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The Sex of Class: Women Transforming American Labor

Abstract

[Excerpt] This book too is about class. It details the rise of class inequalities in the United States, and it offer portraits of the new labor movements that are arising in response. But is also about the sex of class. It is about the feminization of work and workers and the continued reluctance of those who study class and who rally on behalf of ameliorating class injustice to take sufficient notice of this fundamental revolution.

Keywords

Women, labor, movement, United States, union, member, employment, class, work, feminization

Disciplines

Women's Studies

Comments

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THE SEX OF CLASS



WOMEN TRANSFORMING AMERICAN LABOR

Edited by Dorothy Sue Cobble

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Dorothy Sue Cobble

ABBREVIATIONS

ANA	American Nurses Association
ACLU	American Civil Liberties Union
ACORN	Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now
ACTWU	Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union
AFDC	Aid to Families with Dependent Children
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations
AFSCME	American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees
AFT	American Federation of Teachers
AIWA	Asian Immigrant Women’s Advocates
ATU	Amalgamated Transit Union
BSOIW	International Association of Bridge, Structural, Ornamental and Reinforcing Iron Workers
CAAAV	Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence
CAFÉ	Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment
Cal-OSHA	California Occupational Safety and Health Administration
CAW	Committee for Asian Women
CCPOA	California Correctional Peace Officers Association
CCTWC	Child Care That Works Campaign
CEAL	Labor Studies and Support Center [El Salvador]
CFRA	California Family Rights Act

CHAOS	Create Havoc Around Our System
CIOAC	Central Independiente de Obreros Agricolas y Campesinos
CIW	Coalition of Immokalee Workers
CLUW	Coalition of Labor Union Women
CNA	California Nurses Association
CRLA	California Rural Legal Assistance
CSEA	California School Employees Association
CSL	California Senior Legislature
CTA	California Teachers Association
CTW	Change to Win Federation
CWA	Communications Workers of America
CWE	Consortium for Worker Education
DWU	Domestic Workers Union
EEOC	Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
ENDA	Employment Nondiscrimination Act
ETWF	European Transport Workers Federation
FAT	Frente Autentico del Trabajo
FLF	Fuerza Laboral Feminina
FLOC	Farm Labor Organizing Committee (AFL-CIO)
FMLA	Family and Medical Leave Act
FNV	Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging
FOG	Focus on Globalization
FTUWKC	Free Trade Union of the Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia
HERE	Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union
HUCTW	Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers
IAFF	International Association of Firefighters
IAM	International Association of Machinists
IATSE	International Association of Theatrical Stage Employees
IBEW	International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers
IBT	International Brotherhood of Teamsters
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (disbanded as of November 1, 2006)
IDEPSCA	Instituto de Educacion Popular del Sur de California
IHSS	In-Home Supportive Services
ILA	International Longshoremen's Association
ILC	International Labour Conference
ILGWU	International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union
ILO	International Labour Organisation
INS	Immigration and Naturalization Service
IRW	Institute for Research on Women

ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation (formed when ICFTU joined with the World Federation of Trade Unions)
IUD	Industrial Union Department (AFL-CIO)
IUE	International Union of Electrical Workers
IUF	International Union of Food, Agriculture, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations
IUOE	International Union of Operating Engineers
IUPA	International Union of Police Associations
JFREJ	Jews for Racial and Economic Justice
LIUNA	Laborers' International Union of North America
LMO	La Mujer Obrera
MCSU	Marine Cooks and Stewards Union
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NAALC	North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NCHE	National Committee on Household Employment
NEA	National Education Association
NLRA	National Labor Relations Act
NLRB	National Labor Relations Board
NWRO	National Welfare Rights Organization
OFCCP	Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (U.S. Department of Labor)
OPEIU	Office and Professional Employees International Union
OSHA	Occupational Safety and Health Act
OTOC	Omaha Together One Community
PAW	Pride at Work
P-FLAG	Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
POWER	People Organized to Win Employment Rights
RWDSU	Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union
SEDEPAC	Service, Development and Peace [Mexico]
SEIU	Service Employees International Union
SEWA	Self-Employed Women's Association [India]
SEWU	Self Employed Women's Union [South Africa]
SHARE	State Healthcare and Research Employees
SMWIA	Sheet Metal Workers' International Association
STIT	Textile Industry Workers Union [El Salvador]
STRM	Mexican Telephone Workers' Union
STWU	Swedish Transport Workers' Union
TANF	Temporary Aid to Needy Families
TVPA	Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000
TVPRA	Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act

