

LABOR, VALUE, AND FRONTLINES IN READING AND BERKS COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA, UNITED STATES

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The minimum wage in the US state of Pennsylvania has not been raised since 2009. The mandated hourly rate remains at the federal minimum of US\$7.25, while neighboring states have legislated graduated increases to US\$15. Pennsylvania is a fount of cheap labor, in a larger political-economic context that has produced a historic cheapening of labor in the United States relative to the global stage. The strategies of racism and anti-immigrant xenophobia have been central to that outcome. Living conditions for working people have been degraded still further by the neoliberal plundering of city, state, and federal budgets, which slashed public spending and gutted the social safety net. In these circumstances, demands for wages, immigrant rights, racial justice, and state support address many, varied instances of exploitation, dispossession, and extraction. Analyses that cleave off wage demands from social reproduction and justice struggles, therefore, do little to illuminate the politics of the day. For this reason, we need to pay close attention to their multilayered interconnections and their diverse claims on surplus value (e.g., Collins 2017; Harvey 2013, 2081a; Kalb and Mollona 2018; Mullings 2009; Smith 2014; Susser 2012, 2018, 2021).

Bond, Desai, and Ngwane (2013) forge such an approach in their study of South African social movements. Their investigation begins with the extremely differentiated national economy: manufacturing is in decline; finance, construction, and commerce are booming;

and large swaths of the country seem peripheral to the interests of domestic and international capital alike. Reflecting these circumstances, a wellspring of union strikes and community service protests since the 1990s have remained geographically and politically isolated from each other, and they have failed to cohere as a mass movement. While this uneven set of social relations is necessarily the starting point of left politics, it cannot be the end point. Urgently required is a Marxist theory that attends to those contradictions and that “heightens and encapsulates several otherwise familiar tensions—urban/rural; worker/poor; local/national/global; society/nature; gender; and so on—and can show, therefore, perhaps more clearly than in other contexts *the essential relations among them*” (Bond, Desai, Ngwane 2103: 236, emphasis added).

The concept of “essential relations among them” is useful, as it directs us to trace how assorted constituencies and campaigns—for housing, citizenship, health care, and living wages—are connected to each other through their distinct but shared relations to different moments of the capitalist value circuit, to the “real subsumption of not only labour processes but many aspects of daily life under the power of capital in its various forms” (Harvey 2018a: 452; also 2018b). When those connections are not articulated in struggle or brought about on the ground, they stand, offstage, as possibilities for unity. When they are pronounced, they may help to assemble a broader, anticapitalist politics. Scholarship that engages those essential relations can sharpen our study of social movements. Essential relations encourages questions in situations of social change: What hidden relations are being exposed? What can be seen, talked about, abstracted, and theorized at this particular conjuncture? What tactics, alliances, organizational forms, and theoretical interventions can be built and imagined in such changing circumstances?

Class defined as an already accomplished structure does not suffice for this inquiry. Rather, we need an account that conceptualizes people in motion and in changing relationships to capital, the state, and each other. Marxian anthropologists have developed a relational, historical framework to revisit the problem of studying working classes under the conditions of twenty-first-century capitalism. The transformations in social relations that make up ‘class in itself’ press us to consider how oppression, devaluation, and extraction operate alongside and in conjunction with exploitation (Harvey 2018a, 2018b; Kalb 2022). If orthodox Marxism focused too narrowly on wage exploitation at the point of production, at the expense of registering other moments of value, then the realities of daily life in our field-

work settings, and the fundamental insights of feminist social reproduction theory set us on a better course (Bhattacharya 2017; Federici 2012; Gimenez 2018; Vogel [1983] 2013). Anthropologists documented the range of social relationships—waged and unwaged; visible and invisible; free and unfree; debt, rent and consumption—that make up actually-existing capitalism and actually-existing classes. We also sharpened our political tools to better apprehend ‘class for itself.’ Organization and disorganization, struggle and quietude, and alliance and differentiation came to the fore of our research on working classes.¹ In the process, we relearned E.P. Thompson’s indispensable lesson that class is made “in the medium of time—that is, action and reaction, change and conflict” (Thompson 1965: 357.)

The notion of ‘frontlines of value’ (De Angelis 2007, 2016; Kalb this volume) helps deepen this examination of class. Frontlines refers to moments when oppression, exploitation, dispossession, and devaluation clash against the requirements for social reproduction. It points to these antagonisms and to the assorted struggles that give them expression. When we consider each of the constituent concepts—labor, value, frontlines—we quickly recall that the power of capitalists to extract and realize value confronts the countervailing power of laborers to band together to command enough of the surplus to meet their socially determined needs (Lebowitz 2003). Those needs include livelihood, housing, health care, and education, as well as family and community relationships, and individual and collective aspirations for the future.

These changing needs of real people in concrete contexts of ‘living labor’ are often articulated as values, expressed in saturated cultural terms. ‘Values talk’ therefore makes an appearance in many ways in social movements. This fact might seem to confirm a culturalist position, wherein values are conceptualized as ontology, or as “the constitutive idea that drives the emergence of any self-identifying human group/society/culture” (Kalb, this volume.) This version of values defines groups of people; it makes them distinct from others and “brings universes into being” (Graeber 2013: 231; also Graeber 2004). But this reading of values as essence repeats the mistakes of the bounded culture concept that describes difference without explaining the larger processes that produce social and cultural worlds (Wolf 1982; also Gill and Kasmir 2016; Kalb 2018; Kasmir and Gill 2018). It forecloses the necessary work of tracing the relations among expressions of values or ethics, and therefore “opposes the idea that the world is a structured and meaningful articulation of connected ongoing relations that can be stabilized

through analysis and in theory, as a premise for acting upon it" (Narotzky 2016a: 278).

We gain better purchase on those connections if we return to Marx's concept of value, albeit with a critical frame that puts labor at the center of analysis. In this way, we see labor as more than just a source of capital's valorization, but also its negation via struggles for social reproduction. "In capitalism as a whole, the two-sided totality, capital does not merely seek the realization of its own goal, valorization; it also must seek to suspend the realization of the goals of wage-labour" (Lebowitz 2003: 122). Laborers capture a greater share of surplus value through organization and struggle. But division and separation of labor is an inner tendency of capital. As Silvia Federici (2004) aptly phrased it, the accumulation of capital *is* the accumulation of difference. Therefore, banding together or solidarity among laborers is the counterweight to surplus in the hands of capital, and must be at the heart of any investigation of value.

