Rekindling the Movement

Labor's Quest for Relevance in the Twenty-First Century

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CHAPTER FOUR

Lost Ways of Unionism

Historical Perspectives on Reinventing the Labor Movement

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The history of the American labor movement is replete with surprising twists and turns—occurrences no one could have predicted and often with consequences no one intended. Perhaps one of the more famous stories illustrating the labor movement's unpredictable course is the one historians often tell of the multiple and solemn pronouncements made by august labor experts in 1932 heralding the certain death of the labor movement. These dire predictions, of course, were issued literally on the eve of the dramatic and widespread upsurge of labor organizing that began in 1933 (Brody 1993, 82–119).

History, then, serves as a warning to those who would predict the future: the naysayers who rule out rebirth as a possibility as well as those who think we can *will* a reenactment of the turbulent social movements of the 1930s. Many of the economic, political, and cultural forces that spur the birth of mass social movements are beyond the control of organized labor. What can make a difference, however, and in fact is possible to will is the reinvention of the labor movement from the inside, or what could be called institutional redesign. Institutional innovation by itself is not sufficient to revitalize the labor movement, but it is an essential precondition. As the twenty-first century dawns, organized labor must reposition itself to survive droughts of conservative ascendancy. At the same time, when the opportunity for dramatic advance once again arises, the labor movement must be poised for takeoff—ready to ride, or even lead, the next wave of social reform.

The institutional redesign I have in mind involves fundamentally rethinking the house of labor. I'm not talking about adding a new wing or applying a new coat of paint. I'm talking about rethinking the movement from the foundation on up, about reinventing the labor movement so that it can be the vehicle for the aspirations of the twenty-first century workforce. The industrial form of unionism dominant today may continue to be viable for some groups of workers in some sectors of the economy, but if the labor movement is ever to appeal to the majority of today's workers, it must transform itself radically. New models of unionism must be invented—specifically, models more appropriate for a mobile, service-oriented, and knowledge-based economy in which women, immigrants, and people of color are in the majority.

Like many other theorists, I see us at a historical divide—like the 1880s if you will or the 1930s (Piore and Sabel 1984; Heckscher 1988; Cobble 1991b, 1994). We are living through a period of profound technological, economic, and political restructuring. Labor must change to meet these new realities, and it must once again let old forms of unionism give way to new. The issue, however, is not simply how to reinvent a new unionism; it is how to reinvent new *unionisms.* Academics and activists both must resist the siren call of the "one right way"—or as AFL-CIO president John Sweeney calls it, the "one-size-fits-all"—approach to unionism (Sweeney 1996). History shows that the labor movement thrived when it tolerated and even nourished multiple, and at times competing, models of unionism. Today, as in the past, we need union institutions that are suited to workers in a wide range of jobs—from cappuccino maker to computer programmer to dependent-care provider. Moreover, the labor movement of the twenty-first century must be responsive to the multiple and overlapping identities of a culturally and racially diverse workforce. It must be a means to end discriminations based on race, gender, sexual identity, and other invidious social distinctions as well as a vehicle to rectify class inequities. In short, organized labor must create new institutions and broaden its animating philosophy.

In this essay I will draw on historical research to offer some possible directions for institutional and cultural change within the labor movement. I will focus on the labor movement in two very different histor-

ical contexts—both eras that have heuristic value for us today. First, I look at the organizing and representational efforts of the early craft unions and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) before the New Deal. Then I shift to the more recent past to examine the unionism of women service workers in the 1930s and after. Both discussions raise and help partially answer three questions that I think are fundamental to labor's future: (1) How should labor organize itself, that is, what institutional forms will be most effective? (2) Who should belong to the movement, that is, what should be the criteria for membership? (3) What are the issues around which the new workforce will rally? These questions I believe must be posed and answered anew if the labor movement is to redesign its institutions and practices for a new century.