TWSC	Tenants' and Workers' Support Committee
UA	United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing, Pipefitting and Sprinkler Fitting Industry of the United States and Canada
UAW	United Auto Workers
UBCJ	United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America
UDWA	United Domestic Workers of America
UE	United Electrical Workers
UFCW	United Food and Commercial Workers International Union
UFWA	United Farm Workers of America
ULU	United Labor Unions
UNI	Union Network International
UNITE	Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees
UNITE HERE	Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees–Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union
USLEAP	U.S. Labor Education and Action Project
USWA	United Steelworkers of America
VISTA	Volunteers in Service to America
WEEL	Working for Equality and Economic Liberation
WEP	Work Experience Program [New York City]
WIEGO	Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing
WORC	Workers' Organizing Resource Centre [Canada]
WWP	Women Workers Project

THE SEX OF CLASS

INTRODUCTION

Dorothy Sue Cobble

A young female laundry worker is distraught when her boss tells her that she too will have to service him sexually if she wants to keep her job. And what a job it is: paltry wages, stifling heat, the dirty laundry relentlessly piling up around her, the huge unforgiving machines ready to scorch her hands along with the hot starched sheets. Her co-workers agree to confront the boss as a group. And with the help of a local worker organization, their fantasies of revenge take concrete form. They might have won, too, had not some of their husbands and boyfriends interfered; the women were needed at home, the men insisted; and besides, such aggressive public displays were unfeminine.

The story is hard to locate in time or place. It could be pre-World War I Chicago or Calcutta; it could be twenty-first-century Shanghai or San Francisco. As it turns out, it occurred recently in a New York City neighborhood I have walked through many times (Greenhouse 2004b). A rising economic tide lifted many boats in the United States in the 1990s, but class inequality also soared to levels not known since before the New Deal, producing extremes of ostentatious wealth and grinding poverty. New social and cultural distinc-

I thank the many contributors to this volume who offered helpful advice on this introduction. In particular, Heidi Hartmann gave me detailed and substantive comments that pulled me out of a number of intellectual swamps. My husband Michael Merrill helped formulate the ideas expressed here and smoothed the rough edges of the writing. I also thank the participants at the MIT Institute for Work and Employment Seminar for their thoughtful interventions when I presented a draft of this introduction in May of 2006.

tions, premised on material wealth and the unabashed display of it, have emerged as well. These coalescing class cultures sit uneasily in the midst of a society that still regards itself as middle class.

Such class matters have captured the attention of those in and out of the academy (New York Times and Keller 2005; Lardner and Smith 2005). Wealth disparities, blocked mobility, and the loss of good jobs are prime targets for social scientific investigation (Levy 1999; Appelbaum, Bernhardt, and Murnane 2003). Humanists dissect the psychological scars of poverty and the flourishing status-conscious world of the super-rich and the aspiring super-rich (for example, Bourdieu 1987). Governmental bodies, political pundits, and morning radio hosts debate globalization and its economic and social consequences at home and abroad.

This book too is about class.¹ It details the rise of class inequalities in the United States, and it offers portraits of the new labor movements that are arising in response. But it is also about the sex² of class. It is about the feminization of work and workers and the continued reluctance of those who study class and who rally on behalf of ameliorating class injustice to take sufficient notice of this fundamental revolution.

Much of the discussion of the new class inequality, for example, has focused on the declining incomes of working-class men—and certainly their downward mobility is cause for alarm. Yet class disparities among women have widened as well (McCall, chap. 1 in this volume), and the economic situation for many working-class women has been just as troubling. Women started at the bottom and they remain there today (Lovell, Hartmann, and Werschkul, chap. 2 in this volume). If class inequalities are to be remedied, researchers, policy analysts, and public leaders at all levels will need to understand why class disparities have increased among women, why women still predominate on the lower rungs of the occupational ladder, and why market and public policy solutions have had only limited success in addressing these problems.