To advance this line of thought it is important to apprehend the politics of labor. The idea of labor as a political entity first recognizes the myriad ways of getting a living beyond the wage. It then refers to the power-laden processes of categorizing, differentiating, or unifying those laborers, and, further, is points to the "social protests and quietude, organizations, and cultures [that] reflect multiple engagements with capital and state as well as other [laborers] locally, regionally and globally" (Carbonella and Kasmir 2014: 7). In this view, divisions of labor (in the plural) are the political face of the technical or structural division of labor (in the singular). A close examination of the dynamic, dialectical relationship of its two faces makes plain that the social division of labor is never purely technical or economic but is always a historical outcome of impulses for unification or differentiation, both from above and below.

The result of these ongoing processes is not the actualization of class as a fixed structure but a historically situated arrangement of exploitation, dispossession, and extraction between capital and its combined workers, dependents, and debt payers. This arrangement is made by the politics of the day: "Instead of a doctrinaire assertion of class analyses developed in earlier historical periods, the task . . . is to meaningfully theorize the emergent class formations and modes of struggle that define our age . . . the intellectual and political task of renewing the concept of class immanently, by reworking it in and through the struggles of our age" (McNally 2013: 402; also Kalb and Mollona 2018). Don Kalb underscores the point: class is made *in* struggle, it "does not emerge from a position. It emerges from

struggle” (Kalb 2015: 16). By this definition, classes are relational. They are made within larger fields of power that condition the totality of social reproduction, including the wage, and that gives shape to culturally inflected conflicts.

Fieldwork in the US Rust Belt

To address these concerns meaningfully, it is important to consider articulations of labor, value, and frontlines in particular locations. In what follows, I draw on my fieldwork (2018–21) in the majority Latinx (gender-neutral term for Latinos/as) rust-belt city of Reading, Pennsylvania, and the majority white, non-Latinx suburbs of Reading, and the rural towns of Berks County that surround the city. My research took place during a distinct conjuncture for oppositional, left-oriented politics in the United States. The timeframe was bracketed by the 2016 election of Donald Trump and the unfolding crises of 2020–21, including the Coronavirus pandemic, state-led and xenophobic assaults on immigrants, a racial justice uprising catalyzed by the police killings of African Americans, and the national election and subsequent white nationalist insurrection (Kasmir 2020, 2021).

During this period, I carried out participant observation (in person, online, and again in person, as the pandemic dictated) among three social movement groups: Make the Road Reading advances immigrant and workers’ rights; Sunrise Movement Berks is a youth climate justice organization that advocates the Green New Deal; and Berks Stands Up builds political and democratic engagement in the electoral arena. Each is a branch of a national– or state-level organization involved in wider coalitions that provide training and that coordinate campaigns for their affiliates. Their professional staff pursue issue-oriented agendas in the state and national arena. The three local groups are at the heart of a growing left/liberal ecosystem in Reading/Berks that also includes cultural and education associations, legal advocates, and community initiatives. I followed their protests, organizing strategies, and alliance as they responded to urgent national developments, built their power, and made claims on surplus value.

The groups achieved modest but notable advances in a region where decades of deindustrialization deepened divisions between the city and the surrounding county. Trump’s right-wing, authoritarian populism fueled racism and encouraged anti-immigrant and anti-urban reflexes in the area, where white hate groups had gained ground decades earlier. However, opposition to Trump’s presidency



Figure 9.1. Inner city of Reading. © Sharryn Kasmir

also fostered new progressive organizing. In solidly Republican Berks County, the three groups contributed to defeating Donald Trump in 2020 in the battleground state of Pennsylvania. For its importance to the national outcome, the editor of *The Nation* spent election day in Reading. Writing before the results were known, when it seemed the election might hinge on Pennsylvania, he wrote of the social move-

ment trio, “Let the record show that if Joe Biden wins here, he was carried to victory on [their] backs” (Guttenplan 2020). In what follows, I introduce the Reading/Berks region and the groups Make the Road, Sunrise Berks, and Berks Stands Up. Then I discuss the hard work of organizing that broadened the progressive field, and I show how their alliance moved the groups toward more radical positions on race, capitalism, and class. I identify moments when their actions revealed hidden relations among diverse populations and changed what could be seen, talked about, and imagined.

Uneven Development in Reading/Berks

Reading (population 95,844) is a city of row houses, brick factories, and railroad crossings left behind by the once-dominant Reading Railroad conglomerate. Many factory buildings are abandoned, yet some still house manufacturing. Nearly one-third of Reading’s population lives in poverty, triple the rate for Berks County as a whole. Despite repeated attempts to revitalize the central business district, including the recent expansion of a local college into a downtown office building, large storefronts on the main business corridor are vacant. Meanwhile corner shops, restaurants, bodegas, and other small businesses testify to the fact that immigrants vitalize the city’s commercial life. Uneven investment and disinvestment, divisions of labor, and state policy have intensified disparities between Reading and Berks over decades.

Reading is a majority Latinx city (officially 67 percent, 2020 census), with a significant foreign-born population (18.6 percent). A minority of the population identifies as white alone, non-Latinx (20.4 percent). The African American/Black alone community, dating largely to the city’s industrial expansion in the nineteenth century and the post-World War I Great Migration from the South, is comparatively small (13.3 percent). Puerto Ricans came to Reading for jobs in industry and agriculture after Operation Bootstrap (1947), and migrants from Dominican Republic, Mexico and, to a lesser extent, Central America began to arrive in the 1980s, as they were displaced by the growth of export processing zones, free trade agreements, and civil wars in their home countries. Some sought affordable housing in low-cost Reading after they were priced out of working-class neighborhoods in gentrifying New York City (130 miles away); others came directly to join relatives in an increasingly Spanish-speaking city (Reisinger 2004, 2005a, 2005b).

Reading is ringed by working-class and middle-income suburbs, and a few miles beyond are farms and rural towns. Berks County (population 428,849) is majority white alone, non-Latinx (68.7 percent). Reading reliably votes Democrat, while surrounding areas are strongly Republican and supported Donald Trump in 2016 (typically more so with greater distance from the city). This political demarcation manifests the demographic, economic, and social divergence of urban, suburban, and rural Berks over the course of the twentieth century.

