against the Atlanta Justice for Janitors movement in 1988. On March 22, 1988, the same Fulton County Superior Court judge 93 who ordered the injunction barring organizers from the sidewalk near Peachtree Center the previous year, ruled that Justice for Janitors was in contempt of court. Although they had been barred from entering the premise for union activities, the activists were distributing union posters inside the Center to working janitors. The SEIU was fined $500 and three activists were fined $100 each, SEIU regional coordinator Robert Sarason and organizers Ricky Reeves and Thunderbolt Patterson for “unlawful solicitation.” 94

93 The judge in this case was William H. Alexander.
A little over a month later, the same players returned to the courtroom again. Judge William H. Alexander, who had issued two previous rulings, ordered a permanent injunction against the SEIU on April 26, 1988, barring the labor organizers from soliciting employees at Peachtree Center. The injunction’s details were the same as the injunction issued the previous autumn. SEIU organizers were barred from “blocking entrances, cursing, making obscene gestures, singing loudly, clapping or shouting inside Peachtree Center buildings.”

A Movement United

The Atlanta Justice for Janitors campaign was well-connected with broader national movements beyond the scope of the southern city. On March 30, 1988, the Atlanta campaign held a rally in solidarity with the national Justice for Janitors movement. Ten other cities held vigils, including Los Angeles and San Jose. The rally served to remind the public of the nationwide movement to protect the existing janitorial contracts and unionize janitors not represented by a union.

Another large event of solidarity was the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Pilgrimage for Jobs with Justice. Jobs with Justice, an organization created in 1987 as a coalition of progressive organizations that support one another in their overlapping interests, organized this march that began in Memphis on April 4, the anniversary of Dr. King’s assassination. The Pilgrimage began in Memphis, crossed from Tennessee to Mississippi to Alabama, and ended in Georgia. The Pilgrimage entered Atlanta, its last stop, on May 14, 1988. The march was jubilant with almost 10,000 people singing,

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chanting, and marching through downtown Atlanta. Janitors led the march with large brooms, sweeping down the streets.

**Officials Begin to Sweat in ‘Hotlanta’**

As Justice for Janitors continued to pressure janitorial contracting companies and the downtown-building owners to enter into a mass contract to unionize all downtown janitors, owners and city officials began to grow nervous. On June 14, 1988, Michael Gebhart, the president of janitorial contracting company Gebhart Building Services, Inc. and a target of the J4J campaign, wrote a letter to SEIU organizer Ricky Reeves complaining to him about how disruptive their demonstrations had been for the company and their employees at Peachtree Center. He pleaded with Reeves and the SEIU to “petition the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) for an election, and let our people make their own decision by secret ballot in a fair election monitored by the NLRB?” Gebhart made the letter available to the public the following day. Reeves responded that J4J is only interested in a unified contract that includes all 56 of the largest office buildings, 18 contractors and with the blessing of the 43 owners and will not call for a union election until that is achieved.

Not only were janitorial contracting companies growing restless with the persistent J4J campaign, so were city officials. Mayor Andrew Young, a Democrat and sympathizer with the union cause, began to grow more worried with each passing day in the summer of 1988 because the biggest event that his city would host during his mayoral


term was approaching: the 1988 Democratic National Convention. The DNC would take place July 18-21 in Atlanta, Georgia. Mayor Young began to quickly encourage Portman and the SEIU to sit down with one another and work out a deal before the DNC commenced. On July 7, the SEIU began to send out letters to DNC delegates and other politicians, including Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis, to not attend five events during the convention that were co-sponsored by Portman.99 Many of the events were central to the DNC: a dinner at Portman’s home for politicians and leaders, appearances on ABC’s Good Morning America which were planning to film at the Portman-owned Marriott Marquis, a benefit fashion show at a Portman-owned building, a brunch by USA Today at a Portman-owned hotel, and a Delta Air Lines reception co-sponsored by Portman.100 This action prompted a swift response by Mayor Young.

On the evening of July 7, 1988, Mayor Andrew Young made a Cajun shrimp pasta for dinner in his home, not for his family, but for two members of the SEIU and two representatives for John Portman Jr.101 The dinner was the first face-to-face conversation the two parties had ever had and would begin a four-day period of negotiations. The next day the parties would have a more casual meal, Domino’s pizza, still confined in Young’s home, but without any further progress.102 The negotiations ended on July 10 when Portman’s representatives and SEIU leaders walked out of Young’s home, unable to come to any agreement. SEIU’s Robert Sarason told a reporter that talks had reached a

100 Henry Weinstein, “Union Seeking Boycott of 5 Atlanta Convention Events.”
102 Galloway, “Young Opens House, Office to Union, Builder - Mayor Trying to Avert Picketing of Convention.”
stalemate and that “basically, we're still discussing the same questions we had on Thursday.” The two parties headed into the Democratic National Convention still disagreeing about the unionization of janitors in Atlanta, and this disagreement would make for a memorable and dysfunctional DNC, at least for Mayor Young.

1988 Democratic National Convention, A Moment of Missed Opportunity

As politicians, non-governmental leaders, reporters, and a mess of spectators began to descend upon Atlanta, a small group of men gathered outside of a post J4J members were used to occupying, alongside Peachtree Towers. The men were dressed in thick purple costumes as raisins in the 95 degree July 14th heat chanting “We’re raisin’ hell to get Justice for Janitors.” As with many of J4J’s protests, their efforts were creative and unique, enough to catch the eye of a Wall Street Journal reporter who mentioned this group in his account of the week she spent at the DNC.104

J4J began to disrupt the DNC before it even officially began July 18, 1988. On July 15th, the nationally televised program Good Morning America changed its hotel and recording area from the Portman-owned Marriott Marquis hotel to another downtown hotel. GMA planned on hosting many prominent Democratic politicians and activists during the DNC and with the threat of a picket line outside Portman’s hotel, decided to switch hotels rather than force Democrats to choose between crossing a picket line and cancelling their GMA appearance.105

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104 Hoelterhoff, “Gone With the Windbags,”
Justice for Janitors conducted its first protest of the DNC on July 17, 1988, a day before the official Convention was to begin. Over 100 demonstrators picketed a brunch hosted by USA Today and Gannett Newspapers that invited members of Congress, reporters, and delegates to Apparel Mart, a building in which Portman-owned a portion. Many attendants chose to ignore the picketers by utilizing a sky bridge that linked the neighboring Merchandise Market tower to the Apparel Mart tower or entering Apparel Mart through a side door not blocked by the Justice for Janitors picket line. Of the numerous politicians, reporters, and officials that chose to ignore the Justice for Janitors protest and cross their picket line, one man stood out in particular. John Lewis, a man who pledged his support to the Justice for Janitors movement a mere eight months earlier, defiantly crossed the J4J picket line, saying to a nearby reporter that he “didn’t have any real problem with crossing the line” because he spoke to the janitors about it, although their action was intended to prevent politicians, especially their allies, from attending the event. Despite Lewis dishonoring the picket line, the Justice for Janitors campaign noticeably disrupted the event and gained the full attention of John Portman, Jr.

The evening of July 17th, hours after J4J picketed the USA Today brunch, Portman’s representatives called John Sweeney, the leader of the SEIU, as he drove to a planned action at Portman’s house. Portman’s representatives convinced Sweeney to call off the J4J picket of a dinner for Democratic officials hosted at Portman’s private residence. Sweeney promised that Justice for Janitors would not protest any other events during the DNC as long as Portman “negotiates in good faith.” Paul Kirk, the DNC Chairman, also assured Sweeney that Portman would remain faithful on his promise to

negotiate with SEIU as long as J4J would refrain from protesting any other DNC planned events. Sweeney announced to the J4J demonstrators that were already at Portman’s home, prepared to picket outside during the dinner, that “we have won a victory.” Sweeney told protestors that there would be a plan for unionizing janitors at Portman’s properties before the end of the convention.

The truce was quickly broken. On July 19th, two days later, Justice for Janitors picketed a reception for Senators Bob Graham of Florida and Jay Rockefeller of West Virginia at the Portman-owned Marriott Marquis. There are conflicting reports of what exactly transpired to destroy the peace between the two camps. Kirk, the DNC Chair, wrote a letter to Sweeney on the 19th explaining that Portman promised to begin negotiations following the end of the DNC, not during its midst. Kirk made the letter public on the 20th and Sweeney denied the allegation, putting forth his own narrative that Sweeney had agreed to suspend demonstrations only with the promise of negotiations beginning immediately.

The Atlanta J4J campaign ended their protest of the DNC on its last day, July 20, 1988. Over two hundred demonstrators picketed outside the Delta Air Lines reception hosted at Portman’s Marriot Marquis, singing and shouting anti-Portman slogans. A few Democrats, including DNC Chair Kirk and a few local officials, crossed the J4J

107 Roughton, “DECISION ’88 - Janitors Shelve Plans for Demonstrations.”
108 Roughton, “DECISION ’88 - Janitors Shelve Plans for Demonstrations.”
picket line, but many Democrats chose not to go to the event or joined the picket line such as Florida delegate Gloria Jackson.\textsuperscript{113}

The SEIU’s handling of the Democratic National Convention left many officials and union members confused about which actions to take and/or support. The momentum members started even before the DNC officially began with actions they participated in stalled out during the truce called the evening of July 17\textsuperscript{th}, the day before the DNC started. With the breaking of the truce during the middle of the DNC, organizers had to once again mobilize members to picket events and regroup their efforts. The Democratic National Convention had much potential that seemed to be lost by SEIU’s changing course of direction.