The phrase *the sex of class*, as used here, has multiple meanings. On one level, it is simply about moving beyond the image of the working class as blue-collar men and thinking about the realities of class and of class difference as women experience them. In 2005, 46 percent of the nation's wage and salary

¹ I assume that class has cultural as well as economic dimensions, following the lead of E. P. Thompson (1963, 9) who notes that, just as there is no love without lovers, class exists not simply as a structure or a category but as a relationship created by and between people. This volume investigates both changing class structures and the shifting identities of groups and individuals.

² I use *sex* interchangeably with *gender* to refer to unstable and changing notions of sexual difference and of what it means to be a woman or man. As Joan Scott (1999) notes, feminists first used *gender* to signal that notions of sexual difference were socially, not biologically, constructed. But as biological sex has come to be understood as fluid and evolving, the original distinctions between gender and sex have collapsed.

workforce was female.³ But of those in working-class jobs—whether defined by low wages or lack of power or just all-around-dismal working conditions—arguably the majority were women.⁴ In short, a revolution has occurred: women have moved from the margins to the center of the working class. Yet our theories of class and our understanding of the jobs workers do, the problems they face, and the kind of social movements they are creating are decades behind these demographic realities.

The sex of work is changing along with the sex of the worker. Work is feminizing in the sense that more women are doing it. It is also feminizing in the sense that women's often substandard working conditions are becoming the norm, particularly for those without a college degree, still some three-quarters of the workforce. The casualization of work and the growth of low-wage, dead-end, contingent jobs are manifestations of this phenomenon. The proliferation of low-level white-collar and service occupations is another. Women have always held these jobs. What is different today is that men are now often in work arrangements and in occupations once reserved primarily for women (Cobble and Vosko 2000).

Paying more attention to women and to women's jobs, then, is essential if we are to understand the experience of the majority of workers. It is also a helpful place to begin for insight into the present and future of men's lives. The twentieth century witnessed a partial convergence of men's and women's lives as women moved out of the household economy into market work and gradually adopted the employment patterns of men: full-time, long-hour jobs; few career interruptions; and a work-first, family-second orientation (Moen and Roehling 2004). As the convergence continues and market work spreads across the globe, disrupting traditional agricultural and domestic production patterns and shifting dependencies to wage labor, women are now becoming the primary and even the sole breadwinners of many families (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002). In short, as the twenty-first century proceeds, working-class men are becoming more like women. They too hold secondary jobs or no jobs at all in the market, and they too feel the pinch of domestic and care-taking responsibilities when their partners spend time out of the home and put market work first.

But the sex of class refers to more than changing our image of who makes up the working class and whose experiences are taken to be the norm. It is about reinventing worker movements and the class politics they embrace. The

³ U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, "Women in the Labor Force in 2005," <http://www.dol.gov/wb/factsheets/QF-laborforce-05.htm> (accessed August 21, 2006).

⁴ Zweig (2000, tables 1–2) estimates that, in 1996, 60 percent of jobs were working class, using a definition in which power and control were central components. He calculates that 47.4 percent of those in working-class jobs were female. Women have increased their share of the labor force since then. They also predominate in the bottom half of the occupations he judged as working class.

labor movement has always had a sex. Most labor movements of the past arose in response to the needs and aspirations of a male-dominated blue-collar workforce. As that workforce changes and becomes more diverse, so too must the labor movements that represent it.

Integrating women into official positions of leadership in existing labor movements is part of what is necessary. Yet it is not simply a matter of inclusion or of inviting women to join movements that remain essentially unchanged. Many men's jobs may be assuming female characteristics and the lives of men and women may be converging as the breadwinner/homemaker divide continues to collapse, yet sex differences persist. Men and women continue to work in different sectors of the economy, doing different kinds of work. They are still held to different cultural and social expectations. Bodily differences matter as well. Fewer men than women, for example, must choose between keeping their job and bearing a child. Labor movements must be sensitive to the continuing realities of sex differences and how the sex of class matters in determining goals, choosing tactics, and devising institutional structures and policies.

Ending sex discrimination should be a priority for labor movements. As is generally acknowledged, sex-based employment barriers have lessened, with college-educated, white women making notable progress. But the progress made by some women should not blind us to the continuing sex-based disadvantages experienced by the majority. Sex discrimination persists and has very real consequences in the lives of working-class women. Full-time women workers earn about three-quarters the income of full-time male workers (McCall, chap. 1, table 1.1, in this volume), and women continue to be relegated to the lowest-paid, least-prestigious jobs. A whopping 90 percent of those earning less than \$15,000 annually and over two-thirds of those making under \$25,000 are women (Lovell, Hartmann, and Werschkul, chap. 2, tables 2.1–2.2, in this volume).