Reading had been a stronghold of the Socialist Party of America from the 1920s through the 1940s, and an organized working class commanded power across space. Today area activists remember little of its achievements. Reading Socialists won the mayoralty three times from 1927 to 1944, and they took city council seats to comprise a majority in city government. At the time, Socialist parties in the United States, Europe, and Australia had municipalist wings that fought for local-level power through home rule and charter reform. The strategy emerged from the experiences of late nineteenth-century urbanization and industrialization. Reading was home to the Reading Railroad, Berkshire hosiery mills, cigar-making shops, dozens of metal and textile factories, hotels, and stores, and it was home to German-descended and Pennsylvania Dutch migrants from nearby farms. New class configurations and life conditions in the city shaped a novel political response: “If onerous working conditions precipitated new forms of labor organization, the conditions of daily living also produced new forms of urban politics” (Stromquist 2011: 311; also 2009). The Socialist Party grew within these changing circumstances.

The Reading party was closely tied to the craft unions and to the city’s majority German-descended population. Its electoral success rested upon thorough-going, ward-level organizing. Socialists nurtured a political and cultural network that linked city and county, and they held public office in boroughs throughout the county. Reading’s Socialists disbanded in 1962, having weathered decades of declining membership after a series of blows: the national party split in 1936, and the New Deal won working-class voters to the Democratic Party (1930s–1940s); World War II further diminished support; and the Cold War forcefully repressed left organizations (Fones-Wolf 2000; Gavigan 2021; Hendrickson 1972, 1973; Kennedy 1979; Pratt 1970, 1975; Stetler 1974).

Importantly, however, while party records listed members among the Polish and Italian migrants to the city in the late nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries, there is little indication that Reading Socialists organized African Americans. This failure mirrored capitalist divisions of labor in Berks. Black people were less likely to be employed in the industries and shops where craft unions and socialism took hold, most notably cigar making and other skilled trades. Socialists at the national level were likewise slow to organize Black workers and to fight for all laborers and “all work throughout the world” (Du Bois [1920] 1969: 102). In another context, W.E.B. Du Bois warned in 1920 of the failure of Socialists to organize Black workers and to struggle for all laborers. Du Bois foresaw that the fight to curb capitalists’ profits and to increase wages would be won only for white men. That is, the realization of the struggle of laborers for their socially determined needs (material, social, cultural, and ethical) or their part of surplus value, turned on the question of whose labor was counted in and whose was not. The on-the-ground politics that produced those relationships of solidarity and division were in Du Bois’ field of vision.

Racial inequality was the groundwork for the diverging trajectories of Reading and its surrounding environs over the twentieth century, and the legacy leaves its mark to the current day (as I discuss below). No other social movement emerged in the region that commanded the power that Socialists did, and left opposition in Reading/Berks diminished in the wake of its decline. The city’s population reached a peak of 110,000 in 1930, after which capital flight, first of heavy industry and then of textiles, eroded the industrial base. The seesaw of investment and disinvestment reshaped geographical space and disarticulated linkages among working people and between them and wider fields of power, while the construction of highways after World War II drew industry and population out of the urban center to newly built suburbs.

Disinvestment and the cheapening of labor beset Reading’s neighborhoods, and particularly the small African American community. In fact, across the United States, capital flight impacted Black workers earlier and harder than it did whites (Robotham 2020). Sectors of the city’s population that might otherwise have been politically active were consequently disempowered, and the disparate impact of deindustrialization, structural racism, and white supremacy had the effect of moderating Civil Rights organizing in the 1960s and 1970s (Penn State Berks, n.d. a, b).

Latinx migrants came to Reading during a period of economic decline. The population fell to a low of 78,000 in 1980, and those who remained in the city earned lower wages and were less likely to work

in unionized workplaces than those who resided in the suburbs. The suspension of the railroad passenger service in 1981 further widened the gulf between city and county. Capital flight was acute after the passage of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) in the 1990s, when a succession of large industrial employers shut their doors. Setbacks, plant closures, and punishing defeats beleaguered organized labor, and the United Steel Workers and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers were hard hit. Today, shop-based organizing is an uphill battle, and major private employers are non-union. Workplaces are dispersed, immigrant workers are uniquely vulnerable, and unions are on the defensive.

While Berks County overall was transformed by capital abandonment, decline cut an irregular path. Rural land has been rezoned and sold to speculators who invest in million-square-foot warehouses for lease to massive e-commerce corporations. In turn, the city lost its tax base, and the federal government cut funding and devolved fiscal responsibility to cash-strapped municipalities. The political-economic result was a deindustrialized, financially distressed ‘disempowered city’ (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018). Following the neoliberal playbook, revenue sharing and tax redistribution were political non-starters, and urban space was devalued relative to the suburbs (Tabb 2015). As a result, Reading declared financial exigency in 2009 and submitted to state oversight. Upon its exit from the program for fiscally distressed municipalities thirteen years later, the state-appointed manager reflected: “Distressed status had a major impact on every resident and business in the city . . . It constrained vital social, civic and safety services, and investments in infrastructure, parks and development . . . and inhibited the city’s ability to combat poverty and provide affordable housing” (Lynch 2022).

The circumstances of “racialized disinvestment, the splintered political geography of suburban exclusion and regional inequality” (Kirkpatrick and Smith 2015: 3; also Peck 2013, 2014) widened demographic, economic, and political cleavages across Berks. Hate groups, including the Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nation, and the National Socialist movement, leafleted and recruited in the county in the 1980s and 1990s (Penn State Berks n.d. b). After Barack Obama’s election in 2008, the right-wing Tea Party gained a foothold in Berks. Membership in the Tea Party-affiliated Berks Patriots has declined in the years since, but members and sympathizers rallied for Donald Trump and Mike Pence during their 2020 campaign stops in the area, and some county residents went to Washington DC on 6 January to subvert the election of President Biden. Trump’s right-wing populism fueled racism and

anti-immigrant and anti-urban reflexes in this setting. However, it also sparked left/liberal organizing.