**Back to Court and Last Campaign Efforts**

The battle between Portman and the SEIU entered the courtroom yet again in the latter half of 1988. On September 2, the SEIU received its first favorable ruling since their Atlanta campaign began in March of 1987. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), sued Portman’s Peachtree Center Management Co., forcing the company to allow the SEIU to organize janitors inside and outside of the large office-retail complex.\textsuperscript{114} The NLRB’s ruling found the restraining order that the company was granted in the fall of 1987 was not in accordance with federal labor laws, specifically the National


Labor Relations Act of 1935, because of the constriction it put on the ability of employees to decide whether to join a union or not.\textsuperscript{115}

This single ruling against Portman did not deter him from continuing his resistance to Justice for Janitors through the court system. On October 3, 1988, Portman sued the SEIU for disrupting his businesses from hosting events during the Democratic National Convention. Portman claimed that his businesses, particularly the Marriott Marquis, lost an overwhelming amount of accounts and bookings because Justice for Janitors picketed their events. Portman argued that he lost at least $435,000 from Good Morning America canceling their booking at the Marriott Marquis and their plan to broadcast from the venue. Portman also put forth the argument that Justice for Janitor’s action of picketing his events was illegal in their nature as a secondary boycott,\textsuperscript{116} which violates Section 8(b)(4) of the National Labor Relations Act as amended by the Taft Hartley Act of 1947.\textsuperscript{117}

Atlanta’s J4J campaign fought back in the manner that the campaign believed was most effective, through public demonstrations that spurred support for J4J. On November 17, Atlanta’s J4J contingent launched a national and international movement against John Portman. The slogan for the demonstrations was “Bring John Portman to Justice” with twenty-five cities across the United States participating and six different countries participating. Each of the cities were familiar with Portman already because he owned businesses in each one. From Seattle, Washington to Hartford, Connecticut, in Bonn and

\textsuperscript{115} Roach, “Labor Board Files Suit to Allow Janitor Union at Peachtree Center,”

\textsuperscript{116} A secondary boycott is defined as “an attempt to stop others from purchasing products from, performing services for, or otherwise doing business with a company that does business with another company that is in the midst of a labor dispute.” “Secondary boycott,” Cornell University Law School, accessed April 27, 2017, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/secondary_boycott.

Copenhagen, people gathered in the streets to protest Portman and demand just wages, working conditions, and benefits for the janitors that cleaned Portman’s buildings in downtown Atlanta.¹¹⁸

The next year started with more court struggles. On January 9, 1989, the SEIU filed a lawsuit against Portman’s Peachtree Center Management Co. The suit alleged that the company violated federal antitrust and civil rights laws during the Democratic National Convention. During the DNC, the J4J campaign bought thirty minutes of airtime on a local channel that was established specifically to broadcast content relating to the DNC. The channel could be seen any viewers in downtown Atlanta with access to that network. The Marriott Marquis, however, did not air the J4J programs on that channel because the channel was blocked from the hotel’s internal television network, according the SEIU. The block allegedly prevented 6,000 downtown hotel rooms from accessing the channel.¹¹⁹

Two days later, January 11, 1989, Justice for Janitors agreed to refrain from “illegal picketing, demonstrating, and coercive action.” This pledge to stop illegal actions was in direct response to the suit that Portman filed on October 3, 1988 that accused SEIU of orchestrating an illegal secondary boycott of his businesses and requested a large settlement from J4J. Portman’s suit contended that the SEIU picketing of the DNC disrupted the events in his buildings and cost him money. SEIU officials claimed that because the union settled with the NLRB in Portman’s claims against illegal activity, it “clear[ed] the way” for continuing to boycott Portman, despite that activity not being

¹¹⁸ “Atlanta Janitors’ Fight Spawns Nat’l Boycott.”
protected by the NLRA of 1935. Portman’s company countered that SEIU’s settlement of
the complaint over illegal boycotting, “fully vindicate[d]” the company’s position.120

With the week, Justice for Janitors conducted a protest at an unlikely event, a
dinner in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. On January 17, 1989, the M.L.K. Center for
Nonviolent Social Change, Inc. held a dinner commemorating what would have been
King’s 60th birthday. King’s widow, Coretta Scott King, who headed the organization,
attended the dinner with her son, Dexter, who took control over the organization
following the dinner and his mother’s resignation as chair. The large celebration attracted
many of the top Democrats from the city, including John Portman, Jr. Portman gave a
planned presentation during the dinner, which Justice for Janitors peacefully protested
throughout the duration of the speech, the thirty members singing “We Shall Overcome”
loudly from outside the ballroom. The J4J campaign continued to barrage Portman, even
at events hosted by one of their most-recognizable local supporters, Coretta Scott King.121

The campaign received another blow on May 13, 1989. An administrative law
judge122 dismissed the unfair labor practices charges SEIU filed against the Peachtree
Center Management Co. The ruling stated that Justice for Janitors was free to use
methods for organizing besides canvassing inside of the Peachtree Center owned by
Portman. Although the ruling was subject to appeal, this ruling made for another court
procedure that limited the action J4J could take legally.123

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120 “Metro Report - DeKalb Board Elects Lanier Presiding Officer.”
121 “Mrs. King Announces Son To Take Over Presidency Of M.L. King Center Here: At Dinner
Sat. Honoring Filer And HUD’s Sec. Pierce,” Atlanta Daily World (1932-2003); Atlanta, Ga.,
January 17, 1989.
122 Judge Phillip McLeod presided over this ruling and had not ruled in any of the J4J cases prior
to this instance.
123 “Metro Report - Richard Starrett Charged In Fourth Assault on Teen,” Atlanta Journal-
Last Efforts

On July 27, 1989, fifty Atlanta Justice for Janitors members marched outside one of the largest corporations in the United States, Coca-Cola. The Coca-Cola headquarters hired contractors that had non-unionized janitors at their location and, naturally, became a corporate target of J4J. Many groups joined J4J in their efforts to organize the Coca-Cola janitors, including the International Brotherhood of Police Organizations and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.  

Months later, J4J filed a federal discrimination lawsuit against Gebhart Building Services, Inc., a janitorial contracting company that supplied the cleaning crews for most Portman-owned buildings in downtown Atlanta including the Peachtree Center and Northpark. On October 25, 1989, SEIU publicly claimed that two black men were refused applications for positions as janitors with Gebhart Building Services, Inc. at Koger Center in Chamblee, Georgia, a city just northwest of Atlanta proper. The two men that were allegedly discriminated against were black and most employees at Koger Center are Korean. Tony Park, one of the men allegedly discriminated against, claimed that when he sought an application as a janitor in August of 1989, he was told by the manager Robert J. Harris that “all jobs were reserved for Koreans” at that location. Wayne J. Long, the other man who was purportedly discriminated against, tried to apply as a janitor at Koger Center in September but was told that Gebhart Building Services, Inc.

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125 It is important to note that Portman does not own the building where the alleged discrimination took place, which was at Koger Center. Portman, however, was harmed by the publicity against Gebhart Building Services, Inc. because it was a major subcontractor he hired to clean most of his properties.
Russell 41

Inc. was no longer looking to hire janitors. However, only a few days after Long attempted to apply as a janitor, Gebhart allegedly hired a Korean man on as a janitor.

The lawsuit sought $350,000 in back pay and punitive damages for the defendants as well as an affirmative action program to be put in place at Gebhart to prevent further discriminatory practices. Linda Riggins, the president of SEIU local 679, made it known that the lawsuit was a new strategy against Portman by targeting one of his major contractors.  

The campaign came to a final close in February of 1990. The Atlanta J4J campaign was running out of resources and tactics. The Justice for Janitors model switched from their unique method of focusing a public relations assault against one individual, Portman, to attempting to unionize a contracting firm. This shift from unique to traditional organizing practices demonstrates that the J4J campaign no longer was committed to their past tactics and were becoming desperate in winning some campaign. Justice for Janitors decided to launch a last organizing effort against Southern Services Inc. (SSI), a company owned by an African American man, John Burks, who proudly touted that he was a successful black business owner. Local 679 urged workers at SSI to vote for the union, sending each of the workers home with a Walkman and cassette tapes with Jesse Jackson and Linda Riggins imploring workers to consider voting ‘yes’ for the union. Burks and managers at SSI actively worked to dissuade janitors from unionizing

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with SEIU. Burks sent out a memo to his employees urging them to vote no128 and had many flyers informing them that the SEIU falls through on their promises.129 A few SSI janitors told organizers that their managers threatened that they would be fired if they showed up to vote in the union election.130 Although J4J put all of their last efforts into organizing SSI, their efforts fell short. The union election that was slated to take place on February 16, 1990 never took place. J4J organizers knew from their discussions with SSI employees that there would not be enough workers to vote for the union.131 Justice for Janitors ended their campaign in Atlanta in February of 1990, without any large victory of a master contract or even a small victory of winning one single union election.

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130 SEIU Justice for Janitors DVD “#10,” February 10, 1990, SEIU Public Relations Record Box 4, Walter Reuther Library of Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.
131 Lerner in discussion with the author, May 2017.
Chapter 2: “D.C.’s Having Carr Trouble” and the Janitors Know How to Fix It

“It’s transportation terrorism pure and simple.” At least that is how John Undeland, the Washington, D.C. spokesman of the American Automobile Association (AAA) viewed the traffic disruption orchestrated by the Justice for Janitors campaign on September 20, 1995. The traffic disturbance caused over 100,000 commuters to arrive to

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their intended destinations hours later than planned and triggered a special hearing from Congress two weeks later. After eight years of fighting to create an SEIU local for the janitors of Washington, D.C., without a major breakthrough, the Justice for Janitors campaign staged a massive civil disobedience protest that shut down the Roosevelt Bridge, which connected the nation’s capital to Virginia that fall morning in 1995. This confrontation had been many years in the making.