Beyond Industrial Unionism

The early craft unions and the AFL under Samuel Gompers may seem like odd places to look for new models of a revitalized unionism. Most historians and activists tend to turn first to the industrial unionism of the CIO when searching for clues about rebuilding and expanding the labor movement. After all, the labor movement grew exponentially after John L. Lewis and other labor leaders set up their own rival federation in the 1930s dedicated to organizing mass production workers along industrial lines. But I would argue that today's postindustrial workforce may have as much, if not more, in common with the workforce of the nineteenth and early twentieth century as with the industrial factory workers who built the CIO. Further, the older forms of unionism such as the guilds, associations, and self-help groups of the nineteenth century and the craft unions of the pre–New Deal AFL have more to offer as alternative models of collective representation for today's workers than do the industrial unions of the more recent past.

The majority of workers who organized successfully before the New Deal practiced a very different form of unionism than the industrial unionism that became dominant with the rise of the CIO. Building tradesmen, garment workers, restaurant employees, performing artists, and others recruited and gained recognition on an occupational basis

rather than by industry or individual work site. I call this occupational rather than craft unionism because it was not necessarily exclusive or limited to skilled craftsmen, and I argue that aspects of occupational unionism have much to offer today's workforce (Cobble 1991a, 1991b, 1994). With the growth of a mobile, "contingent" workforce, the decline of internal labor markets, and the rise of new crafts, occupations and professions in which worker identity is primarily horizontal (with other workers in the occupation) rather than vertical (with those working for a single employer or company), a unionism emphasizing cross-firm structures and occupational identity appears viable once again.

Occupational unionism was not a work-site or firm-based unionism with wages, benefits, and job security dependent on organizing an individual employer. Rather, the strategy of occupational unionists was to gain market power by organizing the labor supply; that is, they focused on gaining the allegiance of all those who did the work of a particular trade or occupation within a given labor market. Occupational unionists offered a number of services that helped create ongoing ties between workers and their union. They ran hiring halls and employment bureaus and agencies; they also provided training—what we would now see as professional development—as well as job placement for their members. Benefits and union membership were portable (they moved with the worker from job to job). Occupational unions sought employment security for their members rather than job security. The issue was not fighting for seniority or tenure at an individual work site but increasing the overall supply of good, well-paying jobs and of providing workers with the skills to perform those jobs (Cobble 1991a, 1991b, 1994).

Further, occupational unions routinely took on responsibilities that later came to be seen as exclusively management functions. In many instances, they embraced an approach I term *peer management.* In contrast to the industrial union practice, common by the 1930s and 1940s, in which management disciplined and the union grieved, occupational unionists preferred to both write and enforce their own workplace rules rather than simply react to those created by management. Together, workers decided upon acceptable performance standards, how to divide up work time and tasks, which union members would staff certain assignments, and many other work organization and quality questions. What we now commonly think of as managerial "rights" were

for them subject to peer control: Union members saw it as exercising their craft prerogatives—not unlike what persists today among some professional groups that determine and monitor the standards for their profession (Cobble 1991a, 1991b).

Despite the current severe legal limitations on occupational unionism (Cobble 1994), unions increasingly are attempting to revive some of these historic practices. The National Educational Association and the American Federation of Teachers, for example, held their first joint national conference in October 1998. The primary agenda item was how teacher unions could move beyond the old industrial unionism and embrace a craft/professional model that would emphasize teacher training, peer-established workplace performance standards, and improving the quality of service. The "new unionism" (as it has been dubbed by teacher unionists) was the subject of intense debate on the local and regional level for some time before the 1998 national conference (Kerchner, Koppich, and Weeres 1997; Rideout 1998). Since 1998, both teacher unions have held major national conferences to further the development of the new unionism among teachers and to help invent new models of unionism for the growing numbers of doctors, psychologists, and other knowledge workers who desire collective representation (Maitland 1999; Kemble 2000).

Other initiatives are under way to introduce worker- and union-run hiring halls and temporary agencies among contingent and mobile workers, the most successful of which operate in a well-defined geographical area and confine themselves to a single sector, such as farm labor or telecommunications. Local 164, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers in New Jersey, for example, has drawn on its craft traditions representing electricians to organize teledata workers. Local 164 set up a state-of-the-art training program, provided continuous upgrading to journey-level employees, and monitored the performance standards of the workers they trained. They have created an employer demand for unions: employers in the area now seek out the local, eager to sign union agreements that will ensure them a steady source of competent skilled labor (Powers 1998; Merrill 1999). The sectoral labor-management partnerships pioneered in Minnesota and elsewhere also are reviving important elements of occupational union strategy, as is Working Today, A National Association of

Employees with its emphasis on portable benefits and occupational advancement (Parker and Rogers, this volume; Heckscher, this volume; Horowitz 1999).

