

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

OCTAVIA LEONA KOHNER

Interviewer: Michelle Esther O'Brien

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Michelle Esther O'Brien: Hello, my name is Michelle Esther O'Brien and I will be having a conversation with Octavia Leona Kohner for the New York City Trans Oral History Project, in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans identifying people. It is March 27, 2017, and this is being recorded at the NYU Department of Sociology. Hello.

Octavia Leona Kohner: Hi.

O'Brien: Tell me about your childhood.

Kohner: [Laughter]. Oh wait, also, well -- [shifts voice] -- if I use this voice will this, will it be able to pick up just as well, or [shifts voice] should I just stick with the booming voice? I'll stick with the booming voice is fine.

O'Brien: I think whatever voice you're most comfortable speaking in.

Kohner: Sure, um, well that's a complicated question. [Laughter]. So my childhood, how far back should I start, I guess? I guess I was born in Canarsie, lived there until I was sixish, then very conveniently, when my family was thinking of moving, my grandfather's pizzeria burned down, and using the insurance money we moved to Staten Island.

O'Brien: Do you have memories from Canarsie?

Kohner: Um, vaguely. I remember living in a really small, sort of like, it was like longer more than wider sort of like place in Brooklyn. I remember, uh, I remember I used to be in my grandfather's pizzeria and I would sit on the counter and I would eat Ralph's Ices all day, essentially. Or, it wasn't even Ralph's. It was like Italian ices. And I remember living with my father and my grandparents, and they all lived together and my mother had moved away when I was two from Brooklyn to go to Michigan to escape essentially me. I was really young, but it seemed nice from what I remember. I remember not joining the family to eat dinner. I would, uh, sit at a LEGO table in front of the TV, uh, because I was young and I couldn't hold a conversation. I still can't, but I'm older now, so I have no excuse.

O'Brien: And so you moved to Staten Island, your family, when you were six?

Kohner: Around six, maybe five. A little fuzzy there, don't talk to family enough to like, know specifics, but yeah. Um, so around that time we moved to Staten Island, uh, started to go to like, however old you are when you go to kindergarten, so I guess six, maybe. So Staten Island, I started school in kindergarten, a small amount of pre-K. I was always almost always older than the other kids because I was born in February, which is awful. [Laughter]. Um, lived in Staten Island until I was 19.

O'Brien: Tell us about Staten Island.

Kohner: Oy vey. [Laughter]. In Staten Island, I lived towards the exact middle of Staten Island, which is New Springville, which means I could have gone essentially anywhere to high school because New Springville didn't have its own high school except for this really fancy joint that you had to test into, and god knows I couldn't test into it. Um, actually New Springville, a lot of my like, really formative years was spent in Staten Island, kind of fucked me up. it's kind of a weird joint in New York City. Where I lived, it was kind of like the more liberal part, ish. Uh, which I don't know if that helped or hurt my situation as a faggot, and then tranny. [Laughter]. Oh, sorry. Content warning: slurs.

O'Brien: I think it's okay.

Kohner: Great. [Laughter]. Yeah, so living in Staten Island was mostly weird, I would say. I would say Staten Island was weird, and I think it made me weird. Or maybe I was weird and it was just a weird place for me to live.

O'Brien: What was weird about it?

Kohner: Um, well, my childhood nickname was faggot. [Laughter]. So I was called faggot from like age, like before I knew what gay was. I like, was called faggot before I knew what a faggot was. They called me it maybe -- they started calling me it when I was maybe in like, God, third grade? Um, maybe even second? Because I remember, I would play handball outside the middle school that I lived, I lived like a five minute walk from my middle and elementary school and I would play handball outside my elementary school and I wasn't very good and people called me faggot, um, and I was a pre effeminate kid. I always wanted to play the princess and fucking, like, oh my god, it was such a goddamn cliché. I always wanted to be the goddamn princess, and whenever we played house, I wondered if I could be the wife, [Laughter]. Um, so they started calling me faggot. They called me Joey Baloney at first, but then they started calling me faggot. Joey Baloney, like, I never wish I could have been called Joey Baloney, because somehow that's worse than faggot. [Laughter]. So yeah it's the kind of place where you get called a faggot before you know what being gay is. Which I guess is like everywhere really, but you know. It was that kind of weird.

O'Brien: How did you get along with your family?

Kohner: Uh, [Laughter]. So my mom left me when I was two, and we had sort of kind of on and off communication, like she would sometimes visit, I would sometimes visit her in Michigan until maybe I was like, 10. And she knew I liked Pokémon, so like, the last thing she got me before I never saw her again was a pack of Digimon cards, which was, so like that kind of encapsulates the kind of relationship my mother had with me. She was like oh, you like Pokémon, and she takes me to Toys R Us to get me a video game and instead she gets me a pack of Digimon cards. So that's kind of the encapsulation there, but she was also poor and whatever. My father, so there was like, a year in around middle school time where I moved out of Staten Island to live upstate with my father, and he had, and this must have been, I must have been 11 when this happened, and he had for the past like 11 years and for his entire life up until that point lived with his mother, my grandmother so she could help raise me and like, you know, he could like, I

don't know. This whole [inaudible] of like, he was a 19 year old guy with like a kid, was raising him alone, and then he had a second kid with another woman, and he was married to her eventually, but like, so we moved upstate for about a year. And that sucked more than Staten Island somehow. Like upstate New York is worse than anything ever you could imagine, ever. I lived kind of close -- I went to, it was called Syracuse high school but it was a middle school and a high school together. And I only went there for a year. And then --

O'Brien: And this was in Syracuse, New York?

Kohner: Kind of. I lived in Northumberland, which is where Hemmingway's mother is from, too. [Laughter]. Catch, like, 11 year old me trying to find desperate pride in where I lived. It didn't work. Um, and my father never really wanted me, and like, that was obvious. He would have fights with -- he got remarried, eventually, to this woman, and he would have like, fights all the time with her about me. I overheard him yell like, you know, he's my problem, so he's your problem, too. Um, my stepmother's parents would be like, as my stepparents were [inaudible] my stepmother's parents, her father said to me once when I was moving from upstairs to downstairs so I would be not as close to my father and stepmother, um, and they would like, have their kid up there instead and all this other stuff, uh, he was like you know, they're like this because of you, you're ruining their life. And I was like yeah, I know. And my relationship with my stepmother was, she would never sit down and have dinner with me, and my father would never be around for dinner either, because he worked delivery truck stuff. So he had long hours. Sorry, um.

O'Brien: Go on as long as you'd like.

Kohner: So I didn't have really a relationship with my father all that much. I had a close relationship with my grandparents. And when my father tried to have a relationship with me, it was through like, not knowing what to do about me.

O'Brien: Do you have any good memories from Staten Island?

Kohner: Heh, yeah, but they're all sex-related. [Laughter]. Um, yeah. I had a lot of fun sex on Staten Island. And also, no, that's it. [Laughter].

O'Brien: What were your friendships and social connections like?

Kohner: I didn't have friends until high school, and then when I did have friends, like, it was a mix of people who like, used to hate me and now tolerated me, and people who used to tolerate me and now liked me, and the rare person who had always liked me now really liked me, um. And also I was an annoying faggot, and I was the only like, out gay person in my school, in my year. So I was like, the gay guy, um, and fag hags love the gay guy. So I attracted like, future fag hags and like, people who are like fucking uh, oh, look at how cool I am, I have a gay friend. That kind of sitch. And I kind of got through friends through the GSA, uh, but I joined my GSA thinking like oh, we're going to like start petitions and have like die-ins, and we're going to be the next ACT-UP in

high school, um. I didn't know really about ACT UP, but I had this vision of us being what I would learn would be like ACT UP. And it didn't work out. The GSA was more a social club, and that was fine. But I remember always being like hey, let's do this, and people being like, yeah, let's do a petition. And I was like yeah, cool, a petition. [Laughter].

O'Brien: So you had political inclinations?

Kohner: Yeah, kind of. Um, I think I watched a little to many horror films as a kid. There's a lot of like, politicians as the villain in the horror films, and I think I was kind of fucked to like, want to see the destruction of the US government pretty early, [Laughter]. I can remember describing myself as an anti-capitalist in high school. Um, and I turned the Day of Silence into the Day of Screaming, and, uh, I remember learning that we were having a blood drive and my first response wasn't oh, great, save people's lives, it was, why can't the gays give blood? [Laughter]. And we actually sent a petition outside the blood drive so every person participating would be like high, will you let gay people give blood? Do you want to sign this thing? And almost everyone did. It was really nice. Uh, the Day of Screaming was a bit of a surprise. We told everyone it was the Day of Silence and then the GSA was just like, okay, let's just walk around screaming. So yeah, I was a weird leftie high schooler.