Washington, D.C. Background

The Justice for Janitors campaign officially launched in October 1987 with the establishment of SEIU 525, the local that would work to unionize D.C. janitors and, once unionized, represent them. Prior to the launch of this campaign, janitors in the city had simply been pushing for increases in the minimum wage. Most janitors were paid the federal minimum wage of $3.35 an hour with few or no benefits. The minimum wage had remained stagnant throughout the Reagan presidency and janitors and other low-wage Washington workers urged both the D.C. City Council and Congress to pass legislation that would increase their minimum wage to boost their pay in a city where

costs were steadily rising. Their bid to raise the wage would fall flat until the federal raise to $3.80 in 1990, but by then, the Justice for Janitors campaign had begun to lift the sights of Washington janitors well above this meager wage. J4J demanded $6.50 an hour. Justice for Janitors also demanded paid sick leave, an affordable health insurance option, overtime pay, and paid holidays and vacations. An important, yet intangible demand was for “justice and fair treatment on the job” and “dignity and respect.” Through both a grievance system set by the union and a pledge by their employers to treat them with “dignity and respect,” the janitors felt that they would finally be recognized as the hard-working employees that they have always been.

**Purposefully Inclusive**

From the beginning of the campaign, Justice for Janitors made an effort to be inclusive of all of their workers. Approximately, sixty percent of D. C. janitors were women, with a large majority of them being women of color—African American and Latina. They planned actions that were in support of women specifically, such as the “Stop Sexual Harassment Now” press conference and rally that took place on March 23, 1988, within a year of the beginning of the campaign. In addition to suffering the same low pay and degrading working conditions as men, women were subject to sexual harassment or even sexual assault by their supervisors. By singling out an issue that

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141 “Our Contract Demands: This Is Why We Are Fighting For Our Union.”

142 “Our Contract Demands: This Is Why We Are Fighting For Our Union.”


144 “Stop Sexual Harassment of D.C. Janitors Now!”
women faced rather than all workers, the J4J movement was cognizant of the needs of female janitors and worked to address their woes as well as all workers.

Justice for Janitors was also aware of the issues immigrant workers, both documented and undocumented, faced while on the job. In 1993, SEIU President John Sweeney released a statement about the abuse immigrant janitorial workers faced on the job, predominantly by their supervisors. The statement pointed out that there was a pattern of immigrant janitorial workers being taken advantage of all across the country. Specifically speaking to the abuses D.C. immigrant workers face, Sweeney mentioned a case in which a company hired immigrants that were living in Texas, drove them to Washington, D.C. in order to employ them. However, the employer housed these workers in company housing with rent set at an unsustainable level, all the while paying them less than the minimum wage. Sweeney also noted that janitorial immigrant workers in Washington, D.C. systematically were denied legally obligated overtime wages and were paid in cash, so that the employer could avoid paying into the federally mandated benefit of Social Security. By acknowledging these specific injustices that immigrant workers faced, J4J was able to fully represent a population that historically has been underrepresented in the labor movement.

Justice for Janitors also was cognizant of the responsibility many workers had to their children, spouses, and broader family members in their planning of events. One

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146 Sweeney, “LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: Corporate Abuse of Immigrant Workers.”
147 Sweeney, “LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: Corporate Abuse of Immigrant Workers.”
specific event that was family-oriented was the “Easter Egg Hunt for Justice.” The event retained the political nature of J4J’s organizing by including a large phrase reading, “They have turned a deaf ear, but we shall be heard,” as well as a litany of demands as to why their working conditions should be changed—no minimum wage, no health insurance, and contractors who constantly cheat workers. The flyer also promoted the family-friendly event as an opportunity for “Food, Drink, Fun.” The pink flyer features an Easter Bunny holding a basket of eggs, as well. The event, while still political in nature and supporting the J4J movement, was inclusive of children and greater family members who wanted to celebrate the holiday.

While being an inclusive campaign, Justice for Janitors also strategized in a unique way. J4J decided to strategically focus their campaign on attacking the tax breaks the city gave to downtown developers. Like most cities, Washington gave large tax breaks, usually on property taxes, to developers to encourage them to locate and build in the city. These tax abatements often were worth millions of dollars, robbing the cities of a great sum of potential tax revenue. The city also financed many projects through tax-exempt bonds, in which the city fronted the money for a private company to develop land and repay the loan without interest. J4J framed the tax breaks that these large real estate developers received as a drain on the financial resources of all taxpayers and working people. Rather than just focus their campaign on the janitors’ issues, J4J found a

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149 “Join the Easter Egg Hunt for Justice.”
150 “Join the Easter Egg Hunt for Justice.”
151 “Join the Easter Egg Hunt for Justice.”
compelling way to find a way for all working people to connect with the campaign. One *Washington Post* article in 1988 focused on the limited budget of the Tenant Assistance Program (TAP), which gave rent subsidies to low-income families, those making 80 percent or less of the median income in D.C.\textsuperscript{153} This program had an extremely long waitlist because TAP was receiving a very limited budget from the city. J4J framed the lack of funding for TAP and other social service programs supported by the city as stemming from the many tax breaks and loans the city was giving to downtown developers. These downtown real estate developers were the same as those who were at the heart of the J4J movement, as contractors of janitorial work.\textsuperscript{154} By tying their campaign to a broader issue, J4J was able to mobilize supporters not only of wage increases and working conditions for janitors, but also citizens who cared deeply about these government programs.

**Oliver Carr: The Target of the D.C. Campaign**

Although many developers worked in downtown D.C., one of the most lucrative real estate markets in the country, one developer controlled a majority of real estate in the city in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Oliver Carr. J4J decided to target Carr because he was the largest anti-union property owner in the city.\textsuperscript{155} In 1994, the national organizing director of Justice for Janitors, Bill Ragen, stated that they were targeting Carr because “We try to pick our targets so they’ll have the most resonance.”\textsuperscript{156} Carr was the target

\textsuperscript{153} Lynch, “There’s Plenty Of Money for TAP Without New Taxes.”
\textsuperscript{154} Lynch, “There’s Plenty Of Money for TAP Without New Taxes.”
\textsuperscript{155} Lerner in discussion with the author, May 2017.
that would carry the most resonance because he owned such a great deal of downtown real estate, and so Justice for Janitors made Carr the target of a public relations assault. J4J paid for a full-page ad in the New York Times on July 21, 1994 assailing both Carr for not paying his fair share in taxes, and the city for giving him the tax break that shrank its budget.157

Often using the slogan, “D.C. Is Having Carr Trouble,” Justice for Janitors launched a full-scale attack against Oliver Carr at both his home and his business.158 J4J regularly planned marches and pickets outside of Carr’s buildings.159 J4J members picketed outside Carr’s home shouting “We’ll be back!”, referencing that they would not relent in their protests until Carr agreed to their campaign’s conditions and started to pay his fair share of taxes.160 J4J regularly planned marches and pickets outside of Carr’s buildings.161

Local Government On Their Side: Mostly Favorable Rulings for Justice for Janitors

Government rulings were supportive of Justice for Janitors’ efforts to organize at the beginning of the campaign. One instance is when J4J organizers were banned from entering downtown buildings where they were trying to unionize workers. Building managers throughout the city would not allow them to enter their buildings because they knew the organizers’ intent was to get their employees involved in the J4J movement. On December 9, 1989, Superior Court Judge Henry H. Kennedy ruled that the Apartment and

158 Kaplan, “The Union versus Oliver Carr.”
159 Kaplan, “The Union versus Oliver Carr.”
161 Kaplan, “The Union versus Oliver Carr.”
Office Building Association, the umbrella group whose building managers refused J4J organizers access belonged to, had violated D.C.’s Human Rights Act. The Human Rights Act bans anyone from discriminating against another person based on his or her “source of income or place of business.”162 Because the building owners were refusing entrance solely to Justice for Janitors organizers, they were discriminating against this group because of their employer, the SEIU. Justice for Janitors viewed this ruling as a big win, “certainly an arrow in our quiver in our efforts to make the real estate industry more accountable to the working poor in the District,” as SEIU attorney Reuben A Guttman remarked shortly after the announcement.163 With this ruling, organizers were able to enter buildings and distribute informative pamphlets to employees as well as engage in conversations with them during their work breaks, allowing them to further build their movement.

That same ruling would benefit Justice for Janitors on May 25, 1993. The Apartment and Office Building Association (AOBA), which had violated the D.C. Human Rights Act four years earlier, again refused J4J organizers entrance into their buildings because of their association with Justice for Janitors.164 This same refusal again violated the Act, and the AOBA agreed to pay J4J a settlement of $105,000 rather than go through another court procedure for violating Human Rights Act.165 SEIU viewed this instance as a win for J4J because it was “a classic example of the little people against the

163 Twomey, “Janitors Win Rights Ruling: Building Association Violated D.C. Act.”
165 Cooper, “Building Owners, Janitors Union Settle: Trade Group Agrees to Pay Activists $105,000 Over Ban From Offices.”
big people and we feel vindicated,” as Jay Hessey, the executive director of the J4J Local
525.  

Other rulings, however, restricted the ability of Justice for Janitors to organize. J4J was able to get an initiative on the D.C. ballot, called Initiative 35, which would have made the city’s tax appeals public while deals were being brokered between the recipient company and the city government. However, the city government removed this initiative from the ballot on procedural grounds following a legal challenge by the Apartment and Office Building Association, which represented the District’s real estate developers.