The Early AFL and Lost Forms of Organizing

There are other aspects of pre–New Deal unionism that warrant attention in addition to the representational practices of occupational unionists. The Federation itself, especially in its early years in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, experimented with a wide range of organizing and representational strategies that have gone largely unacknowledged by researchers. Most historians assume that the early AFL resembled the lackluster, organizing-averse fossil of the late 1920s and early 1930s with which we are so familiar. Yet my research suggests a somewhat different story.[1]

Indeed, throughout much of its history, the Federation along with its state and local affiliates took considerable initiative in organizing; organizing was simply too important to be left to the Internationals. The Federation coordinated a far-flung and extensive network of AFL volunteer and paid organizers. These AFL organizers helped build up the membership of existing Internationals. They also had the authority to charter new local unions and directly affiliate these new locals with the Federation. By my estimates, from the founding of the AFL in 1886 to its merger with the CIO in 1955, the AFL chartered some twenty thousand federal or directly affiliated local unions (Cobble 1997: figures 1–4; Cobble 1996b, 1–3).

The history of this strange anomalous creature—an AFL-affiliated local union but without a parent International—is both fascinating

[1]The following paragraphs are based on a range of archival sources including AFL, AFL-CIO Charter Books, 1890–1966, Collection 18, George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Springs, Maryland [GMMA]; Directly Affiliated Local Unions, Charter Files, 1900–1965, Microfilm 22, GMMA; Collection 40, AFL, Federal Local Unions Charter Records, 1942–1981, GMMA; American Federation of Labor Records, Part I: Strikes and Agreements Files, 1898–1953, Microfilm Edition. For a fuller discussion see Cobble 1996b and Cobble 1997.

and instructive. The 1886 AFL constitution provided for the formation of "a local body, to be known as a 'Federal Labor Union'" and authorized any group of "seven wage workers of good character and favorable to Trade Unions" to petition the national Federation for a local union charter (AFL 1886). And, as the AFL charter books reveal, thousands did petition for AFL membership, and the vast majority received charters. Many groups of workers simply self-organized; others had assistance from an AFL organizer or a subnational body such as a central labor council (CLC), state federation, or another AFL local union.

These locals demonstrated a remarkable range of institutional forms. Many organized along craft lines: Their membership belonged almost wholly to a single trade. Others were more industrial, representing different types of workers within a single industry. And some were both multicraft and multi-industry—chartered, in essence, as geographic unions because their jurisdiction covered every worker in a particular town, community, or region.

The representational strategies pursued by these locals varied just as widely. Some focused primarily on local legislative initiatives; for example, minimum wage ordinances; others emphasized benevolent functions, offering unemployment assistance or income supports for the sick and disabled. Still others provided job training and employment referrals. A few locals established community mediation and arbitration boards that interceded in labor-management disputes. For a brief period in the early 1890s, the Federation even chartered a number of "nonpartisan social reform clubs" in which "persons of various vocations . . . in favor of union labels, the trades union movement in general, and such economic reforms as will serve to leave to the worker the wealth which he produces" could join together "for mutual aid and instruction" (AFL 1897, 46).

But what is the relevance of this aspect of AFL history today? It bears directly on the questions posed earlier concerning who should be a union member and what institutional structures are appropriate as work and employment relationships transform. The federal locals of the past were *self-constituted* communities; union membership was not dependent on securing employer recognition or qualifying as an employee under the law. Rather, the labor movement itself determined

who was eligible for membership. The AFL issued charters not on the basis of bargaining-unit status or legal classification, but because a group of workers pledged and demonstrated their allegiance to the principles of the labor movement.