O'Brien: And you had an active sex life in high school.

Kohner: Oh yeah, [Laughter]. So, when I was 18, I had already had sex with probably -- it wasn't that active really in the grand scheme of things, but by 18 I'd already had sex with around 40 people. Um, by 19 it was like around 50 people. Um, and that includes, I guess, just blowjobs. I thought I was being real slick not losing my virginity until 16 by giving people blowjobs all the time, but that's not really how it works. [Laughter]. You don't realize that until you're older. Ah!

O'Brien: How would you meet people?

Kohner: Oh god, this was before Grindr and smartphones and all those other things, so I used Adam4Adam. I would pretend I was an 18 year old guy, but really I was like -- I started at 14. Um, and I would say I was 18 and I was obviously not 18 if you ever saw me, but that didn't stop 40 year olds from going on dates with me. Um, [Laughter]. Oh, God, warning, I am the like, worst example of a trans woman. Um, [Laughter], oh, I'm not really good at this respectability bullshit. Anyway, so I was this 14 year old boy going on dates with these 40 year old men, and I thought it was normal. Uh, and I thought it was actually really revolutionary when I turned 16 and I was like, you know, I can't do 40 year olds anymore, 30 is my age limit now. [Laughter]. Um, so yeah, pretty active sex life. Like I said, I was the only gay guy in my school really. There were like other gay guys I kind of knew of in my school. I came out because, god, this really fucked me up I think, so, like, I was 14 years old, and I only came out because I had a crush on this guy who was in the GSA and the poetry club, and he was a senior, and I was like, he's hot and easy, he looks like he wants to have sex with me. And he did, but he was like listen, I can only like, date you if you come out of the closet, because I was like this 14 year old faggot and no one knew I was gay. I was like, you know, but like, except the person who wants to fuck me. And I was like, yeah, sure, whatever.

I mean, it's going to be fine coming out of the closet as long as I have a boyfriend. So this freshman started dating this senior, and then dumped the senior because he was a bad lay [Laughter], and that's how I came out and started having sex with as many people as possible.

O'Brien: Did you form connections with people at all, or was it fun? What were some of the good sides for you around all that?

Kohner: Um, the good sides was that I got really, really good at sex. Like I was just astoundingly good at sex. It's really quite, like, frightening. Um, and I learned what sex was for earlier than I think a lot of people do. Um, and like, I call it networking now. Um, it's a different kind of networking, but it's networking. Definitely met a lot of people. But it was also a little traumatic. It's kind of fucked up, a 16 year old having sex with like, 30 year olds. Like those are like, whatever, a ephobophiles interview you have to say it, but like, it's creepy. Um, [Laughter], so yeah. It was okay. Adam4Adam was a fun website to use. Um, god, I wonder if it's still around. Anyway.

O'Brien: So what happened when you were 18?

Kohner: So when I was 18, I got into Hunter College. Uh, I don't know how. I tested well, but I like, I eventually graduated high school with a 78% average of classes, and like, this is going into AP classes and all this other bullshit that they like, are like, oh please make our school look a little bit better, because I went to Port Richmond high school which was at one point rated one of the top 10 worst high schools in New York City. And, it's not like -- I still have scars from that high school, like physical from being bashed a lot. It wasn't a fun place to go to school, but it was exciting, and I learned how to fight really, really well. Um, so at 18 I got into Hunter College and I thought I was like, big shit on campus because all of my other friends had gotten into Staten Island College which is like, really kind of fucked up and mean of me, um, and I started going there and I met my future fiancé in Hunter College and kind of used dating her, him at the time, as an excuse to, uh, move into the city at 19, at the Hunter dorms.

O'Brien: And tell me about Hunter.

Kohner: Um, it was okay. I don't think I was like, ready for college in the same way that like, I wasn't ready for high school when I was in it. Um, I had a lot of shit to figure out. And I like, didn't have the work ethic required to be in college really. At least in the field I was in, which was eventually anthropology. Um, but it took me awhile to meander into there. Uh, I didn't know what to do or how to do it, so it was kind of a waste of time really, college. And then I came out as trans and then I completely collapsed as a human being, just like full, like, you know when you see one of those chairs that are like made out of the thin metal and you see it collapse suddenly, and like it kind of still looks like what it used to look like, you can tell it used to be a chair but it's like, not useful anymore. Like that's what happened to me in college. But I was still going to college. Um, so Hunter was a pain in the ass.

O'Brien: What led you to come out as trans?

Kohner: There was this club at Hunter College called the Queer Student Union. And I joined it and the Queer Student Union could be summed up as there was only ever one trans woman and no one spoke to her the entire time I was part of it, until I became a trans woman. There was a lot of trans people, a lot of trans masculine people or CAFAB non-binary or CAFAB trans masculine or, like, a lot of not trans women were there. And I was going to this club, ostensibly as an annoying faggot, until I started crossdressing. And it wasn't drag really. It was like, I was going out and like, doing like chores or going to class in like, dresses and like, blouses and like, I would always try to frame it as like ha ha, look at how gay I am or look at how funny this is, isn't it so funny that I'm in women's clothing? Because I hadn't known a single trans woman. I had not met a single trans woman and I was 19, and then this trans man I know, Mike Alt, who is, and Mike's then partner approached me and they were like -- so my dead name is Joe. My dead name is Joseph Michael Paul Fallone, which is the most Italian-American name I've heard in my life, um [Laughter]. If they threw an Anthony in there it really would have just been cemented. Um, and this guy Mike, he comes up to me and he's like, Joe, you know, if you're like, a guy that wears dresses and like you're alternative, you have this alternative masculinity, like, very like college transmasculine like, I accept you, like you know that's really cool, like we get it if you're just like a gay guy who wears dresses we totally understand. But are you trans? Like just asked, like, are you trans? And I hadn't thought of it at all. I hadn't thought of it at all. Like the only trans women I knew were like, like the trans women I knew from like peer outreach when I was like in high school in the community health action network. I would like, go out and hand condoms out to people and there were these -- and I would work with trans women, but like ostensibly like, I didn't really talk to them and all the gay guys I talked to were like oh don't talk to them, they're crazy. And then I was the crazy one, [Laughter]. That's what gender is. You're the sane one until you're the crazy one. so this guy asked me, are you trans? And I go -- and I look at him, and I'm wearing like a long chiffon skirt, and a white blouse, and I look like someone from like, if The Hills Have Eyes meets The Sound of Music. And I think for like, maybe three seconds of silence, and I go. Huh, you know, I think I am. And Mike is stunned at my answer, is just like, uhh, cool, do you want to talk about that? And this is in the Queer Student Union, so it's like a college campus, and I'm like oh, you know, I think so, but I have to go to class. [Laughter]. So I go to class [inaudible] after that, and I'm freaking out and then I come back and I'm like, you know, I don't think I should go to class anymore. I think I should just like, sit with this for a second. Um, so trans men made me a trans woman, and that explains a lot.

O'Brien: And it was quite hard for you?

Kohner: Yeah. I think the hardest part is I didn't know a trans woman until a year into medically transitioning already. Um, I think that was really the hardest part. So I was 19, had started a relationship with someone who would then become my fiancé and it was like a really nice relationship and it gave me the kind of comfort and space to come out as trans really. Uh, because like, you know, I was with someone who loved me. So of course they would accept me for being trans. Um, and like, I was already a gay guy and like, she at the time was a gay guy, and we were like, gay together, and it was like oh, this is just kind of like a different kind of gay, it's fine. Um, like we were both crossdressing right now, what's the difference? She was crossdressing with me at the moment, too. Um, but it wasn't that easy, and I don't think it's ever as easy as you think it

common a story, but is just like, funny, it's funny. So I'm with an abusive partner, I don't have a job, and I'm not in college, and I have cats. And I'm miserable and suicidal, and I try to take my life for the umpteenth time. I don't even know how many times I've tried at this point, but let's say the seventh time, who knows. Maybe sixth. So that's where I was at then. And then during one of my nicer mental breaks, I was in therapy and like, I was like, not trying to actively kill myself. My partner at the time, she turns to me and she goes, hey, Babeland is hiring. I just sent in my resume, you should send in your resume. And I do. And we get interviewed together. Then we get hired together. And then I start working at the Brooklyn location of Babeland.