The Precipice of the D.C. Campaign

The Justice for Janitors began to escalate in their campaign tactics. J4J planned March 18-24 of 1995 as a week of action, deemed Save Our City. Each day that week featured some sort of planned action relating to the J4J campaign. D.C. police arrested more than two hundred protestors at protests on Monday and Tuesday. On Tuesday, March 21, a protest was an organized march to the AFL-CIO. On Wednesday the 22nd, almost 500 people marched to the Freedom Plaza. Finally, on Friday J4J members

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166 Cooper, “Building Owners, Janitors Union Settle: Trade Group Agrees to Pay Activists $105,000 Over Ban From Offices.”
167 Kaplan, “The Union versus Oliver Carr.”
168 Kaplan, “The Union versus Oliver Carr.”
171 Constable, “Janitors Union Expands Its Campaign: Rally for Office Crews Mushrooms Into Highly Visible Crusade Against D.C. Program Cuts.”
closed down the 14th Street Bridge during morning rush hour traffic.\textsuperscript{172} Approximately 250 members participated in effectively shutting down the bridge, which impacted tens of thousands of commuters.\textsuperscript{173}

Another action on the same day was less publicly disruptive. SEIU research analyst Manny Pastreich spoke before the D.C. City Council to deliver his testimony entitled “Saving Our City by Cutting Corporate Welfare”.\textsuperscript{174} Mr. Pastreich explained J4J’s stance against tax abatements and low-to-no interest bonds, and substantiated his claims with concrete data.\textsuperscript{175} The week combined public protest action that grabbed newspaper headlines and the attention of many drivers Friday morning, while also substantiating those protests with the traditional appeal to the government through a City Council meeting. The mix of these tactics allowed J4J to both gain the attention of the public and the local government.

Later that year, Justice for Janitors intensified their tactics in another week of planned action from September 18 to September 22, deemed \textit{The Days of Rage}. Oliver Carr, again, was at the center of many of these actions.\textsuperscript{176} The week’s most notable action occurred on September 20\textsuperscript{th} with the blocking of the Roosevelt Bridge. At 8:00 a.m., Justice for Janitors members blocked the bridge by parking a school bus across the


\textsuperscript{173}Castaneda, “Union Protest on 14th Street Bridge Brings Morning Traffic to Standstill.”


\textsuperscript{175}Pastreich, “Saving Our City By Cutting Corporate Welfare.”

eastbound lanes from Virginia going into the city. Protestors set desks, chairs, and blackboards in front of the bus to stage a classroom. The J4J protestors were invoking these elementary school-related images to highlight the lost revenue for public schools because of the tax breaks the city granted to downtown developers, notably Carr.

Understandably, J4J’s tactics enraged many commuters with over 100,000 drivers prevented from getting to their destination on time. In one letter to the editor, Clare O’Donnell from Fredrick, Maryland voiced her concern about the “physicians, nurses, expectant mothers, and sick children” who may have been on their way to the hospital and other populations that were affected by the closure of the main highway going into the city. The spokesperson for AAA called J4J’s actions as “transportation terrorism” and warned that J4J was increasingly using this tactic of shutting down major roadways in order to protest. Congress held a special session weeks later, on October 6, 1995, condemning the closure of the bridge. Representative Thomas M. Davis, a Republican Congressman representing a district in Northern Virginia, urged D.C. officials to increase the penalties associated with blocking major roadways, in response to the J4J protests that have affected Virginia commuters into D.C.

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Victory! (Finally)

More than a decade after it began, the Justice for Janitors campaign in Washington, D.C. won what it had worked so diligently for, a master contract. Following the blocking of the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge, On June 22, 1998, the SEIU Local 82 signed a contract with a group of cleaning companies.\(^3\) The agreement was with companies that together cleaned 70 percent of D.C.’s downtown commercial office buildings. This agreement encompassed approximately 4,000 janitors by 1999. In 1997, the J4J protests officially ended, a year prior to the signing of the contract in what companies credited for their ability to negotiate with SEIU to come to an agreement.\(^4\)

The agreement included a $6.50 hourly wage that would rise to $8.50 within a five-year period. The contract also included health care, retirement funds, and a fund to help mostly immigrant workers learn other skills that would allow them to move to higher paying jobs.\(^5\)

D.C.’s Justice for Janitors campaign was a success in that it unionized most janitorial staff in the city. The campaign went on for over a decade and underwent brutal scrutiny for taking controversial actions such as blocking necessary bridges during the busiest times of the day. However, a vulnerable segment of the working poor was able to gain tangible benefits as a direct result of this campaign. Workers who once worked for less than $4 an hour and underwent abuses on the job that were ignored now had a more substantial wage of $8.50 (by the end of their first contract) and had a grievance system.

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\(^{184}\) Swoboda and Haggerty, “Janitors Approve Contract: Agreement Ends Lengthy Conflict.”

\(^{185}\) Swoboda and Haggerty, “Janitors Approve Contract: Agreement Ends Lengthy Conflict.”
in place that could address concerns they had while on the job. The Justice for Janitors campaign waged a hard-fought campaign that resulted in a not-so-swift cleanup of working conditions.
Chapter 3: Why Atlanta Fell Short and D.C. Eventually Succeeded

As concluded in chapters one and two in this work, the D.C. campaign resulted in the successful signing of a master contract and a union for the janitors with the SEIU, while the Atlanta campaign achieved neither. It is important to understand which factors led to the desired outcome in D.C. and a less-than desired outcome in Atlanta. This chapter explores why these two campaigns had such different results. Although there are a multitude of minor distinctions between the J4J offensives in Atlanta and D.C., the crucial divergences that led to the success in one and not in the other hinges on the actors involved in each, as well as the structure of the campaigns as a whole. The Justice for Janitors activists, the local governments, and corporate targets and the interactions between all three of these actors ultimately led to the different outcomes in each campaign. The projected timeline for each of these campaigns is also a major crucial difference. Indeed, it was arguably the most impactful difference, with the shortened timeline of the Atlanta campaign compromising its chance of success. The interaction among activists, the local government and corporate targets will first be examined as each of these factors played a role in each campaign, largely harming the campaign in Atlanta and sustaining the J4J campaign in D.C.

The Activists

The populations of activists that made up the Atlanta and D.C. campaigns were different in both their history with the labor movement and attitude toward militant tactics. The Atlanta janitors involved in J4J were overwhelmingly African-American.
These workers were much less militant and more reserved in their actions during the time of the Atlanta J4J campaign. Many African-Americans in Atlanta were very cognizant of the repercussions that come from pushing back against both the government and corporations, especially the likelihood that they would lose their jobs and not easily find a replacement in income. On the other hand, the janitors and activists in the J4J movement in Washington, D.C. were racially diverse, including a few white, more African-American, and an even greater number of Hispanic workers, with the largest contingent of janitors involved in J4J being immigrants from Central American countries. The SEIU failed to incorporate black workers into their D.C. J4J campaign, but were very successful in utilizing ambitious Hispanic janitors to fight, and eventually win, a master contract.

Atlanta Racial Demographics and History

Janitors in the J4J Atlanta campaign were mostly African-American workers who had worked in the janitorial sector for decades. African Americans in the South have long-rooted history of oppression from employers as workers and the racist white contingent as black Americans. These janitors and activists were fully aware of the precariousness of their employment with many janitors being very apprehensive to the idea of organizing, because they knew they likely would be fired and replaced once they decided to organize.

One instance in which worker apprehension halted workers from taking action that might risk their stable employment in order to unionize came in the only actual union election that was held in Atlanta. In February of 1990, SEIU organizers called every Southern Services Inc. employee, and also went to their homes if they did not answer
their phones, in order to convince these workers to vote “yes” to unionize with SEIU. One organizer remarked on February 10, six days before the election, that there were “so many layers to cut through, years and years”\(^{186}\) of repression of workers and their ability to organize without fear. These workers were frightened to vote in the union election in their workplace because they thought there would be some repercussion taken toward them, despite the fact that union elections are done through secret ballots and it is illegal for employers to fire a worker for supporting a union.\(^{187}\) Workers did not simply conjure up the idea that they might be fired for organizing, they were told by their supervisors that if they even go to vote, whether it be yes or no, there would be some sort of retaliation against them.\(^{188}\) This explicit use of threats of losing a job, especially for workers who relied on this source of income to support their families, was very effective in deterring janitors from being militant in their union tactics and organizing with the union to the point that they might be fired.

**D.C. Racial Demographics and History**

In contrast, the J4J campaign in Washington, D.C. thrived from the power Latinx immigrants brought to organizing.\(^{189}\) These Latinx immigrants were often from the war-

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\(^{186}\) SEIU Justice for Janitors DVD “#10,” February 10, 1990, SEIU Public Relations Record Box 4, Walter Reuther Library of Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

\(^{187}\) It is important to note that oftentimes workers are still fired for supporting unions, but are fired for other cited reasons. One modern day example is that of 16 Walmart employees who were fired after they protested. Hadley Malcolm, “Judge rules Walmart unlawfully fired workers on strike,” *USA Today*, January 22, 2016, accessed April 16, 2017, [https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2016/01/22/judge-rules-walmart-unlawfully-fired-workers-on-strike/79160730/](https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2016/01/22/judge-rules-walmart-unlawfully-fired-workers-on-strike/79160730/).

\(^{188}\) SEIU Justice for Janitors DVD “#10,” February 10, 1990, SEIU Public Relations Record Box 4, Walter Reuther Library of Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

\(^{189}\) This argument of immigrant laborers being a strong source of resistance and building the labor movement was also put forth in many pieces that have been written about why the Los Angeles Justice for Janitors campaign was a success. Ruth Milkman, *L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement.*
torn regions of El Salvador and Guatemala, with many fleeing rampant violence and enormous hardship. These immigrants were undaunted in their willingness to take action, from striking to blocking bridges. As one Justice for Janitors organizer, Zoila Reyes, remarked, “We have to throw ourselves into the battle to win, because if we don’t throw ourselves into it, [if] we don’t give it our all, we won’t win anything.”