The labor movement once again must define its own membership boundaries, and it must once again open up its ranks to a broad cross section of the American workforce. We live in a world in which so-called "employees" are disappearing. According to my calculations, close to one-third of the private-sector workforce is no longer defined as an employee under the NLRB, and the number of nonemployees are growing every day (Cobble 1994, 290). As work is being reorganized, more and more workers no longer fit the mold of the traditional employee directed by others and dependent on a single employer. Many are assuming managerial responsibilities, working in teams that are self-regulating and formed around particular projects or tasks. Others are moving into self-employment or independent contractor status. Granted, many so-called independent contractors are misclassified and more properly resemble traditional employees in their lack of autonomy at work and their economic dependence on a single employer. But others are indeed no longer employees in the traditional sense; they may hire or supervise others or may negotiate a fee for their services with multiple employers rather than receive an hourly wage for their labor from a single employer.

The early AFL and the labor movements that preceded it represented nonemployees: They organized the self-employed, the unemployed, contractors who hired others, foremen, and supervisors—indeed, whoever needed to organize in order to control the market and reform the larger economic and political system (Cobble and Vosko 2000). Today, the labor movement must not limit itself to representing only those who qualify as dependent employees. The goal of labor historically has been to help workers achieve economic independence and greater control of the work process. Wouldn't it be ironic if the labor movement ended up fighting to ensure that workers remained dependent employees? To appeal to today's workforce, the labor movement must not be seen as a conservative force wedded to the constraining work arrangements of the past but as a vehicle for creating more humane and flexible work. Economic restructuring opens up opportunities for

workers (and for reviving organized labor) as well as dangers. An economy in which workers have more autonomy and skills, for example, is also an economy in which the bargaining power of labor, both individually and collectively, is enhanced.

Moreover, the labor movement needs to move beyond contract unionism and broaden the current definition of what constitutes a union. The labor movement in the past did not restrict itself in this way. Historically, collective bargaining was one of many methods used by unions to raise the living standards of American workers. Similarly, securing a formal trade agreement with an employer, while desirable, was not the defining feature of unionism. Why should the current labor movement limit itself only to those groups who see securing contracts with individual employers as their primary tactic and who have the power and leverage to win such a contract? The definitions of the movement must be expanded: Why exclude community groups who are organizing around labor issues, for example? In one sense, there is quite a simple answer to declining union membership: Any organization doing the work of the labor movement should be part of the labor movement. Let the ends be the measure of unionism, not the means.

Finally, the history of federal labor unions reveals a structural relationship and a power dynamic among the various union bodies—Federation, International, and state and local bodies—that differs from the current situation. The Federation *itself* initiated organizing directly; it did not see organizing as a function solely of the Internationals. The subnational bodies (the state federations, CLCs, and local unions) also had greater power and autonomy. For example, the CLCs and state federations often organized and affiliated local labor groups as a way of expanding their dues-paying ranks and increasing their economic and political clout at the local and regional levels. These local union groups, federal locals included, could join the AFL and its state and local bodies whether or not they had parent Internationals. It was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that the national unions began assuming authority over the membership rules of subnational structures and asserting, for example, that CLCs and state federations affiliate only local bodies chartered through a national or international union (Ulman 1955).

As political and economic decision making are pushed to the local

and regional levels in response to market restructuring and government decentralization, community-centered unionism and community-based organizing efforts become increasingly important. Witness the crucial role played by the local community in winning the 1998 dock workers lockout and strike in Australia: The community—family members, neighbors, and friends of the strikers—thronged the docks and made it impossible for replacements to get through. Opening up membership at the subnational level and allowing the CLCs and state federations to become more proactive in setting up and affiliating local labor groups could help foster this necessary resurgence of union power at the state and community level.

Representing the New Service Workforce

The last set of historical examples I will discuss are reconstructed from my research on the organizing concerns and strategies initiated by women service workers in the 1930s and after. These examples suggest some of the new issues that need to be embraced as more and more people, men and women, take on jobs in the service sector of the economy.