O'Brien: What year was that?

Kohner: 2015.

O'Brien: Anything else from that year that you want to share?

Kohner: That year was when I got engaged to my partner at the time. Uh, that year was, god, 2015. That feels like a lifetime ago, but it's only like a year and a half ago for God sakes. I really don't remember much of 2015. It was like, mostly a suicidal K-hole. Um, I remember starting to work at Babeland but I was like, so nervous for the first three months I was working at Babeland. Oh, 2015 is also not only the year when I was engaged, but also the year my fiancé broke up with me because I tried to kill myself. It was a six month gap between my trying to kill myself and her breaking up with me. But yeah, she called it quits towards the end of 2015, and then I showed up to work high femme and then she called it not-quits. [Laughter]. She came back to the home we shared and we essentially made love. It was really kind of strange, and then we got back together for a bit. So in 2015 I got a job, got engaged, broke up, got back together, tried killing myself. Busy year really. Yeah. So that was 2015.

O'Brien: Did you have anything that you enjoyed doing during that time?

Kohner: No.

O'Brien: So tell me about your job at Babeland. What did you get hired to do?

Kohner: So my official position at Babeland is sex educator/sales associate. Now in interviews they'll call you a sex educator, but in like one on ones you'll be a sales associate. Because sex educators, like, that's great for people to refer to you as in the news, but uh, really you're just there to peddle dildos.

O'Brien: And it's the same job --

Kohner: It's the same job.

O'Brien: Are you in it now?

Kohner: Yeah, I'm still in the same position. I was hired at the Brooklyn location, um, but traditional to the Rivington location, which is the Lower East Side location. [Coughs]. Mostly because I found the Brooklyn location like, very like, not my seen. Like it's very like, there's like a lot of soccer moms that come in and like families and like chill like adults who are adulating, and then the Lower East Side you get a bunch of drunk idiots at like, 10:00pm who are like, just fucking wild, and I know how to deal with that far better than I do functioning adults. You give me a bunch of drunk assholes and I can handle those any day of the week.

O'Brien: And for people that don't know, describe Babeland overall as a business. Like, what does Babeland do?

Octavia Leona Kohner

So Babeland is, I forget what they try to call it. I don't think they call it an adult store. Um, we are a feminist, woman-owned sex shop, I guess is what I would call it. We sell dildos, we sell vibrators, we sell harnesses and books and instructional porn and um, like, we're kind of like an area between -- we're a luxury electronics boutique. That's what I say whenever I have to tell people what I have to do, I don't want to talk about dildos. So we sell sex toys, and we're woman-owned. We're ostensibly woman-owned, and we're like, allegedly feminist. Um, and very sex positive. And body positive, mostly certain bodies. So that's Babeland.

O'Brien: And how big was the staff? Like how many people in each location?

Kohner: Um, it's like really varied. The SoHo location, which is on Mercer Street, has the most employees. I think somewhere, this is like, spitballing, I want to say somewhere around 18, while the Lower East Side location has somewhere around like 12, and the Brooklyn location has somewhere around nine generally? Like, those are rough numbers and they're constantly changing, but if you keep that in mind, that's around the number. I think we have somewhere around like, 45 people overall that are like, staff.

O'Brien: And you said you were quite nervous starting out?

Kohner: Yeah, so I had experience talking about sex, but it was like, through like a health care-ish lens because I volunteered/worked at the Community Health Action Network of Staten Island as like, an outreach person, and so like, I had that on my resume, and like, I was queer, but I was also the only trans woman present at my location. And, like, I didn't really know how to talk about sex in an acceptable way around these people because they all had like very, very like structured and like, hyper boundary-oriented ways of talking about sex and sexuality and like, very like, textbooky, but like if you were reading a textbook about really radical, queer, sex positive, body positive sex. Where like, we love to say vulva but like, I don't know. I couldn't describe myself as a faggot on the job I think. I think that would ruffle some feathers.

O'Brien: And what were your dynamics with your co-workers and supervisors, and what was -- did you make friends? Did you struggle there? What?

Kohner: I mean, at the Brooklyn location there's really only one person I would call a friend that I made. Everyone else I just kind of worked with. Maybe two. I mean, maybe I made friends with like two people. Like there's two people I could like, see myself being socially with and like, who I have been social with, and who I enjoy seeing outside of the Babeland context. Um, and that's at the Brooklyn location. The Rivington location was a lot more friendly. It was a lot -- everyone was like, it was jokingly referred to as Femme Palace, and I moved actually to the Rivington location because I was tired of being the only trans woman as well. Like the environment of Brooklyn was not for me. It's like a great environment but it's not for me. I was the only trans woman working there. They still have not had a single trans woman work there since I left actually. And I moved to the Rivington location to move with my now ex-fiance, [Laughter], yeah, that was wild.

O'Brien: Is she still working there with you?

Kohner: She's getting a pussy right now -- well, she's recovering post-pussy right now, so like, she hasn't worked there in a little bit, but she's coming back. Um, she also models, so hopefully she just moves to fucking Europe and gets out of my goddamn hair. [Laughter], um, God, um. Um, so yeah, we still kind of work together. I don't see her very often. Um, but like, I don't know. Babeland actually has not hired a trans woman in over a year, since the unionization effort there hasn't been a single trans woman hired. I don't think me sitting in front of them during bargaining sessions every time that there was a bargaining session helped that really. I'm quite loud and argumentative and not very agreeable, and I think they think all trans women are. And I think maybe -- I won't speculate on why Babeland, because I still work there, is not hiring trans women, but all I'll say is that I have not seen another trans woman hired since the unionization efforts.

O'Brien: When did you first start thinking about a union, or when did you first start talking with people about it?

Kohner: So I have to give a shoutout to Lina Solo, who is like, this -- she writes for Teen Vogue and like, all these other -- she's very impressive, she's a very impressive person, and she approached my fiancé Moss, my then fiancé, and was like, we have a union, or we're like, planning on having a union, you're like a leftist, you should sign onto it. Oh, also, Octavia has like an antifa and ACAB tattoo and like, a red and black flag, like, she's probably pro- -- you should just tell Octavia that we're getting a union. So my fiancé, at the time she comes to me and she's like oh, Lina is talking to me about a union. She told me to talk to you because she figured you'd be down. And I was like yeah, obviously. We're anarcho-syndicalists, do you think I'm going to be like boo, unions?

O'Brien: So you were quite political at this point. You haven't talked much about that. how did you get into politics?

Kohner: How did I get into politics? Well, I was a faggot. I was a faggot of Staten Island who like, and I was like, you know, briefly homeless and like, I had already seen enough people die, and

like, I had been threatened far too many times, and like, when your life is in danger, you either like, collapse, assimilate, or like, fight back. And I chose fight back.

O'Brien: And you identified as an anarcho-syndicalist?

Kohner: I didn't identify as an anarcho-syndicalist until I was in like -- I was an anarcho-communist and then an anarcho-syndicalist because I found more language eventually through Wikipedia, and then I, uh, well, and then I like kind of -- someone mentioned anarcho-syndicalism to me a lot, like, I knew a lot of like, anarchists. My main joining the political movements was through anarchism. Uh, because I was one of the faggots in high school who was like, fuck marriage. Like, why do we care so much about marriage? Like, why -- this is bullshit. Why do we want the state to accept us? I don't want to be accepted by the state, I just don't want there to be a state.

O'Brien: And before Babeland, what was your engagement with movements like?

Kohner: I would not describe my engagement with Babeland as an engagement with a movement -- the union at Babeland yes, but never Babeland.

O'Brien: But before you started working there and working on the union --

Kohner: So I would even say like, in high school when I was with the Community Health Action Network, like that was like, fairly political. We were handing out condoms and like, were talking to people about AIDS, and we were talking to people about being queer, and I would like, you know, like, there were like -- like looking back like really, really extraordinary trans women who were trans women in high school handing out like, condoms, like, at the St. George Ferry. Like, astounding people, really. Um, so like, that's where it started. So it actually started somewhere from sex positivity and like, safer sex and stuff like that. Um, and then in college I was part of like, Students for Justice in Palestine, I was part of the Queer Student Union, I went to several like, uh, like ISO meetings that they had a college branch of, although they were considered like the weird ones, and I was like, they don't seem that bad. And I would be grumpy at Hello meetings, and I remember being in one of the meetings and I was like, why are we pinkwashing Israel? [Laughter]. Which did not make me very popular. Um, and also I was like, starting to hear about certain things that were going on in the streets and how to get involved with them. Um, so eventually some of my time was spent doing that stuff.