Reyes, who came from El Salvador to the United States in 1977, and other immigrants put their whole selves into the Justice for Janitors campaign, even risking their own freedom and well-being at times. Reyes recalled that she was willing to go to jail for the cause, and had been arrested a number of times as a result of the more militant Justice for Janitors campaign.

However, there were obstacles to becoming heavily involved in militant action for some immigrants. Reyes noted not every immigrant was willing to put themselves at risk, especially those who were undocumented. As she said, “now the illegals…it isn’t worth it for them to go home [to their country of origin] just for being involved in [Justice for Janitors].” Legal immigrants, like Zoila Reyes, were the most combative and in a position to be the strongest advocates for the Justice for Janitors movement and helped aid in that effort to push for greater rights in their new country. Those who were unable to speak English also were a bit more difficult for Justice for Janitors to organize because of the language barrier. However, the SEIU hired more Spanish-speaking organizers to

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192 Zoila Reyes, interview by Seth Newton Patel, Zoila Reyes (Civil Disobedience).
communicate with immigrant janitors, and this possible barrier was not too detrimental to the campaign.\textsuperscript{193}

The African-American population in D.C., however, was not purposefully incorporated into the J4J effort. The J4J campaign was focused largely on rebuilding unionization in the existing janitorial industry made up of largely Latinx workers, rather than being concerned with workers that had been jettisoned from the previously unionized janitorial industry, which was African-American workers.\textsuperscript{194} Black janitorial workers made up a majority of janitors in D.C. decades before the J4J movement, and before the influx of Latinx immigrants who came into the city mostly in the 1980s. Latinx filled non-unionized janitor jobs that were being converted from unionized positions that black workers once held.\textsuperscript{195} Black janitors were pushed out of the industry in the 1980s during the period in which the janitorial industry shifted from direct employment to contracting.\textsuperscript{196} However, it is still important to note that there were still African Americans who remained in the janitorial industry; it was just in much lower numbers than was the case prior to the wave of immigration that came into D.C. in the 1980s. Justice for Janitors kept separate the existing black workers from new organizing efforts of the largely Latinx population. SEIU separated the existing SEIU unionized janitors in D.C. in SEIU Local 82, who were mostly black janitors, and the new organizing effort that was represented with the new SEIU Local 525. Many of the black


\textsuperscript{194} Bill Fletcher, Jr. (former SEIU Educational Services) in discussion with the author, May 2017.


\textsuperscript{196} Bill Ragen, interview by Claire Tilton and Patrick Dixon, \textit{Bill Ragen (Part 2)}. 
Janitors that were part of Local 82 were resentful of the time and effort that SEIU was putting into Local 525, that was specifically for organizing new janitors rather than supporting and trying to expand Local 82. As Bill Fletcher Jr., who was a SEIU organizer at the time, noted that African-American janitors felt that they were “chopped liver” and felt that there was not any organizing effort to build on their power as unionized janitors or gain back many of the jobs that African Americans had lost in the past decade and more de-unionization and Latinxs taking these non-union janitorial positions.

There was a palpable tension between Latinx immigrants and African Americans in Washington, D.C, beyond the janitorial industry as well. This tension erupted in violence during the 1991 Mount Pleasant riots when a rookie black female officer shot a man of Salvadorian descent. There are differing accounts as to why the officer shot the man who was in police custody, with the officer claiming he lunged at her with a knife while he was uncuffed to the Latinx community arguing that he was handcuffed at the time, so he could not have presented any danger to the officer. Regardless of the actual circumstances, a riot broke out in the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood in Northwest D.C. with people setting cars on fire, looting stores, and throwing Molotov cocktails. The neighborhood was wrecked in three days with over $2 million in damage to the city and private property along with 12 injured police officers and arrests of 225 people. The riot

198 Bill Fletcher, Jr., interview by Jennifer Luff and Jesslyn Cheong, Bill Fletcher, Jr.
was one cataclysmic event in which racial tensions were evident between African Americans and Latinxs.²⁰⁰

Although this racial tension may explain SEIU’s motivation for not organizing African American and Latinx workers collectively, it still does not excuse the neglect SEIU had in organizing the African American population as a whole. Fletcher remarked with hindsight that there were many opportunities in which SEIU could have reached out to the African American community, and engaged them about the best way to return many janitors to their previous positions that were filled by immigrants once they became non-union. He stated in an interview in 2013 that they could have placed certain demands about the number of black workers that would be hired by the janitorial workforce, which is what other unions have done in the past.²⁰¹ There was also the potential for SEIU to carry out educational campaigns with existing unionized African American janitors to fully explain the purpose of focusing on trying to unionize Latinx immigrant workers to benefit all janitors working in the industry, but there was no such campaign carried out among the already unionized African-American janitors.²⁰²

The Local Government

Atlanta’s local government came out in support of the Justice for Janitors movement at first. However, as the labor campaign grew increasingly inconvenient for the city to support, the Atlanta government withdrew their support of Justice for Janitors, and even took actions that inhibited their progress. In a much different dynamic, the D.C. local government did not publicly oppose the Justice for Janitors campaign at any point.

²⁰⁰ Newsweek Staff, “Minority Against Minority.”
²⁰¹ Bill Fletcher, Jr., interview by Jennifer Luff and Jesslyn Cheong, Bill Fletcher, Jr.
²⁰² Bill Fletcher (former SEIU Educational Services) in discussion with the author, May 2017.
On the other hand, the mayoral office often worked alongside many of the real estate developers that J4J targeted, which acted counter to their J4J’s interests. However, Justice for Janitors did receive support from the D.C. city council as well as Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton throughout the decade that the SEIU campaign was going on in Washington. The D.C. local government did not stand in the way of J4J organizing in the same manner that Atlanta’s government, which had once been an ally to the movement, then created obstacles for the campaign in the Southern city.

*Atlanta’s Mayor and Congressional Representative*

The mayor during the Atlanta J4J campaign was Andrew Young. Young was a minister, leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) with the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., Congressional representative for two terms, and U.S. ambassador to the United Nations under President Jimmy Carter prior to his mayoral terms from 1982 to 1990. Andrew Young was a measured Democrat who valued his political career deeply and even had an unsuccessful run for Governor of Georgia in 1990. Young had a close relationship with the real estate developers in downtown Atlanta. His predecessor, Mayor Maynard Jackson, who was also Atlanta’s first black mayor, had a strained relationship with the business community in Atlanta because he disrupted the white elite-level cooperation between the white business developers and the white-controlled local government. Young wanted to reconcile the relationship between business and the local government; he even held a ‘peace-making’ luncheon with business leaders in the community and told them all that he knew that even though

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they did not support his mayoral campaign, “I can’t govern without you.” Young was focused on developing the downtown area and creating an environment that could be a corporate hub, possibly the hub for the businesses of the third world. He felt that it was his duty to build the city because it “has no character…we’re building the city’s character now.” This allegiance that Young had to redeveloping downtown oriented him to oppose J4J’s antagonism of downtown developers, especially their targeting of John Portman, who was the most prominent of the real estate owners.

At the beginning of the Atlanta J4J campaign, Young sent a representative from his office to give the organizers his best wishes in their campaign at their Founding Convention on December 12, 1987. He was encouraging of their goals as a whole, but slowly began to move away from supporting J4J when he realized that their campaign would interrupt the 1988 Democratic National Convention at which Young, as mayor of the city, was at the center. He held negotiations in his home in the weeks leading up to the DNC between Portman’s representatives and SEIU organizers, but these talks led nowhere. Young was integral in J4J losing momentum with their protests during the week of the DNC because he assured them that Portman would bargain, along with DNC Chairman Kirk and AFL-CIO President Kirkland. Young never publicly supported any other J4J actions following the 1988 DNC but continued to work with Portman and other developers to redevelop the city and build its ‘character.’

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208 DVD “#02,” December 1987, SEIU Public Relations Record Box 4, Walter Reuther Library of Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.
209 Galloway, “Young Opens House, Office to Union, Builder - Mayor Trying to Avert Picketing of Convention.”
210 Roughton, “DECISION ’88 - Janitors Shelve Plans for Demonstrations.”
Congressman John Lewis, who was a famed SNCC organizer during the Civil Rights Movement, was a once-strong ally of Justice for Janitors in Atlanta who also moved away from his support of the union effort. Congressman Lewis pledged his support of the Justice for Janitors movement in Atlanta early on, on November 21, 1987, where he encouraged them to carry on organizing despite an injunction that prevented them from protesting loudly and gathering near Portman’s Peachtree Center where that day’s action was planned to target. Congressman Lewis, however, publicly shirked his support of J4J during the most pivotal point in their campaign, the 1988 Democratic National Convention. He crossed the picket line, a reprehensible act for any union supporter, outside of a brunch hosted for members of Congress, reporters, and delegates inside Portman’s Apparel Mart building. Congressman Lewis chose to forego his earlier pledge of support to the J4J movement in order to have lunch with his fellow Congressional members and DNC delegates. Following this exhibition of disloyalty, Congressman Lewis did not publicly support the Atlanta J4J campaign in their efforts to unionize. Both Congressman Lewis and Mayor Young came out in strong support of the J4J campaign in Atlanta, but once the movement inconvenienced them, they withdrew their support from the movement.

D.C.’s Mayor and Congressional Representative

The two mayors during the almost ten-year period of the Justice for Janitors campaign in Washington, D.C., Marion Barry and Sharon Pratt Kelly, were not expressly opposed to J4J’s organizing of janitors, but did take actions that were often counter to Justice for Janitors’ goals. Marion Barry was the mayor of D.C. when J4J began in 1987, ended his third term in 1991, and was mayor again for his fourth term for the last few
years of the campaign in 1995 until the end of J4J’s actions in D.C. in 1998.211 Sharon Pratt Kelly was mayor from 1991-1995, between Barry’s third and fourth term, and during the most active years of the J4J campaign in D.C.