An Emerging Left/Liberal Alignment in Reading/Berks

After the election of Donald Trump, sectors of the US Left turned their energies to the electoral arena. The 2016 campaign of Democratic Socialist Bernie Sanders had become a channel for a radical reformist position that held that contesting power in the two-party system was both necessary and possible (Smucker 2020). Working in the context of historically low interest rates, these progressive actors promoted an intellectual and policy framework that aimed to make the federal government a more active agent of redistribution, and they mounted a case in favor of deficit spending and fiscal stimulus (Kelton 2020). National groups agitated from the ‘outside’ by mobilizing their local affiliates, while allied progressive elected officials worked the ‘inside’ of legislative bodies. At the same time, Black Lives Matter (BLM) grew its network and joined with other racial justice organizations in the broad-based Movement for Black Lives (M4BL). The movement focused on state violence, mass incarceration, and police killings of Black people, tracing those forms of violence and oppression to the history of slavery and racialized capitalism (Kelley 2017, 2021). Their call to defund or abolish the police issued a mandate to shift public spending away from policing and jails and toward improving living conditions in Black, Brown, and poor communities. Gender and LGBTQIA+ equality, raising the minimum wage, environmental justice, erasing student debt, granting immigrant rights, and supporting unions were likewise on the agenda (Ransby 2018; M4BL). The intersecting crises of 2020—the deadly failure of the federal government to coordinate a response to the pandemic; mass joblessness; racial disparity laid bare; and widespread protests sparked by the police murder of an African American man George Floyd²— in conjunction with the low cost of borrowing, strengthened the position of progressives to pursue social justice through government redistribution and deficit-spending.

The ‘inside–outside strategy’ came to fruition in 2021, after Democrats achieved a majority in Congress, and Biden won the presidency. Social movement actors who helped deliver the victory then pressed for a ‘new New Deal.’ Demands for public investment also offered a fix to the seeming ‘twilight’ of the neoliberal regime of accumulation (Maskovsky and Bork-James 2019) and to China’s mounting

economic force and the power of its state purse, as evidenced by the Belt and Road Initiative. These facts augured the decline of US hegemony on the world stage. Government spending was one potential remedy. While stimulus packages and an infrastructure plan were being formulated in Washington, advocates wrangled over how much could be wrested from capital and the state, and in what form (tax the rich, basic income, jobs programs, medical care, state-funded higher education, higher wages, etc.). On the ground, in places like Reading/Berks, the pressing calculations were: Who will be counted in and who will be counted out of the fought-for spending programs? Whose labor will be valued and whose will go unrecognized?

These questions evoked a race and gender critique of the 1930s New Deal. During New Deal negotiations, broadly distributive policies were enclosed by a compromise with Southern legislators and agricultural interests. The 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act exempted tipped, domestic, and farm work from minimum wage regulations, overtime pay, social security, and other labor protections. This maneuver brought the legacies of slavery, share-cropping, and Black women's domestic service squarely into the New Deal. The expansion of the Keynesian state after WWII further accrued benefit to white male workers. The state thereby inscribed a structurally unequal and politically fragmented US working class (Baca 2004, 2017; Coates 2014; Katznelson 2013; Mullings 1986).

Struggles over categorization of labor, visibility, and inclusion were underway in 2020–21. Left theorists and activists in the United States were increasingly mindful of the ways the New Deal underwrote white male privilege. Backers of the Green New Deal made the case that federal investment in green jobs, infrastructure, and the care economy must undo those historic injustices as an urgent priority, beginning in working-class communities impacted by environmental racism. BLM and M4BL showed how New Deal and Keynesian policies widened the widening racial wealth gap. These national conversations seeded the local organizing of Make the Road Reading, Berks Stands Up, and Sunrise Movement Berks.

Make the Road Reading was established in 2014 to serve immigrant and multiracial working people, both documented and undocumented. Its non-profit parent organization began in 1996 in New York City, and there are currently chapters in five states and twelve cities that promote immigrant rights, a US\$15 per hour minimum wage, and building power in Latinx and working-class communities. Make the Road's affiliation with the Center for Popular Democracy ties it to fifty progressive groups nationwide and to national-scale

strategies. Make the Road employs professional organizers and has hundreds of members in Reading (not all are equally active) who participate via a committee structure. Discussions at weekly meetings of the *comite de lucha*, of which I was a member, centered on Trump's punitive immigration policies and the material conditions of life in a distressed city. The Reading chapter has been an effective player in local political races, including the 2019 election of the city's first Latinx mayor. It attempted a workers' committee in 2019 and had some initial success in area mushroom farms. However, the undertaking faced formidable obstacles, as workplaces were dispersed, operations were subcontracted, and workers' distinct immigration and citizenship statuses meant they faced different vulnerabilities. Make the Road Reading conceded the effort.

Indivisible Berks was founded in 2016, in the immediate aftermath of Trump's election. Democratic congressional staffers took a lesson from the right-wing, populist Tea Party that had undertaken grassroots organizing in reaction to Barack Obama's election. Democrats assembled their own playbook for taking back power in Washington DC. Following the 'Indivisible Guide' for state and local action, groups swiftly formed across the country. These were decentralized volunteer chapters, loosely tied to the national parent, and most were started by women (Greenberg and Levin 2019; Gose and Skocpol n.d.).

Two white women from Berks' suburbs formed a county chapter. Its members were mostly (but not exclusively) white, suburban, and middle-income. While officially independent of party affiliation, in practice Indivisible Berks endorsed select Democrats in county and state races. They chose candidates who defended the Affordable Care Act, and they determined to hold officials accountable on a growing list of issues. Looking ahead to the national election, the group left the Indivisible network and joined the statewide Pennsylvania Stands Up in 2020 to become Berks Stands Up. Over one thousand Facebook followers comprise their extended constituency, and several dozen dues-paying members form a more active core.

Sunrise Movement is a national non-profit organization founded in 2017 that promotes the Green New Deal resolution for government spending on renewable energy, green infrastructure, and union jobs. The youth-driven organization used confrontational tactics (i.e., sit-ins in offices of elected Democrat officials) and quickly gained influence in Washington DC. The Berks hub (chapter) launched with a celebration at Make the Road's large downtown headquarters, and a founder of Indivisible Berks made a speech to welcome the new group to the orbit of the Reading/Berks resistance. Sunrise is the

smallest of the three groups; the hub has a fluctuating but dedicated nucleus of ten to twenty multiracial young people, some of whom identify as gender nonbinary. They foresee that Reading's poor residents on the frontlines of disinvestment and environmental degradation would be well served by substantial federal investment.