Daniel Bell (1973) and other commentators (for example, Drucker 1993) stress the centrality of knowledge work in the new economy. I agree. Yet, of equal importance, especially given their numerical dominance, is the new emotional proletariat—the front-line service workers and paraprofessionals engaged in interactive work (Macdonald and Sirianni 1996, 3). Service work, sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983) tells us, is primarily about emotional labor not mental or manual work. It involves the expenditure of energy to create an emotional state in the customer, client, patient, or passenger. Or to reach back to an earlier sociological theorist, C. Wright Mills (1951) eloquently explained that in the new white collar economy people are asked to sell themselves—their personalities, sexuality, and appearance—not just their brains or their brawn. Service workers, then, especially those engaged in person-to-person or voice-to-voice encounters, have new and particular concerns arising from their particular circumstances. The issue is not just controlling the boss-employee relationship but influ-

encing the customer-employee encounter. Service workers want to affect the rules governing employee-customer relationships; they also want to limit management's intrusive regulation over their personality and appearance. Let me offer some examples from the history of organizing among women service workers that point to the salience of these issues.

As early as the 1930s, union leaders like Myra Wolfgang, later vice president of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE), recognized these concerns as legitimate organizing issues and built a sizeable union constituency based on that realization. Wolfgang moved from organizing dime store clerks and soda counter waitresses in the 1930s to organizing Playboy Bunnies in the 1960s. She helped secure the first union contract at the Playboy Club in Detroit in 1964 and later saw HERE win a national contract covering all Playboy Clubs in the country. Before the contract, bunnies received tips but no wages, and she organized the Detroit Club by sending her own seventeen-year-old daughter in as a union "salt" by picketing the club with signs reading, "Don't be a bunny, work for money," and by the astute use of publicity. Her quips were legion. She once testified before Congress, for example, that Hugh Hefner's philosophy was "a gross perpetuation of the idea that women should be obscene and not heard" (Wolfgang 1972, 31–33; Cobble 1991a; Cobble 1996a, 346–47).

Wolfgang and HERE continued to address the particular needs of their service-sector workers after securing representational rights at the Playboy Clubs. HERE kept the loyalty of the workforce by negotiating new *customer* rules of behavior such as the "look but do not touch" rule, by redesigning bunny uniforms to cover more of the worker's body and by contesting management definitions of attractiveness. The union also defended bunnies who were fired for "loss of bunny image"—a dischargeable offense that often occurred in a bunny's thirties but could happen earlier if management noticed such defects as "crinkling eyelids, sagging breasts, and drooping derrieres" (Cobble 1991a, 128–29; Cobble 1996a, 347).

What servers would wear at work was another contested issue. In national negotiations during the 1970s, HERE and the Playboy Clubs International debated just how much of the server's body would be revealed by the bunny costume. In other less publicized negotiations in

the 1970s involving cocktail waitresses and barmaids, HERE restricted employer choice of uniform. They argued in one case, for example, that the employers provide "uniforms that fit" (some employers refused to buy uniforms over a size 12) and "adequately covered all parts of the body normally covered by personal clothing" (Cobble 1991a, 131; Cobble 1996a, 347).

Other service workers have raised similar concerns. Flight attendants, for example, knew the importance of challenging employer control over customer encounters and employee appearance (Nielsen 1982; Rozen 1988). One of the more interesting chapters in their history occurred in the 1970s in response to the increasing sexualization of flight attendant work. When the airlines shifted away from the marriageable-girl-next-door image to the "Fly Me" come-on (pioneered by National Airlines) and the not-so-subtle ads paid for by Continental with flight attendants promising to "really move our tail for you," stewardesses fought back (Cobble 1999, 28–30).

In 1972, flight attendants formed the first national organization for "stewardesses and their allies," the Stewardesses for Women's Rights (SFWR). SFWR wanted equal wages and promotional opportunities, but their central concern was to control their image and end what they called "sexploitation." The airlines created the expectation among the flying public that flight attendants were there for passenger titillation rather than passenger safety. Stewardesses wanted to substitute their own image of professionalism for the sexualized one perpetrated by the airlines. Instead of wearing the required "Fly Me" buttons, they distributed new ones reading, "Don't Fly Me, Fly Your Self." They also handed out "National, Your Fly is Open" bumper stickers. They filed lawsuits alleging that airline ads created a hostile work environment. They also left their male-dominated unions in droves in the 1970s, setting up independent, female-led organizations in which issues of professional image, control over one's appearance (part of what I call "body rights"), and the character of customer interaction would be taken seriously as issues (Cobble 1999, 28–30).