O'Brien: What was happening in New York street politics at the time?

Kohner: So what was happening was Occupy. Um, I remember it was very funny, I had just gotten a job at American Apparel, and then Occupy was also just getting started, and I would like bring in the -- there used to be like this Occupy newspaper that they would hand out, and I would bring it from Occupy -- and I was a boy at this time, and I would bring it from like, uh, [sighs] whatever [inaudible] was going on to my job, and people would be like, what is that? And I'd be like oh, have you heard about anarchism? [Laughter]. And I wasn't like, involved in Occupy, but I would like, you know, go down, spend a few hours, like, I got involved when it was like, halfway to critical

mass. Um, it would mostly be to listen. Like I would show up, and I would be mostly silent, and I would just listen to people talk and talk and talk and talk and talk because God knows Occupy was really good at having people talk and talk and talk and talk. But I learned stuff. Stuff I wasn't learning in college really and stuff I wasn't learning at work, and stuff my family didn't teach me, and stuff that I think, like, trans women that was working with in high school were kind of teaching me but not really yet.

O'Brien: And what was your association with unions in the city when you were involved with Occupy and before then?

Kohner: None, really. Mostly people hated unions. [Laughter]. Unions are a contentious topic amongst the left. That's a nice way to say it. Um, I didn't really know much about unions. I tried to unionize, vaguely, my job in Staten Island when I worked at Hollister by sleeping with people, or in trying to sleep with people and like, trying to convince them that we needed better pay and better hours, and I did that by being a slut, um, and being like oh, you know. I didn't have the knowledge of unions or the language for unions really. Like, I knew what unions were and I thought we should be in one, my father was in a union, and I didn't know how to organize really a union, so I just fucked people and told them about unions, and it was working.

O'Brien: What was your dad's union?

Kohner: Oh, what's the one with the two horses? The Teamsters. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Because he originally worked for FedEx, and then he worked for the fucking Yellow Trucks we saw driving around the city briefly, that fucking, um, shipping thing which got drove out.

O'Brien: DHL?

Kohner: DHL, yeah, yeah, yeah. So he worked for DHL. He did that. he was like a delivery person. Yeah.

O'Brien: So you were approached at Babeland by, uh ... -

Kohner: My fiancé who was approached by Lina Solo.

O'Brien: Yeah. And tell me about getting involved in that effort.

Kohner: So getting involved with the effort was being told there was a union and going fuck yes, and then me meeting the union organizers, like the people who were helping Babeland unionize at the RWDSU who were Stephanie and Pete. And I remember thinking right away like, oh my god, this is really exciting, I don't know anything about unions but I know I love them. [Laughter]. Which is like the perfect person you want to meet when you're like a union organizer. [Laughter]. Because you get to tell them what you think unions are, and they like, believe you. Um, and I was like, agitating people.

O'Brien: How long had you been working at Babeland?

Kohner: Oh, at this point I was like, only working at Babeland maybe like, two and a half, maybe three months. Um, I think I had my -- yeah, around three months. I had my 90 day review like, at four months, which is like just how Babeland functions. They have a 90 day revitalize they give you four months in, maybe five. Some waited eight months before their 90 day revitalize once, it was just like very funny. Um, and I was agitating people after being approached and talking to like, the union, and I made some fuckups, like I let people know there was a union too soon, and like, I wasn't sticking to the AEIOU very well and like, I was just like, really excited, and I thought everyone else would be just as excited, but people were not just as excited.

O'Brien: What's the EIOU?

Kohner: AEIOU. It's a method in unionization that stands for agitate, educate, inoculate, organize, union.

O'Brien: And by telling people there was a union too soon?

Kohner: So I was really good at agitating, because I'm a very agitated person who is good at making other people feel agitated. I was good at educating, because I learned things the way that you are able to teach your co-workers, which is not through textbooks but by talking. And kind of sometimes I would skip the inoculate part, which wasn't very good, which is essentially like, being like oh, they're going to say this but really it's this. Like oh, they're going to say unions take half of your pay, when really they take like 3% maximum, generally, 3% to 5%. And so I missed that part sometimes. And then organize was like getting them in and signing the like, the like I agree that we should have a union card and like, getting collective action together. And I would bring people to O a little bit too early. I wouldn't have felt them out enough where I didn't agitate them enough or -- I wasn't very good at that part. I'll admit it, I'm much better now. I still agitate really well. [Laughter]. So I wasn't actually super, super, super, super good at getting people to meet like Steph and Pete. I was good at getting people agitated, who then other people could be like hi, you're really agitated, do you want to meet Steph and Pete?

O'Brien: Do you remember any early meetings that were influential for you, or conversations surrounding it?

Kohner: Honestly, like, I was like, gung ho from the start. Like I was just like yay, unions. I was already like, an anarcho-communist at this point, kind of an anarcho-syndicalist. I didn't -- I described my politics as like, what if we didn't have governments, what if we only had unions? Um, but I didn't realize that was really anarcho-syndicalism for awhile. But I had already had this puppy, which is my tattoo -- anarcho-communism, anarcho-syndicalism fag. Um, it's like, I don't remember having any meetings with the unions that were like super influential, because they met me once essentially and they were like okay, we can leave this one alone.

O'Brien: But you described that you were impressionable to their characterizations of what a union was.

Kohner: That was later on. That was actually when we went to the vote.

O'Brien: Interesting.

Kohner: So, although I wasn't terribly good at getting everyone to sign the cards, both because of the hours I worked and also like, the way I got people agitated, um, like, it was actually fairly quick from like, we should have a union to oh, we have a union. Um, we had a vote. We like, so we got enough people to sign the card. We got 70% of the staff at Babeland to sign these cards saying, we want a union.

O'Brien: How long did that take?

Kohner: Depends on how you look at it. So we had a lot of high turnover at one point. Like, so we had somewhere around like 30ish percent of the staff already signed cards, but like a lot of them quit all at once because Babeland was a pain in the ass to work at. Um, and then we were able to get the new hires on, and they were new, so they were like fresh, and we got them pretty early to be like, pro union. And then because they were new we were able to get them to be like okay, I will stay until we vote to have a union. So we got from -- so it took us like, three months to get from 0% to 30%, and then everyone quit, and then we were somewhere around like maybe 15% ish, and then it took us another three, four, maybe five months to get to 70%. I want to say like five months really, maybe four? I remember thinking it was too long than it should have been, but I'm also like, short-tempered.

O'Brien: And what were some of the challenges that people had that led them to support the union? Like what were the difficulties of working at Babeland, or that led people to quit?

Kohner: [Sneezes]. Excuse me. Dramatic pause. Um, so a lot of the issues at Babeland were essentially like this is a lot of emotional labor that we are not getting paid for. And a lot of it was, we're getting physically and mentally ill and like, there's not enough accommodation for that. People were being asked to, when they were calling out sick, to find their own coverage, which is illegal in New York. People were being pressured not to call in sick, people were like, getting looked over for like, promotions for very strange reasons. People were getting fired for no reason. Management was playing favorites. Um, people weren't getting the recognition that they deserved. Uh, the job felt really unsafe. Like, we weren't given proper safety training or deescalation training when we were like, dealing with people who were in a highly charged situation. People are very, very, very uncomfortable around their sexuality. Very, very, very uncomfortable around their sexuality, and sometimes that comes out as anger. And sometimes it comes out as anger at the staff. Sometimes we get spit on. Sometimes our asses get grabbed, twice, in one day, by separate people. Um, and we were like, not given enough tools to work with those situations. So it was like, a lot of that. it was more really social issues than economic issues. There were a lot of economic issues. A lot, a lot, a lot, a lot. Like, first of all, Babeland essentially

does not have full-time workers, like, as sex-educators/sales associates. They still don't. They have like one or two, maybe three maximum now, but I really think it's only two. Or one even. So almost none of us have health care. Uh, back then none of us had health care. Um, there was like three all store meetings that happened in the span of a month, that we kept bringing the same issues to them. And this was while the unionization efforts were just getting started, so like people were getting approached but management didn't know it was happening, and we had three all store meetings and we would be like hi, these are our issues. Please listen to us. And their solution was to get an HR person that no one used, and in the second meeting we were like, we still have these issues, we don't want this HR person, we want you to listen to us. Because the owners were coming to New York. One of them already lived in New York. To listen to us with the like, COO and like, CEO, and like, it was all like, very direct line of like, please run your company this way. Um, all of us are agreeing on this. We're communally coming to you. And they didn't listen to us at all.