Creating and sustaining an alliance among these organizations is a difficult undertaking. In the following sections, I discuss the work of building their base, and combining diverse people and struggles.

Manifold Labors: Labor as a Political Formation

Reading's International Workers' Day 2021 was planned by Make the Road, with the collaboration of Berks Stands Up and Sunrise Berks. It began outside Make the Road's downtown office, and participants marched to City Park, where speakers from social movement groups, unions, and local government took the stage. The central themes echoed the inside-outside strategy of their state and national parent organizations: US\$15 an hour minimum wage; congressional passage of the union-backed PRO Act to remove hurdles to union organizing; and citizenship for undocumented 'essential workers.'

The march also turned on the question of whose labor would be legitimated by the state, and whose would not. Undocumented workers and those without a social security number were ineligible for the stimulus checks and unemployment benefits provided in the Trump administration's pandemic stimulus bills. The subsequent Biden recovery act went partway to extending unemployment allowances, but millions of immigrant workers were still cut out of state support. This omission resulted in terrible outcomes in Reading. Essential workers reported to work, even under dangerous conditions, in order to maintain their household income. Covid outbreaks and two deaths in area poultry plants where several Make the Road members were employed confirmed the deadly risks of their precarity. Meanwhile, those who lost paid work during the pandemic shutdown were rapidly immiserated, unable to cover their rent or afford adequate food. Charitable and volunteer groups stepped in to deliver groceries and offer financial support, and Make the Road Reading, Sunrise Berks, and Berks Stands Up formed a new initiative, Berks Mutual Aid, for that purpose. In this situation, challenging the divisions of labor—that is, confronting the accumulation of difference between documented and undocumented, visible and invisible work—was an urgent matter of life and death.

Make the Road and other labor activists appropriated the state-designated classification ‘essential workers’ to affirm that far from ‘disposable’ or ‘surplus,’ terms often used to denigrate them, farm workers, meat processors, food preparers, and caretakers were the core of the national economy; they were worthy and they created value. Advocates turned the state-issued, Janus-faced category essential, which disproportionately exposed Black, Brown, and immigrant workers to sickness and death, into a claim for wages, recognition, and citizenship rights.

The very fact that International Workers’ Day was revived in Reading was itself a noteworthy accomplishment. The holiday was invigorated in the United States in 2006 when immigrant rights groups staged a national Day Without Immigrants. That action was the outcome of more than ten years of organizing (Fine 2006; Striffler 2014), and it took another decade to bring the protest to Reading.

Make the Road reinvented Reading’s May Day in 2017 after the holiday had not been celebrated there since Socialists led the festivities in the early to mid-twentieth century. May 1st had long been edged out by the more domesticated Labor Day, a national commemoration of the accomplishments of US unions. The annual Labor Day parade had been the county’s major union ritual for decades, but it was suspended in 2015 because neither the financially distressed city nor the United Labor Council could shoulder the US\$15,000 price tag. The parade was again cancelled in 2016 for lack of funds (VanAllen 2016). It was therefore symbolically redolent that May Day was initiated the following year by the recently launched immigrant rights group. Underscoring the changing landscape of labor’s institutions and rituals, the event put immigrants at the center of working-class demands, and Make the Road announced itself to be a new social movement actor.

Reading’s May Day was an effort to bring together different factions of the community, a tough fight anywhere, and especially so in a region where the history of uneven investment and capital abandonment created deep-seated divisions. Over a hundred local businesses pledged to close for the day, and hundreds of people stayed out of work and marched to oppose the encroachment of federal immigration enforcement in Berks. Months into his presidency, Trump issued an executive order to expand federal funding for the 287(g) initiative, which partnered state and local police with agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Immigration raids had already resulted in arrests and deportations in Reading, when the county commissioners and sheriff considered applying for

the 287(g) program. The protest helped stall the proposal, and Berks County never applied for the federal monies.

After hosting a smaller event in 2018, Make the Road Reading prepared for another May Day in 2019. For weeks, organizers visited immigrant and Latinx owners of bodegas, restaurants, and nail salons, and asked them to shut in solidarity. Some had participated in 2017 and readily agreed, while others were unfamiliar with the event, and more discussion was required to secure their commitment. I went to dozens of locations with a staff person to seek their collaboration. In one grocery, the organizer asked the Dominican mother and daughter proprietors to support the *huelga*, using the Spanish word for strike to describe the day's purpose. The organizer, also from Dominican Republic, continued in Spanish, "Well, it is not a *huelga* like we know. It's more like a *protest*." This would not be a work stoppage or general strike, the kind of actions the women would be familiar with from International Workers' Day in Dominican Republic, but a more modest march. The mother and daughter were sympathetic. They agreed that Pennsylvania's US\$7.25 wage, doggedly guarded by the Republican-dominated state legislator, was too low, and that Latinx residents had little power in the city. They displayed the Make the Road poster in the shop's front window, and promised to shut on May 1st. A total of 153 businesses did the same.

On the day, approximately a hundred protestors gathered at the Make the Road locale. Members flanked a large 'Fight for \$15' banner, and led the march. They were joined by shop owners, middle-class members of Indivisible Berks, and Sunrise Berks activists who carried signs demanding the closure of the Berks detention center, where ICE contracted with the county to hold immigrant families at US\$200 per day per bed. Although organized labor was not the driving force of the proceedings, the president of the Berks United Labor Council and two representatives of the health care union Service Employees International Union (SEIU) spoke for unions. By contrast, the historic industrial unions United Steel Workers (USW) and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) were not in attendance, a fact that evinced their loss of membership and the hollowing out of heavy industry in Berks.

Their absence also testified to meaningful social cleavages. USW and IBEW members are mostly white and male, and reside outside of the city. The United Labor Council president told me that they would not think of joining the protest. They saw Make the Road as 'radicals,' and they avoided visiting Reading, except to attend sports events, use county offices, or (in past years) participate in the Labor

Day parade. The reinvented May Day therefore had the unintended effect of reinscribing difference between city and county, immigrant and native-born workers, social movement groups and labor unions.