To make matters worse, although many men of all classes engage in caring labor at home and in their communities, the rise of female-headed families and the aging of the population has resulted in increased numbers of women caring for children and elderly relatives without the help of men, financially or emotionally (Reskin and Padavic 2002). The ability of labor movements to improve the lives of workers, men as well as women, is dependent on acknowledging these sex differences and crafting a new class politics premised on that recognition. Such a politics would find its strength through coalition-building *across* the sex divide rather than through adherence to a false solidarity that denies the salience of sex and of sex discrimination.

Perhaps as women approach majority status in labor movements across the globe, the sexual diversity of class experience will be more readily acknowledged. Women have been one-half of all unionists in Canada since 2002

(Morissette, Schellenberg, and Johnson 2005) and are moving toward the majority mark in the United Kingdom, Australia, and a host of other countries (Colgan and Ledwith 2002, table 16; Docherty 2004). In the United States, the feminization of organized labor picked up speed in the post–World War II decades with the expansion of service employment and the decision of many older married women to join the labor force. It has continued unbroken into the present day, with women constituting 43 percent of all union members in 2005 (Cobble and Michal 2002; Milkman, chap. 3 in this volume). Many of these women, both from the World War II generation as well as the Baby Boomer era, looked to unions to solve their problems, not just as workers but as *women* workers. They brought a different sensibility into the movement and pushed to transform its agenda and its practices. They raised issues of pay equity, of child care, of paid maternity leave, of shorter hours and greater job flexibility, and of an end to discrimination on the basis of sex, race, and ethnicity (Cobble 2004). In addition, women and female-majority unions were in the forefront of efforts to lessen discrimination based on sexual orientation (Hunt and Boris, chap. 4 in this volume). Still, as Milkman (chap. 3 in this volume) shows, despite the feminization of labor’s ranks, the U.S. labor movement remains remarkably segregated by sex, with men concentrated in some unions and women in others. These “two worlds of unionism,” to use Milkman’s apt phrase, present a challenge to continuing progress for women because, in many ways, the two worlds remain distinct not only in their gender composition but also in their openness to reform.

The revival of interest in class and social justice movements among many gender scholars and activists could help improve conditions for working-class women and strengthen reform efforts within the house of labor. Younger women in particular view the problems of women through a class or race lens, joining movements to end sweatshops, pass living wage ordinances, or protect the labor rights of immigrants. Historically, working-class women made the greatest advances in transforming unions and raising their own status when they had the support of elite female allies and the backing of the larger women’s movement (Cobble 2004).

But why should women, and men for that matter, turn to a labor movement that according to most commentators is in serious decline and disarray? First of all, as this book shows, although the traditional labor movement in the United States may be a mere shadow of what it was in its golden post–World War II incarnation, other labor movements are arising to take its place. The post–World War II labor movement drew its strength from industrial workers, largely those working in the mass production palaces of the day, churning out automobiles, steel, electrical equipment, and other basic goods. That work is now often done by machines and by millions of factory workers outside the United States. But as manufacturing spread beyond U.S. borders, so did

unionism. One recent estimate is that, although official union membership has declined steeply in the majority of mature industrial economies since the 1970s, those losses have been more than offset by membership gains in the emerging industrial sectors of Latin America, Asia, and African (Docherty 2004). These new labor movements outside the United States, as chapters in this volume suggest, may in the long run end up enhancing worker power and labor standards in the United States.