O'Brien: So would that be like a petition or everybody standing together or what?

Kohner: No, we were like, just kind of like all like snapping like in agreement. It was like very much like oh, the staff is in agreeance here. Like no one was like upset that he had like, brought issues to like the owners or anything like that. Um, and the owners refused to listen to us, essentially. Or they like, paid lipservice. They would be like oh, we'll listen eventually, or oh, we don't have the money, or oh we don't have this or oh we can't do that or oh, I think we're doing this already. Um and eventually everyone just got sick of them not listening to us and we were like, okay, we have a union, we have the law on our side, so fuck them.

O'Brien: So you, about eight months there or so of sort of card signing, managed to get up to 70%, how, and the employer Babeland found out about it at some point. How did they respond to you all?

Kohner: So they found out about it because we petitioned them to form a union.

O'Brien: Oh, so they didn't find out about it until the cards were presented.

Kohner: Yeah, they didn't find out until the cards were presented. We were like hi, we have 70% of the staff who wants a union, please give us a union. Um, that same day we also filed for an election a, uhh, like vote to occur to form a union.

O'Brien: Through the NLRB?

Kohner: Yes.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Kohner: It was like the same day, because we knew they wouldn't accept it, because they're bosses and they never accept it. Even if they're like, feminist. Um, which I really doubt feminist values if they're not pro-worker, but.

O'Brien: And the union RWDSU, um --

Kohner: Retail Wholesale Department Store Union, yes.

O'Brien: Can you tell us anything about RWDSU broadly?

Kohner: RWDSU I would describe as like more of a bottom-up union. So like, they have open bargainings, they petition the workers of the shops that they're like, in charge of, uh, I would say it's one of the -- I would say it's definitely, definitely, definitely, definitely, definitely, definitely one of the better unions out there. Um, they helped spearhead Fight For \$15, they were like heavily, they have retail action project under them, which is a really great organization, like a direct action oriented retail organization. They're responsible for the Macy's union here in New York City and Zara and yeah. So they're like, semi-large, well-established, bottom-up union.

O'Brien: And when, um, you were approaching people or other folks were approaching people to have conversations, what were kind of your co-workers associations with unions or experiences with unions?

Kohner: So most people were like, oh yeah, a union is cool. Like Babeland had an ability to hire mostly left-oriented people.

O'Brien: Had they ever been a part of a union, or was it their political values brought them?

Kohner: Almost no one. Their political values were like, what made them pro-union. All of them were like, left of center people. Um, it's hard to be a conservative at Babeland. I don't know if we have any. We definitely have a lot of centrists, but it's hard to be conservative. I think some people were very like, apprehensive. Eventually, I think most of the people who were apprehensive just thought they were too good for the job, and therefore too good for a union forming at the job. One of the people who were originally anti-union were part of a union, but it was like the Actor's Guild, which is like, famously kind of messy. Um, so I don't think anyone really had experience at a union, with a union, for a union, etc.

O'Brien: And had most people's work experience been in retail? You mentioned you had worked in American Apparel and Hollister, and is that a common --

Kohner: Yeah, almost all of my jobs have been in retail --

O'Brien: Trajectory?

Kohner: Sometimes we hire people with no retail experience, sometimes -- I would say the more marginalized the person, the more retail experience they have. [Laughter]. So like, you can be hired without any retail or sex education experience, but you have to be a specific kind of person. Generally, a cis white woman.

O'Brien: And do you know how the union first got in touch with staff at Babeland? Sort of who reached out to who?

Kohner: Yeah, so Lina was informed that the RWDSU was a pretty good union from a friend who was trying to get a unionization effort going at their place. They were like hey, you know, RWDSU is pretty keen.

O'Brien: At another retail bus?

Kohner: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Well, kind of a weird business really but what could best be organized under the RWDSU. Um, which is not just retail, but also like, this was, shh, the Tenement's Museum, which has walking tours, but they also have like, a gift shop.

O'Brien: There was a big unionizing campaign through the UAW at the time at the museum.

Kohner: That was the RWDSU.

O'Brien: Oh, I'm mistaken.

Kohner: Oh, maybe I'm wrong. Um, the point is, like, through the Tenement Museum and unfortunately their future failure, Lina got in touch with the RWDSU, um, and then got the RWDSU in touch with the workers.

O'Brien: So, presenting the cards, that's when the employer found out. What was the, uh, spirit or solidarity between employees like at that point? Were folks really strong? Was it mixed?

Kohner: Spirits were really high.

O'Brien: Yeah?

Kohner: Spirits were really, really, really, really, really high when we presented the cards.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Kohner: Almost everyone had been to inoculation meetings where we were like, this is what they'll show you. They will tell you unions are bad, and they will tell you all these lies, and they are lies, and here are the truths. Here are the printed out facts. These are facts. So spirits were high. When they didn't accept the union, that was just like more evidence they didn't want to

listen to us. And then when they started union busting, that was really good evidence that they didn't want to listen to us.

O'Brien: What was the -- what sort of union busting strategies did they use?

Kohner: So essentially what happened is we sent in the cards, and then the very next day or maybe the day after, the owner, who is on the west coast, and the COO or something came by to New York to start talking to us about unions and how unions aren't right for us. Unions are great, my mother was in a union, this is not the place for a union. Which is like, such a standard line. Um, and it's always bullshit. Um, a lot of union busting was actually incredibly emotionally manipulative. There was a, like, all staff meeting, and then there was individual -- actually, I think there were just individual store meetings where like, the owners came to the Rivington location and talked to all the Rivington staff and you had to be at a mandatory meeting. And then they went to the Mercer and the Brooklyn and all these places and they were like, mandatory meeting, dadadadada. Rivington was always the most well, like the closest organized out of any of them. Um, because we were all, like, we were Femme Palace and we had femme solidarity already. Um, and then they would have these one-on-one meetings where they would cry because they were so sad. They felt like they had failed and that they didn't listen to us and they were going to do so much better. [Mimics crying]. And, it's like, such a shame that we want a union, but they're going to do so, so much better, and they're going to listen to us so much more, and they're going to give us all the things we want, we just don't need the union. Unions are great, just not for here. Uh, and they were crying really, really hard. At every single meeting. It was all spontaneous though.

O'Brien: Do you think they got help in planning that, in how to respond?

Kohner: Yes, but not good help. They -- I don't think they really realized how serious the issue was until we, like, until they were seeing that their union busting didn't work and we won 21-4 vote wise. And then they got a new lawyer, a better lawyer.

O'Brien: That 21-4, that's the vote for --

Kohner: That was the vote.

O'Brien: For representation.

Kohner: Yeah.

O'Brien: How long between the cards being presented and that?

Kohner: One month.

O'Brien: Oh, one month.

Kohner: Yeah, which is generally what happens because it's like, we filed both the show cards and also go to election.

O'Brien: And, did their union busting, did that happen -- it sounds like it galvanized people more or --

Kohner: Yeah, because like, nobody wants to be cried at --

O'Brien: Solidified their resolve.

Kohner: And like, lied to? Because we all knew they were lying. It was like, two people who didn't go to like, uh, the inoculation meetings, and it worked on them. But like, one of the people actually after we got a union quit because they were like, I don't want this. But like, fuck them. Um, it was really funny, because we all knew better and we would all text each other like, I just had my one-on-one and they cried. Oh, they cried at mine too. Oh, they used this line. Oh, they used that line in mine, too.

O'Brien: And you mentioned a really strong level of solidarity at the Rivington location between femmes. Tell me about some of how gender played out in the campaign?

Kohner: So a lot of the one-on-one meetings were like, you know, we're women. We're a small company, we're women, feminist-owned. Unions aren't feminist. Unions don't prioritize women, unions don't prioritize women of color. Women don't play into any of these sort of identity politics that we're utilizing to keep you oppressed. [Laughter]. Um, it was like funny because they were going to try and posit like, unions don't know about trans women, but I think they knew that they didn't know about trans women either, because I had said they didn't know about trans women. I described their store to their faces one time at an all-store meeting as the trans masc store, which was my nicer version of the hot TERF store.

