

Undergraduate Research Assistantship Report 2025

Project Title: Political mobilising among Chicago's police and teachers' unions

Faculty: Dr. Johann Koehler, Department of Social Policy

Research Assistant: Nooralhoda Tillaih, Department of Anthropology

Introduction

Over this academic year, I had the pleasure to work with Dr Johann Koehler of LSE's Department of Social Policy, Dr Tony Cheng of Duke University's Department of Sociology, as well as Dr Eos Trinidad of University of California Berkeley's School of Education, on a study of the Chicago Teacher's Union (CTU) and Chicago Fraternal Order of the Police's (FOP) participation in politics. In particular, we examine the different ways in which each union mobilises towards political action. To that end, I was tasked with reading, coding, and synthesising a digital archive of monthly newsletters published by the unions across 2014-2023 for key sentiment and their overarching themes.

Situating the project

Teachers and police unions loom especially large among labour organising efforts in the United States in general and in Chicago in particular. The contrasts between the two unions stem from features that distinguish teaching from policework as such; in part, they stem from the idiosyncrasies of local governance. Thus, this research fits into a wider research series by Dr Koehler and Dr Cheng, and Dr Trinidad investigating the social policy stakes of those contrasting efforts to mobilise labour.

Research: Methods

My initial task as a research assistant for this project was to familiarise myself with the monthly newsletters and the code base compiled by my supporting professors. This began with my initial introductory meeting with them, as we read through the first newsletter for each union to understand the literary style deployed by the various authors. Additionally, we reviewed the definitions and examples of the existing code base compiled this project which were divided into two main categories: 'Demands' that union officers call for, and 'Techniques' that they use to mobilise the members. This was an exceedingly helpful introduction to the practice of coding documents, which was a novel skill for me. By performing this review, I was equipped with a sense of the practices commonly used by each Union in their communications.

Next, I began working on my major task- coding the monthly document for instances and rhetoric of political mobilisation and related keywords. This required reading texts closely, and with exercising critical sensibility and judgement to highlight the most relevant passages. Thus, my interpretation of the text heavily relied on my discretion. For example, for 'Demands', 'improved working conditions' encompassed smaller class sizes for the CTU, and an increased number of days-off for the FOP; and for 'Techniques' was signing petitions and filing suit which were straightforward. However, overtime, the content which

each codes encompassed/represented began to nuance and I found that some lines began to blur between them e.g. for the techniques listed, grievances that were filed by officers were difficult to code as I required details on the specific case to differentiate such as if arbitration took place in a court, or if it was a basic appeal. I also added new codes to include new trends that I had anticipated and predicted, such as 'Solidarity building' (Technique) or 'Accountability' (Demand).

During our regularly scheduled meetings, I assembled progress reports for my assisting professors, which included the most prominent themes, events and trends that I have observed for each year. I coded each Union's document year-by-year, i.e. completing 2014 for both, then moving onto 2015 for both. This strategy allowed us to remain cognisant of the wider socio-political context that the Unions were situated within and the major influential events that are not explicitly reported on in the newsletters (e.g. the tragic murder of George Floyd). With these, we had complex and well-informed discussions of the approach, style, and motivations for each union's efforts to mobilise, and to begin illustrating the possible implications that these will have more widely on their future as a political Union.

Research: Findings

It was fascinating to see firsthand how patterns in the CTU and FOP's messaging emerged through coding the documents; all of the available monthly reports over the past nine years form a continuously evolving tapestry for each, respectively. The FOP grew into top-down and reactive cohesion e.g. they newsletter are implicitly addressed to cops, with a 'us vs them' sentiments by often criticising the media and members of the public for treating cops with disdain or unfair technical constraints imposed on them like the enforcement of Body Worn Cameras; whereas the CTU strengthened through bottom-up coalition-building, its newsletters mobilizing audiences beyond teachers to include parents, social justice activists and lay people of the public.

Nevertheless, with each new internal election and heads of leadership, a new era for the unions emerges. Later efforts highlight new strategies by the FOP to improve the public and personal relationships between cops and members of the local community by regularly hosting fundraiser events and participating in fun activities with young students. Contrastingly, CTU's focus changed drastically over the years, from the legislative 'Fight against Janus' to building the Right To Recovery (R2R) package to support vulnerable families during the pandemic. Most recently, widespread distrust of Chicago Public Schools has borne a desire to regain autonomy and reorganise a governance structure with the newly elected school board through committee formation. Although the path and shape of mobilising efforts for both unions seem to differ completely, it seems that both have grown into a desire to 'take matters into their own hands' and redefine the limits of the powers beyond the restrictions imposed by superior governmental bodies in Chicago.

Thanks & Closing

My experience as a research assistant at LSE was far from easy, nevertheless, it remains as one of the most rewarding: I learnt new skills, explored worlds of knowledge and had the honourable opportunity work with and learn from Dr Koehler, Dr Cheng and Dr Trinidad who have shown me their endless encouragement and support. Thank you to Joss Harrison, Bharati Kondepudy and Adeola Akande Pierre-Noel for your guidance and Administration of the programme.