Barry was a radical civil rights leader turned mayor of D.C. who left a mixed legacy of corruption while also fighting for many of the black working people of the city.212 At the beginning of the Justice for Janitors campaign in D.C., Barry did not make any public announcement in support or against the J4J movement. He did, however, work closely with the targets of the J4J campaign, the downtown real estate developers. Barry supported the selling of Gallery Place Metro stop, prime real estate territory, at an exceptionally low price to Oliver Carr. J4J publicly opposed this measure, arguing that Carr and other developers were not paying their fair share for the property and would forego too many taxes in exchange for developing and profiting from the land.213 Barry never supported the J4J movement openly, but did work to support their opponents through making deals with developers who were at the center of J4J’s campaign, especially Oliver Carr. These real estate developers, including Carr, were known contributors to Barry’s political campaigns, and so Barry did have an allegiance to them during his third and fourth mayoral terms, in the midst of J4J’s campaigns.214

Sharon Pratt Kelly, who served as D.C.’s mayor from 1991 to 1995, had a very different background from Marion Barry. Kelly was a lawyer by trade but also had

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211 Marion Barry was arrested on drug charges and dropped out of the mayoral race in 1990, opening the door to Kelly’s election in 1991.
worked closely with business, including holding various senior roles with the large electric company, Pepco.\(^{215}\) Kelly, similarly to Barry, also worked closely with real estate developers and was focused on creating “an environment that attracts investment and growth.”\(^{216}\) Kelly maintained that she supported the ability for workers to bargain with their employers, including through non-traditional labor campaigns like the Justice for Janitors campaign.\(^{217}\) However, as mayor, she did propose an action that limited the ability of workers to demonstrate against their employers. Kelly, in 1994, introduced an amendment to an existing law about noise violations to prohibit musical instruments, vehicle loudspeakers, and sound amplification, which are all useful ways for protestors or strikers to voice their opinions. This proposal was directed at unions, specifically at limiting the actions of Justice for Janitors and the hotel workers, which were also on strike at that time.\(^{218}\) Kelly never came out publicly with any support for J4J, and similarly to Barry, she worked closely with J4J’s targets, the downtown real estate developers. Although Kelly did try to limit some of the tactics that J4J used in restricting their right to make noise outside of office buildings, she did not oppose them beyond this one restriction. Mayors Barry and Kelly never allied with J4J, so the Justice for Janitors campaign never expected any strong support from them, especially since it was known that both candidates were working closely with the downtown real estate developers.

\(^{217}\)Sharon Pratt Kelly, interview by Patrick Dixon, Sharon Pratt.
Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton, unlike the D.C. mayors during the J4J campaign, was an advocate of J4J’s work and even defended them at an inconvenient time for her politically. Congresswoman Norton was a former Civil Rights activist with the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and lawyer who specialized in freedom of speech cases prior to her career as the Congressional delegate for D.C. from 1991 to the current year.\(^\text{219}\) Congresswoman Norton did not always agree with the tactics that J4J used, including their blocking of 14th Street and Theodore Roosevelt Bridges, but “believe[d] profoundly in its mission.”\(^\text{220}\) She considered many of the organizers her “friends” and had many conversations with them about their campaign.\(^\text{221}\) In an interview many years later, she concluded that the work J4J did in D.C. was “quite extraordinary” and was the “most skillful job of organizing that I had ever seen.”\(^\text{222}\) Congresswoman Norton was an ally of J4J through their years in organizing and also defended them at the Congressional hearing about Justice for Janitors’s blocking Theodore Roosevelt Bridge, even though she personally opposed the campaign’s use of this tactic.

The Corporate

The Corporate Structure

Atlanta was actively trying to sell their city as a hub for corporations, both domestically and internationally. The 1980s was a period of concerted redevelopment in downtown Atlanta to retain large corporations such as Delta, CNN, Coca-Cola, Georgia-

Pacific, among others and also to become the U.S. hub for companies from the third world.\textsuperscript{223} The city leadership was focused on being able to look attractive to corporate players in its effort to grow economically. City heads saw protests over the janitors’ working conditions as a threat to this vision.

The District of Columbia, contrastingly, houses the U.S. federal government, and due to this fact, naturally attracts lobbyists, non-profit groups, and international organizations. D.C. has an inherent importance because it is the national capital and always has a flourishing real estate market due to this importance. During the J4J campaign, the city’s government leaders were not afraid that real estate developers would no longer be involved in locating in downtown D.C. Because of the uniqueness of Washington, D.C., Justice for Janitors could push a lot in their tactics, even shutting down bridges two separate times. Additionally, the mayors did take active measures to encourage development, but did not fear that these developers would lose interest in working in the city.

The Corporate Targets

Justice for Janitors in both Atlanta and D.C. focused on one specific individual in each campaign. John Portman, Jr. was a very prominent architect and developer in Atlanta. Portman designed and his company built many prominent buildings in downtown Atlanta.\textsuperscript{224} He was known not only for nearly singlehandedly shaping the Atlanta downtown skyline, but also as a supporter of the Civil Rights Movement and friend of Martin Luther and Coretta Scott King. Portman was the target of the J4J

\textsuperscript{223} Stone, \textit{Regime Politics}, 110.

campaign, but due to his strong alliances within the Democratic Party, he was able to sustain the public relations assault against him during the week of the Democratic National Convention in 1988. Mayor Young, Congressman Lewis, most DNC delegates, and other Democratic officials attended his events during the week and did not stand with the janitors assailing him.

In D.C., J4J concentrated most of their efforts against Oliver T. Carr Jr., a powerful real estate developer of the city. Carr created his own real estate company and began operating in D.C. in the 1960s as a real estate developer. Carr was the first developer to propose redevelopment of areas that were affected by the riots following Martin Luther King’s assassination and worked from that point to undertake many big projects. Carr, despite the power of his real estate company in D.C., was not well known by the general population. When Justice for Janitors targeted Oliver Carr in their campaign, there was no strong positive perception of him to overcome. J4J’s portrayal of Carr as a developer who failed to pay his fair share of taxes, especially at a time when the D.C. budget was extremely stretched thin, was not difficult to turn public opinion against him and in support of J4J measures. By voter referendum, the D.C. population decided to pass an initiative that raised the taxes for real estate developers

228 There were multiple editorials written in favor of J4J and/or against Oliver Carr. One of the many include: Tyler, “Oliver T. Carr, Jr.”
downtown, a public sign that a majority of voters supported the same goals that J4J had in raising the tax rate against Carr and other developers.\(^{229}\) Portman was not an easy man to villainize and the J4J campaign was not able to successfully build a public relations campaign against him as they were able to with Carr in D.C.

**A Time Stamp on Atlanta, Was it Defeated Before it Began?**

Despite all of these many differences in the actors—the activists, the local government, and the corporate—that weakened the Atlanta J4J campaign and overwhelmingly strengthened the D.C. campaign, there is one distinction that had the most impact of all. The most prominent difference between the Atlanta and D.C. campaigns was the structure and timeline of the campaign itself. The D.C. campaign did not have a built-in timeline of their campaign. When the D.C. campaign began in 1988, it had no deadline to achieve its goal of gaining a master contract and a union. The campaign, which lasted almost ten years, was able to work slowly toward its goal and build on the momentum slowly over time, rather than using a single event as a catalyst, the campaign in Atlanta tried to do with the DNC. Because the D.C. Justice for Janitors campaign did not have a built-in deadline to the structure of the campaign, it was able to work through many obstacles and achieve its goal in the end.

The Atlanta campaign began in 1987, but from the beginning, the campaign’s focus was on July 1988. Justice for Janitors had launched only one campaign before it came to Atlanta, in Denver where it had been able to win a master contract and a union. The Justice for Janitors campaign chose Atlanta as the second city to launch its

nationwide campaign with a focus on one specific event that would help the janitors win a master contract and a union, the Democratic National Convention. The campaign began to mobilize activists in Atlanta not even an entire year before the DNC. Events from that point until July 1988 were focused on building support for a hoped-for breakthrough during the week of the DNC.

The concentration of the J4J campaign on this one week of action tied the success of the Atlanta campaign to the success of pressuring key politicians and companies during the one week of the DNC. Unfortunately, this week did not yield the expected results that Justice for Janitors had sought. DNC high-ranking officials, such as DNC president Paul Kirk, refused to endorse the Justice for Janitors campaign and speak out against the target of the Atlanta campaign, Democratic supporter John Portman. Despite their being a record number of union members as delegates for the DNC, these delegates largely avoided conflict with DNC officials and also did not support the J4J campaign. Political allies of the campaign, specifically Congressman John Lewis, who publicly endorsed Justice for Janitors, chose to cross the picket line made up of janitors outside of a DNC event that was sponsored by John Portman. The local and national support J4J expected during the week of the DNC in Atlanta never came to fruition, and in turn, neither did the success of the overall campaign.

The Atlanta J4J campaign hinged its success on making a breakthrough during the DNC; after its failure to garner support during the DNC, the campaign faltered. Although there were a few actions after July 1988 and labor organizers continued to try to garner support from the Atlanta community, the momentum of the movement fizzled out after the DNC. Following that week in mid-July 1988, the catalyst for pressuring top
politicians and Portman was removed and the campaign began to slow down until its official demise in early 1990.
Conclusion

The Atlanta J4J campaign that began in March 1987 came to an unfortunate end in February 1990 after failing to gain a master contract or even unionize a single contracting company. The D.C. Justice for Janitors campaign was launched seven months after the Atlanta campaign began, in October 1987 and did not officially conclude until over a decade later in June 1998 when the janitors at SEIU Local 82 won a master contract with a sound majority of downtown business owners. The two campaigns were compared in depth in the previous chapter in order to show which factors played the most impactful roles in the ultimate failure of the Atlanta campaign and the success of the D.C. campaign. The activists, local government, and corporate structures and targets in each campaign influenced the unwanted result for SEIU organizers in Atlanta and the intended outcome for J4J in D.C..