Of equal importance, public- and service-sector unionism in the United States is far from moribund. Many of the older industrial unions from the 1930s have virtually disappeared, but public-sector unionism mushroomed in the 1960s and 1970s, drawing in teachers, clericals, health-care workers, and others. The movement peaked in the early 1980s with close to two-fifths of government workers organized (Cobble 2005). It remains undiminished today⁵ as large public-sector unions such as the American Federation of State, County, Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) continue to expand their ranks. Of equal importance, many unions such as the Service Employees Industrial Union (SEIU), rooted historically in nonfactory workplaces, have pioneered new organizing and representational practices among low-wage service workers, signing up thousands of janitors, home care, and day-care workers across the country (Cobble 1996; Boris and Klein, chap. 9 in this volume). In July 2005, a number of these unions broke from the official labor federation, the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL–CIO), and set up their own rival labor center, dubbed the Change-to-Win (CTW) federation. Many of these organizing breakthroughs have involved women, particularly women of color (Bronfenbrenner 2005). Indeed, with close to 7 million women covered by union contracts, organized labor arguably is the largest working women’s movement in the country.⁶

As white-collar unionism has flourished in Canada, Europe and elsewhere, U.S. levels have remained low, in part because U.S. labor law denies basic labor rights to millions of managerial and supervisory workers in the private sector (U.S. General Accounting Office 2002). Yet professional and technical associations are thriving, and if historical patterns hold, many of these associations will evolve into more unionlike entities. Both teachers and nurses, for example, organized initially into professional associations that focused on what they defined as professional concerns: status, control over workplace decisions affecting the worker-client relation, ability to set standards for competence, and the overall health of the sector. Gradually, these organizations in-

⁵ U.S. Department of Labor, Women’s Bureau, “Women in the Labor Force in 2005,” <http://www.dol.gov/wb/factsheets/QF-laborforce-05.htm> (accessed August 21, 2006).

⁶ Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Union Members in 2005,” press release, January 20, 2006, table 1, <http://www.bls.gov/pub/news.release/union2.txt> (accessed June 4, 2006).

corporated more traditional union matters: salaries, benefits, seniority rights, and job protection. They also dropped their opposition to strikes and to collective bargaining. Today, union membership among teachers and nurses is commonplace.

The National Education Association (NEA), the nation's largest professional employee association with 2.7 million members, turned to collective bargaining in the 1960s, influenced by the example of its rival, the AFT, which had been pushing for teacher contracts and bargaining rights since the turn of the century (Murphy 1990). In addition to classroom teachers, the AFT organized classroom aides, school bus drivers, and other school personnel. In 1978, they also set up a health-care division, which represents nurses, therapists, technicians, pharmacists, doctors, and other health-care workers.⁷ By 2005, two-fifths of organized women workers worked in education (Milkman, chap. 3 in this volume), an interesting parallel to a century ago when a comparable proportion of union women came from the garment industry.

Nurses embraced collective bargaining later than did teachers. The American Nurses Association (ANA) formally dropped its opposition to bargaining in the late 1940s, but few of its affiliated state nurse associations seriously pursued the union route. In the 1990s, however, the collective bargaining wing of the ANA grew by leaps and bounds, creating tensions within the association over how to represent the divergent interests of staff nurses and nurse managers. In 1995, the 60,000 member California Nurses Association left the ANA over the issue, eventually setting up a new independent national union for registered nurses in 2004. In 2000, the ANA also established its own national nurses union, the United American Nurses, which coordinates bargaining among ANA-affiliated state nurse associations. SEIU and other unions with health-care divisions are courting nurses as well. Currently, some 17 percent of nurses are affiliated with one of the many unions vying to represent them, making them among the more organized occupational groups in the United States (Gordon 2005).⁸

Yet many nurses and teachers remain wary of traditional unionism, finding it at odds with certain long-standing values within the profession. In response, some professional unions are moving toward a new unionism that melds the best traditions of professionalism and collective bargaining into a new amalgam (Kerchner 1999). Such a reconceived nurse unionism, for example, would concern itself with preserving the "ethic of care" and making it possible for nurses to provide quality care without abandoning the union em-

⁷For more information on teacher unionism, visit the NEA website, www.nea.org, and the AFT website, www.aft.org.

⁸For more information on nurse unionism, visit the websites maintained by the American Nurses Association, www.ana.org; the California Nurses Association, www.cna.org; the SEIU, www.seiu.org; and the AFT, www.aft.org.

phasis on “equity, collective rights, and improving the conditions of work and pay” (Armstrong 1993, 320). Nonprofessional service workers, such as the home care workers profiled by Boris and Klein (chap. 9 in this volume), also are struggling to combine these concerns and meet the needs of those giving the care as well as those receiving it.