These issues remain very much alive today. In 1998, for example, grocery clerks of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) local in Oakland, California, sparked a media firestorm by protesting Safeway's new "smile rules" for employees. Grocery store clerks were

required to smile and make extended eye contact with all customers. They must also offer to carry groceries into the parking lot for anyone needing assistance. Management's substitution of its own rules for service workers' own highly developed nonverbal and verbal methods of controlling interactions with the public, especially with aggressive men, had disastrous results. Worker job satisfaction declined, sexual harassment increased, and, in one case, a female employee was sexually assaulted in the parking lot when management insisted, over her objections, that she help two male customers carry their groceries to the car. The UFCW's complaints did not generate much of a response from Safeway. But local radio call-in talk shows, newspaper editorial columns, and Internet sites buzzed with opinions about whether "smile rules" were a serious labor issue and who had the right to set the rules of social encounter in the workplace (for example, Veverka 1998; McNichol 1998).

Of course there are issues other than the employee-customer relationship that will be crucial concerns for the twenty-first-century workforce. Issues of economic justice, opportunity, and security will not disappear. Raising wages for the vast army of low-paid service workers, ending unfair and discriminatory treatment, and establishing labor protections and benefits as a right of citizenship rather than as a function of employment will all be important reform priorities.

Yet it is important for the labor movement to acknowledge that the concerns of large numbers of today's workers, service and otherwise, are as much psychological as economic. Since World War II, the numbers of college-educated workers have increased significantly. That shift along with other social and cultural changes has meant that more workers now expect jobs that offer autonomy, variety, and the opportunity for self-development. They also want work lives that are compatible with their family and civic commitments.

The Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW) is one example of a union responding to this wide range of worker concerns. They have pushed aggressively on economic issues such as wages and benefits, winning major monetary gains for the clerical and healthcare workers they represent. Yet as Kris Rondeau of HUCTW recently explained, the union's current goals, generated in response to member

priorities, involve "work redesign," creating opportunities for "deep learning," and negotiating release time for what she called "community building." This latter provision would allow workers paid time off from the job so that they could remain active in vital community institutions such as the Parent Teacher Associations in their local public schools (Rondeau 1998).

A unionism reconceived to meet the needs of the new workforce will move away from treating people as interchangeable units and focus on representing the *individual* as well as the *collective* interests of employees. That shift of course is a fundamental challenge to many current union practices, from seniority to across-the-board wage packages. Yet there are alternative labor movement traditions to draw on. The performing arts unions, for example, still negotiate a collective contract that sets minimum standards while allowing individuals to bargain supplemental enhancements (Gray and Seeber 1998). And, as Pat Armstrong (1993, 308–12) maintains in her work on nurses, the strongest representational strategy for nurses has been and continues to be one that blends concern for individual and collective needs. Nurse unionism builds on the best of the professional traditions—that is, a concern for "collegial participation, individual rights, and influencing public policy"—without abandoning the traditional union emphasis on "equity, collective rights, and improving conditions of work and pay."

In conclusion, this essay has raised and attempted to answer some fundamental questions facing a labor movement in need of revival—questions about how the movement should be structured, who should join, and what issues should lie at its core. I have relied on examples from labor's own history to help suggest alternatives to current union practice and to identify some past practices that warrant reclaiming. What are these best union past practices? Let me offer four as a partial summary: (1) a unionism with fluid, porous membership boundaries that shift as the nature of work shifts; (2) a unionism with the structural capacity to organize occupationally and geographically as well as industrially; (3) a movement with a structure in which all levels—national, local, state, and regional—are activated and empowered economically as well as politically; and (4) a movement open to diverse means as well as diverse ends.

History makes it clear, however, that the solutions for one generation were never wholly the solutions for the next. The unionism of the future may look in part like the unionism of the past, but it also will transcend that past in ways we have yet to imagine. Our task, then, if a new and revitalized labor movement is to be built for the twenty-first century, is to have the courage to risk change and the courage to think beyond our traditions, past and present.