Notwithstanding, the Labor Council president's attendance sent an important message. It signaled his readiness to embrace new local actors and to keep the door open for sectors of organized labor to join in the changing left-oriented alliance. There were other engrams of unions on May 1st, as well. Some Sunrise members come from homes where union membership has been etched in family history and identification. The grandfather of one was an IBEW member; another's father lost his job when Ronald Reagan fired and permanently replaced striking air traffic controllers in 1981, an act that dealt a decisive blow to the union movement and issued a neoliberal salvo. Many Make the Road members from Dominican Republic had lived through the wave of industrial actions and general strikes in their home country in the late 1980s, and they brought their experiences in clubs and unions to this new context in Pennsylvania. In addition, the 'Fight for \$15' community-labor campaign was formulated by a national coalition of unions and social movement groups, including SEIU and the Movement for Black Lives.³

If May Day revealed social divides between city and suburbs, unprotected and union workers, native born and immigrant, it also evinced the possibility for coherence. A Make the Road director observed that small-shop owners who joined the march, "don't do better than workers who sell their labor in a traditional way" (Richman 2017). If only fleetingly, May 1st actions enunciated a relationship between immigrant rights and the needs, anxieties, and grievances of a heterogeneous group of protestors, including middle-class suburbanites worried about health insurance and medical costs (Indivisible); immigrant shop owners and undocumented workers (Make the Road); and precariously employed, student-debt-incumbered young people (Sunrise).

To be sure, the form the protest took exposed the structural impediments to workplace organizing. The Make the Road staffer recognized this reality in the grocery, when she contrasted the Reading march with the instrument of the general strike that the mother and daughter proprietors would recall from Dominican Republic. The collection of non-profits, volunteer groups, and union representatives in Reading/Berks did not have the capacity to stage a mass walkout; such militant action would have required a greater degree of power and unity than had been achieved. Nonetheless, Make the Road revitalized an international working-class holiday, mobilized

a diverse collective, and instituted an annual ritual for the growing alliance in Berks.

Values Talk

Immediately upon her return from the Women's March in Washington DC, the first mass protest against the Trump administration, a founder of Indivisible Berks posted on Facebook and called her friends and neighbors to action. She was promptly contacted by an acquaintance who was likewise shocked by Trump's sexism, racism, and anti-immigrant xenophobia, and afraid that his authoritarian nationalism threatened democracy in the United States. Both women had been active in Berks Democrats, but they now considered that Party an ineffective vehicle for the kind of grassroots organizing that would be needed to confront the right-wing agenda in majority-Republican Berks County. Attesting to the fact that their skepticism of the Democrats was widely shared, Indivisible chapters appeared across the country in short order.

Indivisible Berks' first effort was a 'listening canvass.' Volunteers, who were mostly white, suburban, and middle-income, spent weekends in 2018 and 2019 knocking on doors in select boroughs with slim electoral margins and that they deemed swayable. At their neighbors' homes, they asked: "How can government make your life better?" The question was meant to initiate nonpartisan conversations about representative democracy and the role of government in securing their well-being. If this opening was measured and cautious, it also registered a challenge to the reigning neoliberal common sense in favor of small government and against public spending, a message the Berks Patriots had doubled down on in the preceding decade. In addition, the invitation to envision government social support went against Trump policies that handed tax cuts to the rich and threatened to repeal the Obama administration's Affordable Health Care Act.

Canvassers hoped to engage voters whose own vulnerability was exacerbated by these dispossessive policies. Indivisible learned that affordable health care, the price of prescription drugs, and the defense of public services were big-tent issues that appealed to disparate segments of their suburban and rural turf. It was therefore both tactical and heartfelt when the organization drove a months-long campaign to defeat a plan to privatize the county-owned, unionized nursing home. Indivisible's reputation as a formidable local actor was cemented when the county commissioners backed down and signed

contracts that kept the nursing home in public hands and preserved union jobs.

Indivisible's two founders supported redistributive policies akin to New Deal and post-WWII Keynesian protections. Clearly recognizable in their worldview is the 'double movement' involving processes of marketization and the countervailing struggle for social cover (Polanyi 1944). In their own words, the women saw themselves as working to "defeat the Trump agenda, elect leaders who share our values, and realize bold policies." It is worthwhile to examine the rhetorical work being done by the dense, polysemic phrase 'share our values.' They used this expression to voice critique and redraw the familiar (and tired, in their view) political map. They avoided the terms 'left' and 'right' to characterize policy or to chart the political field, and were wary of the descriptor 'progressive' for their organization. They maintained that a new political vocabulary was necessary to reach a broad constituency in their highly partisan county. Instead of those well-worn political identifiers, they believed that 'those who share our values' summoned a more expansive imagined, ethical community; it hailed an anticipated political subject, whom Invisible hoped to engage. This hoped-for assembly would be sufficiently large to swing elections and to assert power over public officials, and it might shift the moral compass toward re-embedding the market and a new social compact.

Importantly, however, 'shared values' envisaged a consensus that sidestepped histories of uneven capitalist processes in Berks. It wished away racial and citizen-based inequality and divisions of labor more than it confronted the contradictions that a large-tent would inevitably bring to the fore. In so doing, it thwarted the difficult work of uncovering the essential relations among different populations. Susana Narotzky made a similar observation regarding the 2011 anti-austerity mobilizations in Spain. Under the banners of 'dignity' and 'justice,' demonstrators issued moral claims about people's worth—that they deserved food, work, and social welfare to provide a dignified life. Yet those slogans did not contest the class inequality or capitalist property relations that undergirded the widespread production of precarity and indignity in Spain (Narotzky 2016b). In Reading/Berks, values talk likewise evaded questions of race, class, and the intertwined processes of capitalist exploitation, dispossession, and oppression. However, the ensuing conjunctural crises of 2020–21 changed what could be seen, talked about, and imagined. Some of Indivisible's executive board members strained against those developments in the lead up to the national election

and after the police murder of George Floyd, while others steered a more radical course.

Gearing up for the 2020 election, Indivisible Berks' leadership made the tactical decision to leave the national's moderate and decentralized orbit and to join forces with the more left-leaning and strategically honed Pennsylvania Stands Up. In so doing, they hoped to benefit from the institutional strength, expertise, and resources of the statewide coalition. The coalition was associated with the Bernie Sanders' camp and was committed to a social democratic agenda. It brought together groups from nine Pennsylvania counties to defeat Donald Trump and to support progressive local and state candidates, some of whom were members of Democratic Socialists of America.