O'Brien: Oh wow.

Kohner: Which is what it's been described as in the trans feminine community. The trans fems call it either the hot TERF store, or if they don't call it that, then they call it the hot trans guy store or like the nothing there for us store.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Kohner: Which changed eventually. Now we have gender affirming items for trans feminine people, but like, you know. I think they gave up talking to me really. I didn't get the one-on-one experience that a lot of people got. Uh, I tried to act dumb. I was like, oh, you know, I was writing this like, dissertation in college where I was talking about unions in a historical sense, but I don't know about unions now. I already had my fucking an-syn tattoo or an-com tattoo. So like, they were just like, we don't know if this will work on you, but we're going to try just for the show of it. And I tried really, really hard to play dumb. I tried really hard. If they hadn't spoken to me

before I was playing it cool before there was a union, I think they would have not known, but they knew who I was. They knew what my politics were.

O'Brien: Are there other ways that gender played out in that campaign?

Kohner: You know, Babeland mostly only, like, kind of not really. I mean, they just tried to weaponize their womanhood against us. They tried to say we as women need to stick together. These women who had the ability to fire the other women tried to say that. These women who had the ability to get us better pay, get us health care. Uh, it didn't work, really. Um --

O'Brien: And what do you think helped keep the solidarity strong between people?

Kohner: We were just funnier and more charming than the owners. We like, were able to talk to each other like the owners couldn't and we were able to see past bullshit that the owners were trying to use. They got better at it, but they still were never good enough. Um, we -- so there were four trans women working at Babeland when the vote happened. Two of the trans women were only around to stay for the vote because myself and one of my co-workers had approached them and were like hey, you should really stick around, if not for yourself than for your sisters of the future. Granted there have been no sisters of the future yet, but um, so the workers were able to like actually unite on the kind of like, using similar styles that like the bosses were trying to use against us. We were coming to each other with like, ideas of solidarity. And like, these ideas of like, collective power and like, what women, femmes, non-binary people, trans people, like, people of color, what we can all do together when we are united. Which, we used the union as an example of being united. While they used the union as an example of being divided, which just, is completely nonsensical.

O'Brien: So the vote happened a month after you're presenting the cards, and what was the response on both sides?

Kohner: Well, so the vote happened and we got 21-4. We thought it would be 23-2, but it was 21-4. It turns out one of their union busting methods was having someone smoke weed with a co-worker, like a manager smoke weed with the co-workers to like form solidarity with them, and apparently that worked for at least one person. [Laughter]. Um, grossly inappropriate if you ask me, allegedly, but um, this is just what I've been told, it is rumors, I have no fact about it. Um, and I don't know if I believe it, but maybe I do. Um, we were a little surprised, but we won, so we didn't care. And some of it came to like, okay, let's get those four people to be pro-union by being like, hi, we're still cool, we get that you don't want a union, but we're cool. Um, eventually one of those people who voted against it are now very pro-union.

O'Brien: Great.

Kohner: I think the other two, one of those people got fired, one of those people quit, and the other one is still around.

O'Brien: Mmhmm.

Kohner: But is like, sticking out like a sore thumb.

O'Brien: And were you politically active or politically connected outside of work very much at this point?

Kohner: Yes. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

O'Brien: What sorts of stuff were you doing?

Kohner: So at this point, I was mostly doing not very front-facing work. Um, which I don't think I want to comment on.

O'Brien: Okay.

Kohner: I think during the union vote I was mostly doing, yeah. Yes I was active. No, I cannot comment on how.

O'Brien: No problem.

Kohner: [Laughter].

O'Brien: So tell me about the process of forming a bargaining committee.

Kohner: So after we got the vote, we celebrated. We all went out for karaoke. Um, it was really fun. Uh, well, we all went out for drinks. Karaoke was a different occasion. We all went out for drinks and like, we networked and communicated and we were like, stood solidarity. I'm telling you, solidarity happens most over a glass of beer. Or wine. Or a bowl. Point is, substances help. [Laughter]. And for the sober people who stand in people being sober, [Laughter], eat mac and cheese or something. Unless they're vegan, vegan mac and cheese. Um, [Laughter], but we had like some time off, and then eventually there was like a call for hey, this is an open bargaining session, there's no committee, just show up.

O'Brien: Oh.

Kohner: So like, which I think is like, one of the most excellent ways to do it.

O'Brien: So no -- we had open bargaining here at NYU, but we elected a committee to sort of coordinate those sessions, you had --

Kohner: We're too small a staff.

O'Brien: Oh, interesting.

Kohner: We're a staff of like --

O'Brien: So who was the lead negotiator?

Kohner: We had a lawyer.

O'Brien: Okay.

Kohner: That like -- so what would happen is we would go into the room -- uh, so there was like three rooms essentially, there was the room where all the management was, the conference room, and then the room where we all were. We would be in our room talking about what we need, we'd prioritize what we need, we'd send out surveys asking people like, people to rate on a scale of 1-20, one being the most important, 20 being the least important, and you can't have like, two 20s or two 1s, like, the needs. And we mapped out what people wanted the most and what people wanted the least, and we fought hardest on the things people wanted the most, and we didn't fight it all in the shit. Like, we did fight, because we fought on everything. Everything had to seem equally important. But like, we definitely pushed really, really motherfucking hard on like, the really, really important shit. And that was done by the workers coming to these open bargaining sessions and we were like, uh, we need to prioritize this, we want this, like, I've talked to people, they want that. like, dadada, this that the other, with two union reps and a lawyer, who was like the boss of the union reps kind of but also their friend, so you know -- you know how hierarchies and non-profits can work sometimes, bullshit. Um, and what would happen is like, we would say all these things and they'd be like okay, you can't be like an official voice in there, because we can't be sued, but we're only going to push what you want, we're only going to renege on what you want, and we're going to call caucuses and take time apart whenever we're not sure on something and stuff like that. They always waited for our stamp of approval before they agreed on anything.

O'Brien: That's great.

Kohner: Yeah, no, it's really great.

O'Brien: Do you remember any particular bargaining sessions that had a big impact on you?

Kohner: Um, so they started to really dislike me at bargaining sessions, the management did, because I was showing up to literally every single one of them. Um, there was only one bargaining session I missed, ever, so I would constantly sit across from them, and like, our role as the workers was to be angry. As angry as possible. Like just like, the union has to be like holding us back from nearly foaming at the mouth and jumping at them from across the table, which was mostly an act for some people but for me was literal. There would be like limes where I would stand up and slam my hand and be like, this is totally unacceptable. And I was like, how dare you! And I'd be like, you call yourself a feminist? This is not feminism? [Laughter]. I'm on the labor board right

now, which means I get to meet people every three mos and yell at them, because I was very good at it.

O'Brien: What's the labor board?

Kohner: Uh, I forget what the technical term is, but there's like a shop steward and then we have this board that comes together every three months to discuss ongoing issues and try to resolve them, and I'm on that board. There's three workers and three management that show up. Um, but a bargaining session that really stood out to me was, we -- so there was a dress code that was made because of me, like literally because of me. I would show up in booty shorts that showed my ass cheeks off all the time, because being trans is like slight of hand and you have to bring attention to body parts you like and draw attention away from body parts you don't, um, [Laughter], which is like, really real for everyone, but especially trans people. So my body part that I'm really proud of is my ass. I have an amazing fucking ass, like you could eat dinner off it while I'm standing up. Um, it's like just perfect, [Laughter]. Um, and I would show it off. I'd wear booty shorts. And like, it wasn't to get attention. It was to draw attention away from other things. Um, but like, I didn't like when I got attention. It was just like -- it was like a thing that it was like, people I knew would probably pay attention to but it's socially unacceptable to pay attention to it. So like, I would be able to have human interactions with people, pretty easily, because they all the sudden like, shut down and they were like, I can't notice anything about this person. [Laughter]. It's all very smart. But, management did not like that I had my ass out. Well, they liked it, but then they hired a new manager who I think took issue with it and was like, we need a dress code. Um, and there's this thing called the status quo, which means once you vote, once you like petition to have a union and you're like, waiting to vote, and until you have a contract, they can't make new rules up and they can't suddenly start enforcing rules that they weren't before, and since Babeland didn't have really a dress code before, um, they couldn't enforce one, except they had to bargain one into the contract. But they tried to enforce it on me, only, because I wasn't the only person wearing booty shorts, but I was the only person approached about it. And I wasn't the only person wearing chiffon tops or like, mesh tops, but I was the only person approached for it. Things that like, my coercively assigned female at birth trans coworkers and my like, cis male coworkers were wearing that were like, totally socially acceptable were like, suddenly provocative or like, unacceptable on me. So they made a dress code just for me. Which was, you cannot have your booty out. They were like, most adamant on the buttocks not showing. Um, and one day I was called in, and I got a talking to, hauled into an office and I got a talking to from my boss who was like, you can't dress like this. And I look at her and I go, well luckily we're in what is called status quo, which means you cannot create these rules and you cannot unfairly like, have these rules apply to only me, and since you have no way to officially discipline me, and you have no -- I have no legal recourse, I will continue to wear what I want to wear. So I kept showing up in booty shorts, and then I wore even smaller ones at bargaining sessions.