New forms of worker representation and collective power are emerging in other female-dominated occupations and sectors as well. Immigrant women, many concentrated in domestic and household service, are banding together with the help of worker centers. As Fine (chap. 11 in this volume) details, new community-based worker centers now exist in more than one hundred cities across the country, and many have had a substantial impact on the lives of the millions of immigrant workers, documented and undocumented, who now populate the day-labor ranks of residential construction and household services, scrubbing the floors and pruning the bushes in suburbs and cities across the United States. Welfare and workfare recipients, historically excluded from a labor movement defining itself as limited to wage workers, have self-organized as well with the help of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) and other community-based groups. They continue to demand recognition as workers wherever their labor is performed, however it is compensated, mirroring the rise of labor movements among marginalized female workers globally (Tait, chap 10 in this volume).

This book argues that the growth of collective movements is necessary if the work and lives of the majority of working women are to improve. Certainly, education opens up job opportunities and raises pay (Lovell, Hartmann, and Werschkul, chap. 2 in this volume). And the labor movement should embrace educational access as a core worker right in the twenty-first century, just as it did in the nineteenth. Yet any solution premised solely on individual upward mobility and human capital investment is doomed to fail as long as employers set the terms of employment. Moreover, there will always be a need for non-professional workers, that majority sector of the workforce engaged in retail, clerical, goods production, construction, and support services.

Historically, protecting worker freedom of association and encouraging worker organization has increased the supply of good jobs both for those with more education, such as teachers, and those with less, such as laundry workers. It has also invigorated political citizenship; increased the likelihood of economic, social, and personal security during periods of ill health and dependency; and curbed the worst abuses in working conditions and work hours, thus ensuring that individuals have dignity and time for themselves, their families, their friends, and their communities. Government can take on many of these regulatory and welfare functions, but the most prosperous and democratic societies rely on a mix of private and public provision. Unions and worker associations are private voluntary organizations that regulate

markets and attend to group welfare. They allow for participation from the bottom rather than rule from above. To the degree that they are local, democratic, and decentralized, they also can be conduits for creativity, innovation, and leadership development. Only very few individuals can bargain effectively in the face of organized capital; collective organization is necessary to equalize the relationship.

The Sex of Class is about growing unions and associations so that the needs of the majority can be met. It assumes that labor movements have a future and that women are helping to make that future a reality. It argues that women transformed labor organizations in the past and will continue to do so in the future.

The chapters in this book point to a number of specific changes that would strengthen the U.S. labor movement and improve the lives of working women. First, the boundaries of the labor movement need to be expanded. The traditional labor movement defines its membership too narrowly, often restricting membership to those workers capable of winning a labor contract from an employer. Not only is it virtually impossible for many workers to use the worksite-based election procedures currently available for securing a majority vote of their co-workers, only one-third of the workplaces where a majority vote is won ever succeed in convincing the employer to sign a contract (Cobble 1994; Compa 2004). Not surprisingly, as employer resistance to collective bargaining has grown and workers find it difficult to secure contracts, union membership has fallen.

But why should the labor movement be restricted to those covered by employer-signed contracts? Historically, the labor movement defined itself broadly. It was a big-tent movement, taking in a wide variety of worker organizations, many of which pursued goals other than contract coverage (Cobble 1997, 2001). As this book documents, workers today are organizing collectively and using that power to transform their working and living conditions. They are also using a variety of means to advance their interests. They rely on public opinion, political action, and community organizing to raise workplace standards and end discrimination (Nussbaum, chap. 8; Boris and Klein, chap. 9; Tait, chap. 10; Fine, chap. 11; Quan, chap. 13 in this volume); they seek better enforcement of existing domestic and international labor laws (Crain, chap. 5; Ontiveros, chap. 12; Fine, chap. 11); they are organizing across borders, relying on alliances with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and new labor and feminist transnational networks (Quan, chap. 13; Vosko, chap. 14). The official labor movement should reach out and expand, offering new mechanisms for group affiliation and embracing new strategies for worker advancement. It should move beyond contract unionism and become, once again, a more inclusive heterogeneous movement.

It is not just a fixation on labor contracts that limits the size of today's labor

movement. Samuel Gompers, the first president of the AFL, insisted that organized labor limit its membership to wage workers. There was a certain progressive logic to this a century ago because many in the labor movement were still committed to ending the wage system, either by helping wage workers become small producers and businessmen, as was the principal strategy of the Knights of Labor, or by doing away with capital and hence wage labor, as was the dream of the Industrial Workers of the World.