Involvement with the statewide organization challenged and transformed the local group. The decision to become Berks Stands Up was not unanimous, and some on the executive board resigned their posts. Those who remained drew on their relationship with Sunrise Berks to recruit young and non-white activists to leadership positions in the new organization. Several months later, when Berks Stands Up endorsed Sanders in the Democratic presidential primary, there was a further exit of moderate members, but again their numbers were boosted with new recruits. Berks Stands Up arrived at another crossroads only weeks later during the wave of racial justice protests.

Frontlines

The police murder of George Floyd in Spring 2020 catalyzed a wave of protests in the United States. Two months into the pandemic, as Covid-19 deaths mounted, especially in poor, immigrant, and minority communities, and as unemployment soared, people across the country took to the streets. The mobilizations encouraged a new cohort of Black leaders in Reading, broadened and radicalized the existing left/liberal alignment, and opened frontlines of struggle.

When I began fieldwork, there were few Black-led political organizations in Reading/Berks. Reading had a long-standing chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) that sponsored candidate forums, hosted an annual Juneteenth celebration, and sponsored community events. There was no local BLM chapter to mobilize young, radical activists. Organizing was partly limited by the Black community's small size (never more than 13 percent of the city's population), and because working- and



Figure 9.2. Mobilization in Reading. © Sharryn Kashmir

middle-class African Americans left for the suburbs when housing markets opened to them after the 1960s. Urban disinvestment and capital abandonment made sustaining community institutions in the city even more difficult.

More profoundly, the presence in Berks of white hate groups posed a threat to community efforts. The short-lived House of Soul is a case in point. The social center opened in 1967, sponsored by the federally funded Detached Worker Project of the Reading YMCA. It was shut down by municipal officials only two years later, after the city saw two nights of disturbances. The unrest followed an episode of racist intimidation outside the center: white youths drove by the building shouting racial slurs and then graffitied the facade. Young people gathered at the House of Soul took to the streets in response. The intertwined forces of white supremacy, racialized disinvestment, and urban decline stalled progressive activism in the 1960s and 1970s, and took a toll on the churches and clubs that had earlier nurtured Black community life (Penn State Berks n.d. a).

Without established organizations in the lead, the racial justice rallies and marches in Reading were planned via social media by new activists. Local LGBTQIA+, education, and arts groups joined in. Amid the upswell, two young women founded Decolonize Reading,

with the goal of inaugurating a Black-led initiative to challenge racism and colonialism. As monuments to slave traders and Confederate Civil War officers were toppled in England and the United States, and the symbolic control of public space was in the news, they turned their attention to the Christopher Columbus statue in City Park. In its debut as a political actor, Decolonize Reading co-sponsored a rally against white supremacy with Make the Road, Sunrise, and Berks Stands Up. Organizers assembled a crowd of about a hundred in City Park. A dark-skinned Dominican man, a member of Make the Road, told of his personal experiences of anti-Black racism in the Latinx community. Other speakers recounted harassment by the Reading police, read aloud testimonies of immigrant detainees in Berks detention center, and deplored the Columbus statue for symbolizing European colonialism in a city populated with immigrants from the Caribbean and Latin America.

The racial justice upsurge emboldened the left/liberal alignment in Reading/Berks. The new leaders of Berks Stands Up posted a statement on Facebook in support of the BLM agenda to defund the police. Dissent and conflict were posted forthwith. Some group members objected to the word 'defund,' and they proposed alternate language they believed might sit better with their neighbors and with the white, suburban swing voters whom they hoped to sway. Young Black, Latinx, and white commentators forcefully countered that it was not the group's place to edit the Black Lives message. The Black Lives platform connected police brutality, skyrocketing police budgets, and disinvestment in Black communities. It linked oppression and violence to the dispossession of labor and property dating back to slavery and colonialism, and to the extraction of value via private jails and housing gentrification. It called for public spending on policing to be redirected to improve living conditions in poor neighborhoods (M4BL; Ransby 2018). Over the course of their argument over the word 'defund,' Berks Stands Up members did not immediately recognize connections between the struggle to defund the police and their own fight to re-embed the market and win a new New Deal. They missed the opportunity to link these different experiences of oppression and dispossession, and to uncover the relations among them. Nonetheless, they stayed the course of alliance. When an African American man was arrested in a Walmart in a Berks suburb months later, members of Berks Stands Up assembled in protest and joined the shouts of "defund the police!"

Value and the Relations among Them

The accomplishments of the Socialist Movement in Reading/Berks are largely forgotten; even in activist circles, the Reading Socialists are rarely remembered. One notable exception occurred during the initial surge of Covid-19 in spring 2020, when nonessential businesses were closed in Pennsylvania, and residents were advised to stay home. Sunrise Berks put online its two-week course on tactics, social movement history, and political theory. Only weeks earlier, Bernie Sanders had withdrawn from the presidential primary. As Sunrise members had fully embraced Sanders' candidacy, they felt Joe Biden's centrist victory as a stinging disappointment. The hub leader searched for consolation and inspiration in local history.

He told the group that there were sit-down strikes in six hosiery mills Berks in the 1930s, making the county a national locus of union organizing (see Kennedy 1979). Reading was a center of municipal Socialism from the 1920s through the 1940s, one of only three urban centers in the United States where the party was at the helm of city government. The Socialist administration built the city's first children's playground, introduced the bid-for-contract system to combat corruption, and operated a city-owned electric plant. The party maintained close ties to the labor movement, and nurtured a social network that followed railroad lines from city to rural towns. Moreover, the Socialists were crack organizers, and they won races by going door to door and building a strong base in working-class wards (Pratt 1970, 1975; Hendrickson 1972, 1973; Stetler 1974; Gavigan 2021).

The hub leader recalled the city's Socialist past to make two points: working people had once won elections and commanded power in the local arena; and political horizons in Reading/Berks had once been more radical, and they could be again. Public ownership of the municipal power plant made the case that even private property could be challenged. None of the multiracial young people at the virtual meeting knew of Reading's Socialist Party, and over the course of the session, they registered its significance.