O'Brien: Excellent.

Kohner: And one time -- and the bargaining session after I got that write-up, I showed up in the smallest booty shorts I had, which also had to no sides. It was essentially ass-flaps, and like, it

was a denim thong if I had to be honest. And I sat next to Claire, who is one of the co-owners, and she like, she was like a very lovely person. Like, she's like, sweet. She's kind of like a lesbian mom, because she is a lesbian mom. And she wants to be on friendly terms with her staff. I mean, this was a company that used to go to metro together and snort coke together in the bathroom. This is a company that used to have magic wand races behind the register, this is a company that would like, allegedly, this is all alleged, I would never say this is actually fact, but this is all alleged, this is like the rumors that go around, that like, maybe sometimes on occasion a person who eventually got famous would, for \$20, show you where your G spot was in the bathroom, because you never knew the G spot was a thing before and you don't know where it is. These are all rumors and like, the kind of stories that get passed around. Um, and I think she wanted like, to be friends, but didn't know how as also a boss, because she can't. So I turned to Claire, in my booty shorts, as it's the bargaining session after I look at my manager and go you have no legal ability to do this to me, and I turn to Claire and I go, are you ready? Because someone had brought up, the lawyer was like, and now I think we have to talk about this dress code. And of course Claire's face just kind of drops a little bit and everyone just looks like really tense except me who was like, really excited and leaning over the table, and I turn to Claire and I go, are you ready? And she goes, no. I go, are you excited? She goes, no. I go, do you like my shorts? She goes, yeah. And I'm like, this is unacceptable, this is like, not body-positivity, this is unevenly applied, and like, I'm going really, really buck wild after someone had been like very reasonable beforehand, like, we dress in this manner and we feel like we aren't talked to about it, but Octavia is. Like very like, they were all like very calm and like, we're here as humans, and I'm like, this is fucking bullshit. And then we got a very liberal dress code in the contract as a result.

O'Brien: Mmhmm. And did you guys get outside support or solidarity from like, other unions or other political groups or employee groups? Like what -- yeah?

Kohner: So we did get a lot of outside support. Um, we contacted two city council members, three city council members. One of them has purview over the lower east side and the SoHo location. Like it is, I forget their names, I'm so bad. Um, another is the person who has purview over the one by the Barclays Center, and the third one is like, the head of the LGBT caucus in New York City, who is really fabulous. Really, really got along with him, and I was at the meetings with all three of them, and we were able to get them to like, sign our letter saying like, we want you to like, accept these people's unions, this that the other, so that was like, the biggest wigs we got. Um, we also had several community members e-mail them in solidarity with us like hey, we want you to know that we want this contract to be signed. Uh, and they responded really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really intensely to that. Like, as soon as they heard -- like I was, at the bargaining session, like after we got community members to reach out to them about something, they were like, you can't do this, you can't be going to the community, like we are a feminist, blablabla, and they're like, really, really nervous. Like, they did not want their image to be hurt. And it wasn't even bad e-mails. We were just like hey, you know, we're glad that you like, have this union now. We're hoping that like, you're going to be like -- very mild-mannered fucking messages. And they bugged out at any of that. But we had like a lot of community solidarity. We had a list of community allies that were willing to reach out to them whenever we needed them to, and we only really had to use like, three of them, because every time we did they like, freaked

out and gave us what we wanted sometimes, which is good because we had a long fucking list, and we could have gotten like, a lot of boycotts going on. Like, lesbian sex mafia would have sworn to never buy from them again. Like all these places would have been like, we're never dealing with you people again if you don't do this. But like, very mild things got us what we wanted. There was one point where we were we're leafleting, um, outside the lower east side location and the Brooklyn location, and I think the SoHo location because one of our coworkers was fired unjustly, really fucked up situation. Um, and a lot of people were actually very, very receptive. They were like oh, thank you, let's get in touch, this that the other. We were able to get in touch with like, a lot of community members and also like, weirdly, because it was the lower east side and everyone lives there who works for tech companies or bullshit, had like two reporters be like, oh, this is very interesting, let me take down this information. So yeah, a lot, a lot, a lot of community support, because people in theory love unions. Um, people especially in theory love unions, just not for themselves.

O'Brien: And you mentioned the lesbian sex mafia. Uh, what were some of the responses from broader, queer sex and trans communities in the city?

Kohner: Loved it. Loved it. They loved that we had a union. They were like, oh good. Loved that we had a union, didn't love that we weren't getting the union, the contract as fast as we were.

O'Brien: Why do you think that was? Why do you think there was broad union support?

Kohner: Because, I mean, like, the history of unions is like, the history of like, like the first unions were founded by women, like, in the United States. Like, this is like, something that is in our cultural consciousness because god knows like, the only way women are going to get like, equal pay and like, favoritism will stop being shown to men, and stop, like, is like if we bargain it in, because the bosses aren't going to listen to us. But the bosses will listen to us if we're all together in a goddamn union. People are very like, invested in our community becoming more organized.

O'Brien: Uh, and for your own politics were, besides wanting to have a better job and wanting to not be mistreated and, you know, your own personal benefit, did you have an analysis about how this campaign might fit into a broader struggle?

Kohner: Yes. Yes, yes, yes, yes.

O'Brien: Tell me about that.

Kohner: So luckily, so Babeland is the first multi-store sex toy shop in America to be unionized. We also were able to get into our contract -- we have the most impressive first contract the RWDSU has ever had. We have so many social like, things set up that we are supported socially, we have better defense training, um, we have May Day off, we have, like, we have um, uh, shit, what is it called? When you're like, given -- like if two people have the same resume, the person more marginalized is given preference. Um, we have that in the contract. Affirmative action! We have affirmative action in the contract. Um, not that it's helped any trans women so far, but we

have it in the contract. It would be nice if it helped trans women, but we don't have it yet. Um, like, we have a very, very, very robust first contract. Something that can be pointed to and be like, listen, they got this because they did this. Because they threatened to strike, they have this. Striking really works. You threaten a motherfucker's bottom dollar, phew. They lose a day of business, they shit their pants. They lose a weekend before their busiest -- like, they lose their busiest weekend? They will cave.

O'Brien: So you guys had a strike vote and a strike plan before --

Kohner: Yup. We had a strike vote, we had a strike plan, and this contract which has been dragged out forever, this price, which they put forward like, this is as much as we can go, we can't budget. And they budgeted just the smallest percentage. Like, every time we met, they budgeted it slightly, slightly, slightly, slightly higher. They'd wring their hands and be like, we can't afford this, we can't do it. We voted to strike, we presented our vote to strike, they already knew because snitches, uh, but they weren't able to mobilize against it fast enough or robustly enough because we had over 80% of the workforce voted to strike.

O'Brien: Wow.

Kohner: Yeah. And the next bargaining session we met up, they had almost tripled their budgeted planned out to give us, and then we got slightly more than that, um, because we were like listen, we're going to strike on Valentine's Day weekend, which means you are going to lose the busiest weekend of your fucking job.

O'Brien: That's huge.

Kohner: Yeah.

O'Brien: How long was bargaining?

Kohner: Bargaining was somewhere around a year, which for like, maybe somewhere around a year. Which for like a company of 40ish people is like, obscenely long. That is like, ludicrously long for like, and like, Babeland did not have their shit together in like, busting the union or like, any of that. Like, it was all like kind of pathetic. It was all really, really sad and pathetic. Um, and they kept doing things that like, they would shoot themselves in the foot by trying to be anti-union but then they would do things that would just like, mobilize the workforce even more against them. Um, [Laughter], it was all really, really silly.