One hundred years later, however, this foundational premise of the U.S. labor movement bears rethinking. As I have argued elsewhere (Cobble 1994, 1997), U.S. unions need to organize all workers and not restrict themselves to employees or to wage workers. For too long, the labor movement has let the narrow definition of employee in the National Labor Relations Act—a definition that by recent calculations excludes 22 percent of the private-sector workforce (U.S. General Accounting Office 2002)—determine who is and is not a worker. The movement needs once again to draw its own boundaries, which would include the growing numbers of managers, supervisors, and self-employed exempted under the law. It could also include the unemployed, the underemployed, and those on social wages or public assistance (Tait, chap. 10 in this volume).

Indeed, first-line supervisors, inside contractors, and the self-employed were once the backbone of the labor movement (Cobble and Vosko 2000). Today's workers look less and less like the traditional wage proletariat as they sell themselves, their products, and their labor power. Yet petty entrepreneurs, street vendors, and other informal economy workers have created one of the largest labor associations in India, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA). SEWA is an important force in pushing for a fair distribution of India's new wealth and in expanding the boundaries of official unionism globally (Vosko, chap. 14 in this volume). The informal economy is not limited to the so-called developing countries, as is evident in the rise of self-employment in trucking, construction, household services, and other sectors of the U.S. economy. And North American unions, as Vosko discusses, have much to learn from the new unions such as SEWA that are emerging among informal economy workers worldwide.

The chapters that follow also speak to a second important theme: the need for labor to expand its message and address the diverse needs of workers. Female-majority unions were among the first to respond to the concerns of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered members, securing health benefits for unmarried partners and contract language forbidding discrimination against sexual minorities (Hunt and Boris, chap. 4 in this volume). Some of these same unions have helped move the issues of family leave and child care to the center of labor's agenda. In California, a broad coalition of unions came together under the leadership of the State Federation of Labor to lobby suc-

cessfully for the first state law in the United States granting paid family and medical leave; in New York, union pressure resulted in a substantial expansion of the state child-care subsidy program (Firestein and Dones, chap. 7 in this volume). Yet not all unions embrace this new more diverse agenda, and, as Crain (chap. 5 in this volume) recounts, organized labor still lags in its commitment to end the “collective harms” of sexual harassment and sex segregation.

Still, a few unions stand out as models of how work-based organizations can respond to the complex and diverse identities of workers. Just as family leave is not for women only, as Firestein and Dones observe, the workplace redesign pioneered by the female-majority Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Employees (HUCTW) may meet the needs of men as well as women. HUCTW is often cited as an example of women’s ways of unionism, but that does not mean that only women find their model of representation appealing. The union’s assumption (and that of its sister organization in health care) is eloquently articulated by the organizers interviewed by Lydia Savage (chap. 6 in this volume). They believe that men and women want a workplace and a union in which creativity and community are encouraged and in which labor-management institutions foster social and intellectual growth. Because in their experience few workers want a steady diet of confrontation, conflict, and anger, these organizers emphasize partnering with management. Yet they also have turned to more confrontational tactics when other approaches failed, as in their raucous strike over pay and benefit parity for part-timers.

The approach of these organizers underscores another theme of this volume: no one model of unionism is likely to fit all groups of workers. The labor movement is about self-representation, about groups of workers inventing the kind of workplace organization that best suits their own circumstances. A labor movement that tries to impose a single model of organization or a single message or a single strategy will only weaken and marginalize itself. The future of unionism lies in embracing diversity in union strategy, tactics, structure, and message.

A third and final set of articles (Ontiveros, chap. 12; Quan, chap. 13; Vosko, chap. 14 in this volume) links labor’s future to its ability to forge ties with workers outside the United States and draws on the newly emerging strength of global labor standards and global worker movements. It should not be surprising that women are key figures in building these local-global connections. Labor women have always relied on allies outside the labor movement to advance their agenda, whether community groups, consumer organizations, women’s groups, civil rights organizations, legal advocates, or government officials. The go-it-alone strategy was simply not feasible for most working women, given the nature of their jobs and their multiple responsibilities at work and home. In addition, responding in part to the rise of religious funda-

mentalism as well as to the precarious fate of women in the new global economy, a global women's movement emerged in the 1980s that has helped integrate gender into the policies of such diverse institutions as the World Bank, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, and the International Labour Organisation. These chapters, like others in the book, suggest that embracing difference, whether sexual, cultural, or political, is far from a weakness or a distraction. Rather, it is essential to the future of labor movements and of working women's equality.