The most significant factor in the D.C. campaign that bolstered its ability for success and detracted Atlanta’s ability to win was the time limit imposed on Atlanta from the beginning. The D.C. campaign was always in the national spotlight due to its location in the nation’s capital and because of this, always had the direct support of the international that was nearby. The steady ability to win over time fed the campaign until it was able to finally win a master contract with all of the janitorial contracting firms. The Atlanta campaign, however, never was able to have any small victories. The most prescient moment for that campaign was in July 1988 during the Democratic National Convention where the union was not able to maintain the support of once strong allies, and lost out on a moment that could have spurred the campaign along to ultimate success.
Following the loss of momentum in July 1988, the Atlanta campaign failed to achieve a master contract with janitorial contracting firms in the downtown area, and eventually pulled out of the South when they were unable to successfully unionize with even one janitorial contracting firm.

This thesis is the first step in properly analyzing these two Justice for Janitors campaigns. No study before this has documented the events in Atlanta and D.C. and this thesis achieves chronicling those narratives. A historical analysis at the level of a thesis, unfortunately, can only achieve so much because of the limited time afforded to the author to complete the project and scope that a piece of this length can cover. Future scholars should use this work as a basis for studying these two J4J campaigns as well as others in much greater depth in a longer format, such as a dissertation or book.

This work also analyzes which factors aided and detracted from the overall success, or lack thereof, of the Atlanta and D.C. J4J efforts to re-organize janitors. By analyzing the elements of these campaigns that benefited and harmed them, the thesis also contributes to the larger understanding of current labor campaigns. Justice for Janitors is an organizing model that differs tremendously from the traditional labor model because they were focusing on master contracts among contracting firms and establishing a base wage for the entire market, in this case the janitorial market. Their tactics were unconventional from traditional methods of striking and boycotting; their campaigns became mass public relations campaigns that worked to sway overall public opinion through drastic actions such as blocking bridges to creative measures such as dressing up as raisins on a hot summer day to ‘raise hell.’
There are many lessons that can be derived from the study of the Justice for Janitors campaigns in Atlanta and D.C. As discussed earlier, the most pertinent differences between the two campaigns were in the manners in which their activists, local governments, and corporations interacted with one another. Organizers of social movement campaigns now, especially those organizing workers, should take the following into consideration.

First, labor organizers need to make certain that they understand the issues that are most important to workers and are truly being inclusive of all workers. The Atlanta J4J campaign illuminated the important lesson that many labor organizers now know, but is still crucial to labor organizing for the future. Many janitors were very hesitant and fearful of losing their jobs if they chose to be involved in union activities or even vote in a union election. Workers, especially in precarious jobs such as low-wage, part-time positions like a janitor, are often very dependent on these jobs as a vital portion of their overall income and can be more hesitant to pressure their employer for better working conditions. In the Atlanta J4J campaign, there were many janitors that were both fearful and hesitant to become involved in the union, and played a role in why the campaign was not successful there. Organizers in the future should seek ways to empower workers to defy their fear of possibly losing their jobs through unionization and stand for higher wages and other benefits. This undertaking will be difficult, and has proven a complicated practice to enact especially with low-wage workers, but it can be done, as it was with J4J campaigns in other cities including Washington, D.C.

In the D.C. J4J campaign, there was a lot of tension between the Latinx and African American janitors. By having two separate SEIU Locals for the janitors, Local 82 which was made up of existing unionized workers who were mostly black and the new organizing local, Local 525, which for janitors that were working to be unionized who were largely Hispanic, exacerbated the tension that already existed between these two communities in the city. Future organizers of campaigns like these should consider having an open dialogue among workers who may be divided for whatever reason so that they can truly get to know one another and their common goal, so they can build solidarity rather than animosity.231

Next, leaders of labor campaigns must make sure that their work can be successful without the support and advocacy of powerful public figures in their communities. The D.C. campaign was successful despite no aid from Mayors Barry and Kelly and a low level of support from Congresswoman Norton. The Atlanta J4J campaign, on the other hand, was bolstered at its beginning in March 1987 by the public support of Mayor Young and Congressman Lewis. However, both Young and Lewis failed to support J4J during the midst of the Democratic National Convention in 1988, an important moment for the campaign. Future organizers should ensure that their campaigns are not too reliant on public figures. Although it is beneficial to any labor campaign to have the endorsement of respected public officials and community leaders,

231 Bill Fletcher mentioned in a conversation that I had with him that he wished SEIU would have putting forth a more concerted effort to educate the already unionized workers, mostly black workers, about the benefits to them from working to unionize other janitors, in this case largely Latinx workers. He said that he thought it would have made for a more unified movement and less tension between the two groups. Bill Fletcher (former SEIU Educational Services) in discussion with the author, May 2017.
they should try to avoid these officials being major drivers of their campaign, especially at crucial moments for them.

Labor campaigns that are geared toward one figure, as the J4J campaigns often were, they should launch a public relations attack only on corporate targets that they are equipped to fight. Atlanta’s J4J campaign targeted John Portman who was a developer who almost singlehandedly shaped the Atlanta skyline and was a known Civil Rights advocate. Portman was well connected to mainstream pro-Civil Rights Democrats who were the political establishment. They helped Portman maintain a credible public image despite the J4J campaign that sought to disparage him. The D.C. J4J campaign, on the other hand, was able to successfully besiege Oliver Carr by utilizing public anger over the low tax rate that Carr and other developers were paying. Labor organizers who want to initiate a public relations offensive against a lofty public figure should only target those who they have strong weapons to fight.

The last lesson to draw from this thesis that studied the Atlanta and D.C. Justice for Janitors campaigns is that labor campaigns should avoid structuring their campaign around one monumental event and attempt to preserve the campaign for as long as possible. The Atlanta campaign lost a lot of momentum following their inability to gain ground during the Democratic National Convention. On the other hand, the D.C. campaign had a strong level of support due to both incremental success throughout the years as well as being close to the SEIU International. Labor organizers going forward should make sure that a campaign is able to be supported structurally for as long as possible in achieving their goals.
The new manner in which J4J approached organizing has influenced many new campaigns, so it is an extremely important topic for labor organizers to evaluate what worked and what did not within the J4J campaigns. Studying Atlanta, the only campaign in which Justice for Janitors “got their asses kicked,”[232] is especially important because there are so many points to look back at in what went wrong and can be improved for better organizing. After sitting down with Stephen Lerner, who was the architect of the J4J campaigns, he shared that there are many important lessons that he learned from the Atlanta campaign that helped in his organizing of future campaigns in D.C. and elsewhere. He noted that it was important to understand the political-corporate alliance in a city prior for labor campaigns to be launched in the city. Prior to going into Atlanta, Lerner and other SEIU organizers assumed that the city would be liberal and because it was so supportive of the Civil Rights Movement, it would be a pro-union city. However, this was not the case. The political establishment and the downtown developers worked closely with and supported one another.

The lessons drawn from the study of these two J4J campaigns give a deep insight into other manners in which labor organizers can work to re-organize sectors that have in the past been ‘un-organizable’. These low-wage service sector jobs, the largest and fastest growing portion of the economy, can become higher paying unionized positions with better benefits if unions are able to adapt, as J4J did in D.C. successfully, to the economic structure. Labor unions may be able to unionize more workers than ever before if they are able to approach workers with many of these lessons in mind.

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Secondary Sources


Appendix

Atlanta Justice for Janitors Timeline

March 1987 Beginning of J4J in Atlanta

August 3, 1987 SEIU employees "allegedly became disruptive or attempted to enter private offices without permission" (“Union works to organize Peachtree Center janitors,” The Atlanta Constitution)

August 6, 1987 two SEIU employees arrested after refusing to leave 229 Peachtree Street NE (“Union works to organize Peachtree Center janitors,” The Atlanta Constitution)

September 10- union employees and Thunderbolt Patterson allegedly taunted security guards with racial slurs (“Union works to organize Peachtree Center janitors,” The Atlanta Constitution)

September 24, 1987 Peachtree Center Managaement Co. got a restraining order against SEIU soliciting members inside the building but J4J organizers passed leaflets out still later that day to unionize janitors (“Union works to organize Peachtree Center janitors,” The Atlanta Constitution)

October 3, 1987 local labor unions in Atlanta came out to support the NFL Players whose union was in a battle with the NFL front office—including J4J (“One Strange Sunday was strange enough,” The Atlanta Constitution)

Nov. 20, 1987 J4J got an injunction from Peachtree Center Management Co. (“Janitors plan downtown demonstration - Group asking pay raises is under court injunction”, The Atlanta Journal Constitution)

Nov. 21, 1987 John Lewis meets with local leaders and labor officials pledged to J4J (“Cong. Lewis Calls Meeting On Janitors”, Atlanta Daily World)

Nov. 24, 1987 planning a demonstration at noon Tuesday outside Peachtree Street office complex (“Janitors plan downtown demonstration - Group asking pay raises is under court injunction”, The Atlanta Journal Constitution)

Nov. 24, 1987 union organizers alongside civil rights and other activists stepped up campaign for janitors with goal of unionizing 1300 janitors, 56 biggest office buildings had a lunchtime protest with about 50 activists with police escort (“Justice for Janitors group marches”, The Atlanta Constitution)
- took place despite a court injunction
Mocking the court order, protestors were near Peachtree Center tied into groups of six and taped their mouths shut with one protestor taping the mic of his megaphone
-the protest was within the confines of the injunction and was therefore legal