O'Brien: So you all won a contract this February.

Kohner: Uh, yeah.

O'Brien: Yeah, so last month, a month ago or so?

Kohner: A little bit more than a month ago now, yeah, because it was like, I think like maybe the first week of February ish, somewhere around that time. Uh, we got a contract, the most robust first contract in RWDSU history, and it was a contract for queers, people of color and like, trans people, and like, we were able to get it above minimum wage that it will be in a few years, so we'll like, we'll still be able to like, stay in the game, and relevant.

O'Brien: That's great. And, uh, what has happened since the contract?

Kohner: Um, [sighs]. So, they've decided to test the limit of the contracts out. A lot of times on me. I have been given so far three write-ups. Uh, since then. Sometimes like, write ups that like, literally cannot be allowed to happen under the contract. Um --

O'Brien: So how are you all responding to that?

Kohner: We are going to arbitration.

O'Brien: Mmhmm.

Kohner: So here's what happens though. Here's something funny that happened. There was a Yelp review written about me in December. They called me a man and said that I was dressed completely inappropriately, um, they were like, it's winter sweetie, and um, just like in general completely was an incredibly biased review. They called me racist because I'm Jewish and I said Mozel Tov to them when they were like -- and they were like, they must have been racist thinking I was Jewish. And I was just like, or I'm Jewish. I didn't say that because they said that I was racist against Jews and that I was a man and I was like, all these things in this yelp review about a Jewish trans women, and Babeland decided to write me up for that review. So I have a disciplinary action against me due to a Yelp review that calls me a man. Um, and it was because I didn't want to hear this person talk about how they abused their partner. Um, in front of me. And I was just like, I was like, is there anything else we can help you with? Alright, great, if there's nothing else we can help you with, have a beautiful evening. Like very like, you know, I am being very nice to you because I'm getting paid to do this, but I don't want to interact with you kind of situation. Um, I was very polite, exceedingly polite, exceedingly polite. Um, but Babeland wrote me up because of a Yelp review that called me a man. And all these other things. And the union has my back, and they say this is absolutely, completely unacceptable. This is obviously a biased review, we are not even considering this as like, in the preview of existing. Um, so this feminist, trans positive, body positive, sex positive company has decided to align themselves with homophobic, transphobic, anti-semites over their own worker because their own worker is very pro-union.

O'Brien: And how has the campaign shaped your politics and shaped, affected you or transformed you in the process?

Kohner: I think the most revealing thing was, uh, learning that people were against unions. Because like, I come from like a family like, that is like, I don't know -- like, this working class family, my father's a schlub. Like, everyone was like, unions are great. Like, if it wasn't for a union

we like, wouldn't be around. Or like, if it wasn't for like -- like, they're all Republicans now, but they were Democrats back then, um, that kind of family. Um, and I like learned that like people like were against unions even though like, it just like didn't occur to people that unions were a thing that they should be for. So like, the unionization process hasn't taught me really anything or like, radicalized me in any sort of way. Um, if anything it strengthened my support of unions, but only bottom up unions, top down unions can go fuck themselves. Um, but unions who keeps anarchist principals in mind, those are like, really important. Non-hierarchical, etc. Um, but like, it's kind of terrifying that people can only align with unions not because of any sort of like, political leanings or like, moral or ethical leanings, but because like, their friends do. And it like, eh, it's terrifying to think that it works the other way, too. Um, and it's really, really, really eye-opening that like, I knew this happened, but like, to be so directly confronted by people who describe themselves as feminists and as radical and like, can have tattoos from fingertips to neckline and like, describe themselves as queer and radical and left and in some cases like anarchist and like, then be anti-union, is really, really frightening. Um, and to rely on like, bourgie fucking like, identity politics bullshit is really frightening, and to see how it works is really terrifying. Um, but to see how it doesn't work is also really great. So it's mostly galvanizing. That's the word I'm looking for! It's mostly galvanizing.

O'Brien: And do you think the staff at Babeland will engage in other kinds of political action together in any way coming out of this?

Kohner: Several coworkers came to the women's strike that I spoke at. I spoke about Babeland there. I called Babeland's feminism "boss feminism." I said Babeland's feminism was, uh, based on divisiveness and deception and, uh, was feminism used as a tool of the ruling class. And several co-workers came out to that thing, and I know at least two of them would not have gone if I was not speaking, and I know people wouldn't have been interested if it wasn't for the union, and so yeah, I see Babes, which is what we refer to as each other and [inaudible], like, Babes work at Babeland, Babes at Babeland. Babes are becoming more and will continue to be politically robust in really interesting, direct-action oriented ways.

O'Brien: What's the women's strike?

Kohner: The women's strike was March 8, like, this really big one that just happened was March 8, and it was a call for women to like, strike from their workplace. Or if they can't strike, then like, ask other people to strike and like, Babeland couldn't strike because we just signed a contract which was like, no strike, no walkout, which is like the most ridiculous clause I've heard of in my life, and it was in literally every contract, which is terrifying and should not be around and we should just constantly be striking. Um, and that's a criticism of unions right there that I will stand by forever. Um, but I will say it was a working day and I may have seen some people who worked at the union there too, and I don't think any of them were upset that they saw Babes there. Which is, I think, really nice. But the women's strike was this call to action, strike from your work, both like emotional labor, physical labor, paid labor, unpaid labor, everything, like women should not participate in the workforce this way. Like, we need to participate in the workforce by striking it, and like, coming out in force, and I would say, at maximum, 8,000 people showed up in

Washington Square Park. Um, somewhere around 7,000. It was really inspiring and really beautiful. Um --

O'Brien: And you spoke there.

Kohner: Yeah, I spoke there. I was invited to speak there. They gave me a five minute block, but I told them to give a minute to Red Umbrella Project who was following after me because I was like listen, anything I can say like, they can say too, but like different. I'm just going to talk about unions, they're going to talk about other shit. Give them the extra minute. [Laughter]. Um, and I got up on stage and I said, I was introduced as a biological trans woman, which is the greatest introduction I've ever asked for in my life. I asked for it. I get introduced everywhere that I speak or like, read at, as a biological trans woman. I think it's hilarious, and I think cis people should call trans women biological trans women. [Laughter]. Um, and I got up and the first words out of my mouth were hi, my name was Octavia Leona Kohner, and I am a strike success story. And I spoke about how we got nearly triple the budget because we threatened to strike.

O'Brien: It's great.

Kohner: Yeah.

O'Brien: And what are your relationships with trans communities like in New York these days?

Kohner: Very positive. Very, very, very, very, very positive. Very, very, very, very, very, very, very positive. You're hard pressed, generally, to find like, a trans woman who would say they dislike me as a -- they would say they find me annoying. Lord knows there's a lot of trans women in this city who find me annoying, but like, I have such a deep love for my sisters, and I always want like, them to know like, no matter what we disagree on, unless you're a fascist, I like -- you're still a sister. And the same way things with family can be strained, like, no matter what, sisters like, I would literally put my life on the line for a sister, even if I didn't agree with her politically, because no one else is going to do that. And I have more love in my body for trans women than I could ever have animosity. And I think like a lot of sisters, like, a lot of my sisters see that, and it's really nice, um. I threw a birthday party instead of killing myself, and 45 to 50 trans women showed up to it, and I was like, I didn't even know I knew so many of you. [Laughter], actually trans women I didn't know showed up. [Laughter]. Um, and it was really nice. And I would say like, except for some extreme examples, um, two people I could think of ever. I have a very, very, very positive, strong relationship with the trans women in this city, and I love them all really, really, like, I could never find myself hating a trans woman. I could find myself not wanting to be around a particular trans girl, but I would really only ever wish her to be alive at the very least, and to be happy. Like, I just don't want to see any -- I don't want to go to any more funerals. 25, and I've been to enough funerals already. I don't need to do anymore. And I just want people to be nice to each other.

O'Brien: Anything else you would like to share?

Kohner: Um, I guess the only thing I'd like to share is, heh, I really hope, I really, really hope that uh, everyone can look out for each other. And I do think that unions, bottom up unions, are really helpful with that, and I think, I mean, I think -- can I speak to the microphone? I think if you're a trans woman listening right now, I can very safely say I love you. Um, yeah.

O'Brien: Thank you.