During the training, W.E.B Du Bois' warning about race and labor, issued a century earlier, was unexamined. The Socialists Party of Du Bois' day fought for "labor's hire" over of "employer's profit," but it did not dependably do so in the cause of "all work throughout the world." The labors of white women and people of color were too often left out of the party's political vision and organizing. For Du Bois, it was not enough to make the case that these omissions were unfair, nor to affirm that inclusion of all workers was a "high,

ethical ideal.” Ethics and ideals were certainly necessary tools for social change, but they were not sufficient by themselves. Du Bois went further than a proclamation of values. He made the case that “no real reorganization of industry could be permanently made with the majority of mankind left out” (Du Bois [1920] 1969: 120). His intervention therefore shifted the terms of analysis from many concrete, differentially recognized labors of Black and white workers, women and men, to a single, abstract labor comprised of all human toil. He had ethics in mind, but also singular value. He characterized this value as “labor’s hire versus employer’s profit,” and those words were a forceful, resonant reference to Marx’s surplus value, produced by all work throughout the world.

Sunrise hub members—some burdened with student debt, some working precarious jobs, some active in the effort to shut the immigrant detention center—were introduced to Reading Socialism while living in a majority Latinx city, in a majority white, non-Latinx county, where layered histories of capital accumulation and abandonment etched economic, social, and political cleavages. Connections between past and present, and relations among experiences of oppression, dispossession, exploitation, and extraction were knowable during their Zoom history lesson. If they were not fully recognized at the time, they were nevertheless sketched for future understanding and action. Making connections between values and value, labors and labor, as Du Bois did a century ago, is as much a necessary project for left activists as it is an intellectual problem for contemporary Marxist scholars. The challenge is “how to *take advantage* of the unevenness and particular conjunctural combinations of social relations” (Bond, Desai, and Ngwane 2013: 254, emphasis in original). If we offer thick descriptions of cultural ethics but neglect surplus value, or if we detail concrete livelihoods but disregard universal labor, we miss the essential relations among them.

Toward that goal, Marxist anthropologists seek to renew the concept of class to chart people’s shifting livelihoods and forms of work, and to capture their changing relationships to capital, the state, and each other. The tool kit of labor, value, and frontlines helps us to see these processes as they unfold in concrete places, over time, and to recognize the hard work of organizing, building institutions, and creating alliances. The anthropology of labor privileges the political terrain on which different forms of work are categorized, divided, or unified, and it focuses an ethnographic lens on how “culturally embedded forms of organization are [made and] disorganized; place-bound paths of dispossession are continuously generated; and wage

and unwaged forms of making a living change repeatedly and pull people apart or together at different conjunctures through space and time. All contribute to the historical dynamics of remaking differences [and similarities] that reconfigure labour/capital power geometries” (Narotzky 2018: 36).

The concept of value puts the totality of social reproduction, not just the wage, at the center of class analysis, and it gives us purchase on the many ways working people claim a share of the surplus by making demands on capital and the state. The division or unification of labor is critical to that equation. Frontlines refers to these many points struggle, and to the fact that these nodes of conflict may be temporary, incomplete, and may fail to cohere. The three social movement groups in Reading/Berks sometimes ‘stayed in their own lane’ and built their own constituencies around their own issues—immigrant rights; the Green New Deal; democratic participation. As well, they reliably showed up for each other’s events and supported each other’s campaigns. Their alliance also produced moments of solidarity, when the relations among divided sectors of Reading/Berks, which are typically hidden from view, could be known.

When social movement groups show up as a heterogeneous, collective presence, they are pushed toward a more comprehensive explanation of capitalist processes. Greater combination in struggle may lead to more encompassing alliances, analysis, and politics; and they may fuel larger programmatic and ideological abstractions and greater universalism in order to explain the antagonisms and contradictions of capitalism. No such thoroughgoing synthesis was forthcoming when Make the Road celebrated May Day with Latinx non-unionized workers and small business owners, but without members of the large industrial unions in attendance. It was remained offstage as well, when Berks Stands Up fought internally over the invocation to defund the police but failed to recognize the links to the new social contract that the group sought to bring about. When Sunrise Berks members imagined possible socialist horizons but neglected the Socialist Party’s record on Black workers, that synthesis was likewise forestalled. If the potential to connect different but shared relations to capitalist value was eclipsed in these instances, the potential for greater unity could be imagined nevertheless.

Left/liberal alignments like the configuration in Reading/Berks can be seen in other US cities. Each has its own history, demographics, and path dependency. Philadelphia, New York, and Oakland have larger African American populations, more continuous recent activist traditions, and stronger labor movements. In those cities, political

formations include BLM and M4BL, reconfigured ACORN affiliates, the Working Families Party, and unions. In studying these developments, it is imperative that we rethink class. This point is not to declare the (re)making of working classes as an already accomplished fact, nor to prioritize class over other identities, contradictions, or conflicts. Rather the project is to apprehend the uneven combinations of people and struggles, and to grasp the relations among them in order to achieve greater universality and power.

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Toward a Global Anthropology of Labor (edited with Gus Carbonella, Berghahn Books, 2014); and *The 'Myth' of Mondragón: Cooperatives, Politics and Working-Class Life in a Basque Town* (SUNY, 1996).

Notes

1. See for example, Carbonella and Kasmir 2014, 2015; Gill 2016; Gill and Kasmir 2016; Kalb 1997, 2015; Kalb and Mollona 2018; Kalb and Tak 2005; Kasmir and Carbonella 2008; Kasmir and Gill 2018, 2022; Lem and Barber 2010; Narotzky 2018; Nonini and Susser 2020; Smith 2014, 2018, 2020; Susser 2012, 2018.
2. The brutality of George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis police in May 2020 was captured on video and widely disseminated via social media. The counterresponse was nearly immediate. Protests were staged in cities and suburbs throughout the United States, and worldwide. Years of organizing by Black Lives Matter and the Movement for Black Lives undergirded these spontaneous eruptions that mobilized veteran political actors, as well as massive numbers of new participants. Floyd's killing occurred in the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic, when racial disparities in health and economic security were fully on display. The spring uprising ushered people out of pandemic lockdown; the marches were interracial, and lasted for months in the run-up to the national election.
3. Scholars note the importance of organized labor for myriad social and political struggles in which unions do not take a leading role. Susana Narotzky (2016a) underlines unions' overlooked role in the 2011 Indignados mobilizations in Spain. David McNally (2013) traces the influence of working-class politics and labor unions, despite their apparent absence from recent mass mobilizations in Colombia, Mexico, Tunisia, and Egypt. Karen Brodtkin's (2007) study of student activism in Los Angeles likewise shows the continued significance of unions for building social movements.

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