On the cover of *The Sex of Class* is an image by Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer David Turnley of an immigrant woman from Mexico. Mostly she is hidden from us. Her face recedes into the darkness; only her brilliant yellow work gloves and the blue of her tank top are illuminated, suggesting perhaps that we know little of her except the hard work of her hands and heart. And indeed, as this book argues, the health of our economy, our families, and our communities rests upon the physical and emotional labor of millions of working-class women like her.

Yet this book also suggests that women like her are no longer willing to remain invisible. Her blue work shirt may not be the iconic one of old. Nor will the social movements she leads be the same either. As the essays in this volume make clear, the sex of class matters and those who wish to understand the future of work and of labor movements will need to pay attention to her pose, hand on hip, defiant and female.

PART I

WOMEN'S INEQUALITIES AND PUBLIC POLICY

Chapters 1 and 2 document the persistence of women's economic inequality and offer suggestions for public policy remedies. In the first chapter, Leslie McCall provides a portrait of the changing class and gender structures of U.S. society since the 1970s. She makes a case for greater attention to class-specific policies, given her findings of increasing class divergence among women as well as men and a singular lack of economic progress for those at the very bottom. The second chapter by Vicky Lovell, Heidi Hartmann, and Misha Werschkul makes an equally compelling case for the retention of gender-specific strategies in any package of reforms, given the disturbing consequences of gender discrimination for low-wage women workers.

Leslie McCall's careful charting of the changing economic status of women makes clear why it is so difficult to craft policies for women as a group: the kinds of inequality experienced by women at the top and at the bottom are quite different. Elite women have made impressive strides economically, moving into high-paying professions and seeing their salaries, status, and opportunities soar—what McCall labels “absolute progress.” At the same time, because elite men have made considerable gains as well, the gender pay gap between men and women at the top remains firmly in place. This more limited “relative progress,” as McCall notes, is cause for concern, particularly as it is likely rooted in the greater responsibilities of women for family and domestic labor. In contrast, women at the bottom, like men at the bottom, have made little absolute progress. And their moderate relative progress, as mea-

sured by the decline of the gender pay gap, is hardly a cause for celebration because much of it stems from the declining fortunes of the male members of their households. Remedying their situation, McCall argues, will require policy interventions that have more to do with class and that focus on lifting overall working-class income. Strategies targeted at women will need to be evaluated in light of class differences as well. Increasing women's human capital through education and skill training, for example, will always be important, but poor women will also need different kinds of educational opportunity. McCall recommends reviving apprenticeships, which do not require choosing between school and work, a choice many workers cannot afford to make.

Vicky Lovell, Heidi Hartmann, and Misha Werschkul approach the problems of low-wage women from a different angle. Focusing on the impact of current class-specific policies, they find much to be desired. Governmental wage floors have the potential to foster absolute progress for women. Yet current wage standards are abysmally low, and despite the flurry of new living wage ordinances, these policies only cover a tiny fraction of workers. Moreover, wage-floor regulation may encourage some employers to hire men and raise the salaries of higher-paid workers, leaving existing gender-based wage hierarchies unchanged. Gender-specific policies have their limitations as well. Efforts to integrate physically demanding blue-collar jobs have met resistance, and pay equity efforts have languished. Yet, as the authors note, without attention to changing deep-seated gender norms and practices that devalue women's work and restrict their job opportunities, women will continue to be disproportionately concentrated in low-wage jobs and receive less compensation than men for their labor and expertise.

Both chapters stress the need for new public policies attentive to gender and class inequities. And they rightly point to the benefits of enhanced educational opportunity, stronger government wage regulations, and more comprehensive antidiscrimination laws. As Lovell, Hartmann, and Werschkul note, such policies are needed to "ameliorate the worst effects of the unconstrained operation of free markets on women, minorities, and low-wage workers." By focusing on how workers are organizing collectively and increasing their economic and political clout, many of the chapters in the rest of this book show how these policies, as well as other reforms, can become reality.