Dec. 12, 1987 Janitors came together in downtown to rally for union to demand at least $5.25 an hour
-gathered at American Hotel on Spring Street

Dec. 20 1987 Demands stated (“Janitors Push For Wages And Benefits”)

March 22, 1988 Fulton County Superior Court Judge William H. Alexander ruled against J4J, they were in contempt of court order for distributing posters in Peachtree Center in January 1988, fined $500, three activists fined $100, SEIU regional coordinator Robert S. Sarason, organizer Ricky M. Reeves, professional wrestler- activist Claude "Thunderbolt" Patterson for unlawful solicitation (“Business Report” The Atlanta Journal)

March 24, 1988 Peachtree Center Management Co. asked the court to hold J4J campaign supporters in contempt of the injunction they filed on November 20, 1988 (“Justice For Janitors Continues”, Atlanta Daily World)

March 30, 1988 Atlanta J4J had rally in solidarity with whole J4J national movement (along with 10 other cities) (“Janitors Stage Vigil as Part of National Protest” Los Angeles Times)

April 26, 1988 Fulton County Superior Court Judge William H. Alexander issued a permanent injunction barring solicitation of employees at Peachtree Street office-retail complex, restrains SEIU from blocking entrances, cursing, making obscene gestures, singing loudly, clapping or shouting inside Peachtree Center buildings, made permanent the temporary restraining order issued Fall 1987, cannot have more than six people gathering on sidewalks next to Peachtree Center and outlaws use of megaphones and bullhorns within 50 yards of the center

May 14, 1988 Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Pilgrimage for Jobs with Justice had almost 10,000 people singing, chanting, and marching through downtown Atlanta (“March that began in Memphis draws thousands in Atlanta”, Tri-State Defender)
--March began in Memphis on April 4, crossed through Tenn., Miss., Alabama and Georgia

June 14, 1988 Gebhart Building Services, Inc.'s president Michael J. Gebhart wrote in a letter to SEIU organizer Rick Reeves that demonstrations have "led to disruption of our employees" at Peachtree Center and "Why don't you petition the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) for an election, and let our people make their own decision by secret ballot in a fair election monitored by the NLRB?", Union officials repeated that they are demanding a unified contract for the city's 56 biggest office buildings-they will
continue public demonstrations and private discussions until 18 contractors are ready to bargain at one time with 43 owners' blessing

July 7, 1988 Young made a cajun shrimp pasta for the two parties in the first face to face at his home (“Young Opens House, Office to Union, Builder - Mayor Trying to Avert Picketing of Convention” The Atlanta Journal Constitution)

July 7, 1988 SEIU started sending out letters to DNC delegates and other politicians including Michael Dukakis to not attend five events during the convention (dinner at Portman's house, appearances on Good Morning America, benefit fashion show, brunch by USA Today, and a Delta Air Lines reception) (“Union Seeking Boycott of 5 Atlanta Convention Events,” Los Angeles Times) and (“Young Opens House, Office to Union, Builder - Mayor Trying to Avert Picketing of Convention” The Atlanta Journal Constitution)

July 8, 1988 Domino's pizza was delivered as two parties discussed (“Young Opens House, Office to Union, Builder - Mayor Trying to Avert Picketing of Convention” The Atlanta Journal Constitution)

July 10, 1988 Following 4 days of negotiations between Portman's executives and SEIU representatives, they walked out (“Portman Seeks To Head Off Protest By Janitors,” Atlanta Daily World)

July 14, 1988 J4J demonstrators dressed as raisins in 95 degree weather outside of Peachtree Towers with the chant "We're raisin' hell to get Justice for Janitors" (“Gone With the Windbags”, Wall Street Journal)

July 15, 1988 Good Morning America changes hotels from Portman owned Marriott Marquis to another downtown hotel because of threatened picket line by J4J (“Demonstrators Gathering for Usual Sideshow: Officials Hope to Avoid Disruptions as Varied Groups Advocate Views”, Los Angeles Times)


----100+ group of demonstrators that picketed a brunch hosted by USA Today and Gannett Newspapers for Congressional members, Dem. dignitaries, reporters, and delegates at Apparel Mart on Spring Street, which Portman owns an interest in, most partygoers avoided demonstrators by using a sky bridge from Merchandise Mart to Apparel Mart and others entered through a side door to Apparel Mart, JOHN LEWIS IGNORED THE PICKET LINE "I spoke to them, they spoke to me" "I didn't have any real problem with crossing the line" (“DECISION '88 - Janitors Shelve Plans for Demonstrations”, The Atlanta Journal, The Atlanta Constitution)

July 17, 1988 Portman representatives called to convince SEIU and John Sweeney to call off plan to picket a party for Dems at Portman's house-- which they did (DECISION '88 -
Janitors Shelve Plans for Demonstrations,” The Atlanta Constitution, The Atlanta Journal)

July 19, 1988 Resumed campaign against Portman on after he reneged on promise to start negotiations, picket line kept Dem. senators away from a reception for Bob Graham (D-FL) and Jay Rockefeller (D-WV) at Portman-owned Marriott Marquis (“DECISION '88 - Janitors Union, Saying Portman Reneged on Talks, Pickets Event for 2 – Senators”, The Atlanta Constitution)

July 19, 1988 Kirk wrote a letter to Sweeney that Portman promised to begin negotiations after DNC and letter went public Wednesday July 20, Sweeney denied that he had agreed to suspend demonstrations for the week and reiterated that talks were to begin immediately (“DECISION '88 - Kirk: Portman Didn't Renege On Union Pledge”, The Atlanta Constitution, The Atlanta Journal)

July 20, 1988 Wednesday, 200+ demonstrators picketed outside Delta reception at the Marquis singing and shouting anti-Portman slogans, few Democratic politicians other than Kirk crossed the picket line but several local officials did including DeKalb County Chief Executive Officer Manuel Maloof and Clayton County Commission Chairman Charles Griswell, Delta spokesman Bill Berry said "It had to have some effect. A lot of Democrats feel very uncomfortable crossing a picket line" (“DECISION '88 - Kirk: Portman Didn't Renege On Union Pledge”, The Atlanta Journal, The Atlanta Constitution)


September 2, 1988 NLRB suing Peachtree Center Management Co. to force the company to permit union organizing on the premises of the office-retail complex (“Labor Board Files Suit to Allow Janitor Union at Peachtree Center”, The Atlanta Journal, The Atlanta Constitution)

--the restraining order prohibiting SEIU organizers form soliciting employees at Peachtree Center is unconstitutional

-orders Peachtree Center Management Co. to withdraw restraining order issued Fall 1987

October 3, 1988 Portman suing J4J for cost to his businesses from their disrupting events during the DNC-- $435,000 (“Portman Firm Sues Janitors Over Picketing”, The Atlanta Constitution, The Atlanta Journal)

-most of the cost is related to Good Morning America canceling their plan to broadcast from Marriott Marquis hotel

-claims the boycott/ picketing violated labor law with secondary boycott

November 17, 1988 Demonstrations throughout 25 cities and 6 countries “Bring John Portman to Justice” (“Atlanta Janitors' Fight Spawns Nat'l Boycott” LA Sentinel)
Jan. 9, 1989 SEIU filed suit against Peachtree Center Management Co. alleging that the company violated federal antitrust and civil rights laws (“Metro Report - DeKalb Board Elects Lanier Presiding Officer”, The Atlanta Constitution, The Atlanta Journal) -Portman officials caused a union television show to be yanked from the internal television network of 6,000 downtown hotel rooms

Jan. 11, 1989 J4J has agreed to refrain from "illegal picketing, demonstrating and coercive action" (“Metro Report - DeKalb Board Elects Lanier Presiding Officer”, The Atlanta Constitution, The Atlanta Journal) --SEIU settled with NLRB in Portman file against them but J4J says it clears the way for more action against Portman in the future

Jan. 17, 1989 Salute to Greatness dinner in honor of MLK Jr.'s 60th birthday celebration (“Mrs. King Announces Son To Take Over Presidency Of M.L. King Center Here: At Dinner Sat. Honoring Filer And HUD's Sec. Pierce”, Atlanta Daily World) --30 members of J4J, wearing red J4J t-shirts, conducted a peaceful protest during John Portman's speech and sang "We Shall Overcome" outside the ballroom

May 13, 1989 Admin. Law Judge Philip P. McLeod dismissed unfair labor practices suit SEIU filed against Peachtree Center (“Metro Report - Richard Starrett Charged In Fourth Assault on Teen”, The Atlanta Journal Constitution) -ruling they had other ways of reaching janitors rather than canvassing inside the Center -decision is subject to appeal


October 25, 1989 J4J campaign filed a federal discrimination lawsuit against Gebhart Building Services, Inc., a company that contracts with many Portman-owned buildings including Peachtree Center and Northpark, (“Janitors' Suit Claims Portman Contractor Won't Hire Black Workers”, The Atlanta Journal, The Atlanta Constitution) -J4J claims that two black men were refused applications for janitorial work at Koger Center in Chamblee, which Portman does not own -Tony Park, a Korean manager for Gebhart, allegedly told Robert J. Harris in August that "all jobs were reserved for Koreans" at the Koger Center -Wayne J. Long tried to apply in September but was told Gebhart was not hiring janitors but a few days later, Gebhart allegedly hired a Korean man for janitorial work -Long, Harris, and the SEIU are all plaintiffs in the suit which seeks $350,000 in back pay and punitive damages, and unspecified other damages, also requires an affirmative action program for Gebhart be put in place -lawsuit represents a new strategy against Portman by targeting a Portman contractor
Feb 16, 1990 Southern Services, Inc. union election ("Black-Owned Atlanta Cleaning Firm Faces Crisis On Eve Of Union Election", Atlanta Daily World)