



CHAPTER 9

The Promise of Service Worker Unionism

Dorothy Sue Cobble and Michael Merrill

Despite C. Wright Mills' pioneering efforts in *White Collar* (1951) to draw attention to the "giant salesroom" of employee-customer exchange or Daniel Bell's riveting descriptions of "people work" in his 1973 classic *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, labor and industrial relations scholars paid little attention to the service economy until recently. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, they rarely strayed far from the factory floor; and when they did, service workers were more often than not understood through manufacturing metaphors like "sweatshop," "speed-up," "white-collar proletariat," and the "office assembly line." There were exceptions, of course. Flight attendants, department store clerks, waitresses, and fast food workers, for example, were all subjects of revealing studies by the early 1990s (Hochschild, 1983; Benson, 1988; Cobble, 1991a; Leidner, 1993). But the theoretical frameworks governing studies of workers and work processes in the social sciences as a whole continued, for the most part, to be drawn from an imaginary¹ populated by industrial wage-earners (male) and white-collar salaried managers (male). The knowledge and efforts of the predominantly female service workforce remained largely unacknowledged and unexplored.

Now, writing in 2008, "managing service encounters," "empowering front-line service workers," and piercing the mysteries of the Wal-Mart service economy have taken center stage as topics of academic inquiry and business concern. And despite grouching from some labor leaders that





“we’ll never build a real labor movement with a bunch of nurses,” the conventional wisdom in the U.S. labor movement, particularly in the new Change-To-Win (CTW) federation, formed in July 2005,² is not only that service workers are “organizable” – a premise which had long been in doubt – but also that they are the future of trade unionism.

The new thinking among trade unionists should not be surprising since, as this chapter will detail, almost all the recent growth in union membership in the U.S. has been in service occupations and industries. But do these now substantial union victories among service workers herald the beginnings of a new unionism that could transform service work and service economies? Will the growth of service unions in the twenty-first century have the same impact on the wealth and welfare of wage-earners as the rise of large industrial unions had on working-class fortunes a half century ago? Will this new unionism help revalue service work and raise at least some portion of the millions and millions of low-wage service workers into the middle class? After a brief description of the changing demographics of U.S. labor unions and the new organizing occurring among white and blue-collar service workers, the first part of this chapter takes up these questions by analyzing both the new models of service worker unionism that have emerged and the challenges that service workers and their allies must overcome in their attempts to organize.

The examples in this section of the chapter will be drawn primarily from Cobble’s long-term research on the unionization of service workers in the U.S., but we see the general arguments as relevant to many “advanced” industrial countries. As Dolvik and Waddington (2005) have noted, more than 70 percent of employment in many OECD countries is now in service industries, and, of equal importance, with the privatization of services, or the rise of “marketized services” (to use their term), a growing share of workers face the more privatized labor market dynamics common to the United States. In addition, our conclusions have been informed by the insights of the many non-U.S. scholars writing on service work and labor movement revitalization (Dolvik and Waddington, 2005; Korczynski, 2002; Tannock, 2001; Simms, *et al.*, 2000; Simms, 2003).

In the second section of this chapter, we examine the rise of a new service worker unionism, arguing that contract unionism by itself is not enough to reverse the fortunes of those in the lowest-paying service occupations, a disproportionate number of whom are women and minorities. The struggle for union recognition and signed contracts with employers is a crucial aspect of raising the status of service workers. But the movement to transform service work will need to be broad-based. It will need to include workers organizing *outside* the traditional trade unions in community, women’s and civil rights organizations and their middle-class allies in government, business, and academe. It also will need





to embrace the community unions and worker centers emerging among low-income workers as well as the NGOs and the other global institutions which have sprung up everywhere to advance labor and human rights, institute new international labor standards, and regulate corporate conduct. Thus, in the next section of the chapter, we will take a closer look at these efforts and at what they have to teach us about the limits of a reform strategy based solely on contract unionism.

Finally, in the concluding section of the chapter we argue that raising the standards of service workers will require new ways of thinking about labor and labor movements. In the social imaginary we have inherited, “labor” is a process by which “man” (literally) engages and dominates “nature,” creating value by wrestling “goods” out of resistant raw materials with skill, will, and tools. In this imagined world, workers organize themselves to fight a “class war” against their employers, sometimes of “position” and sometimes of “maneuver,” so that they may have a determining say in the distribution of the things their labor makes and of the income earned by their sale. This older imaginary captured important elements of the lived realities of earlier generations of wage earners in the industrialized areas of the world, and it still does capture essential truths about the lives of many workers today, especially those in newly industrializing countries. But it obscures the circumstances and aspirations of the growing number of service workers in the new economies of the twenty-first century.

To understand these new economies, and the labor movements they are spawning, we need an imaginary that does not privilege the making of things over the provision of services. In such an imaginary, “labor” would be as much about cooperating with and taking care of one another as about knocking nature into useable shapes; and labor movements would be as much about strengthening the bonds that hold us together and increasing the pleasure we take in each other’s company as about ensuring an equitable distribution of goods, whether in the household, the firm, or the wider society. The chapter ends, then, with a discussion of how paying closer attention to the specificities of service labor can enrich our social theory, expand our understanding of work and work processes, and help move us toward a world in which all labor receives the recognition and reward it deserves.

The Rise of Service Worker Unionism

The power of U.S. unions – as measured by membership figures or by political and economic clout – has seemed to most commentators to be in free fall for the last quarter century. In 1979, organized labor still claimed close to a fourth of all workers, some 23 percent; but by the end of the 1980s the figure had dropped to 15 percent. It has been inching downward





ever since. In 2005, union density (the percentage of the labor force that is unionized)³ stood at 12 percent in the U.S., a drop of 21 points since its high water mark of 33 percent in 1953 (USDL, 2006). One has to go back almost a hundred years, to before World War I, to find figures so low. A similar decline occurred in the U.K. and many other Western European countries, with U.K. union membership slipping from a high of 56 percent in 1979 to around 30 percent today (USDL, 2006; Korczynski, 2002, p. 175).

To take just the U.S. case, the story of unrelenting union decline changes rather dramatically if one looks beneath these generic figures to union membership in various sectors of the economy. Many of the industrial unions in mining and mass production have virtually disappeared in the last quarter century, and unionism in construction and among small manufacturers is similarly diminished. Yet unionism among service workers is far from moribund. Indeed, it has been on the rise since the 1960s, fueled first by the emergence of public sector unions in the 1960s and 1970s and more recently by the continuing growth of unionism among low-wage service workers in both the public and private sectors.

Public sector unionism blossomed in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s, as one group of workers after another – most of them in service occupations – turned to unionization. By the early 1980s, when public sector unionism peaked, close to two-fifths of U.S. government workers had organized (Cobble, 2005; USDL, 2006). Over the next quarter century, public sector unionism held steady. In 2005, with private sector unionism hovering at 7 percent, public sector density sat at a respectable 37 percent. Unionism in public services enjoyed a similar resurgence in the U.K. and Europe, with average union densities in public service today of 50 percent in the EU countries (Dolvik and Waddington, 2005: 320).

Teachers were among the first and largest occupational group to embrace unionism in the U.S. 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 American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which had been pushing for teacher contracts and bargaining rights since the beginning of the twentieth century (Murphy 1990, Table 6).

Other public sector workers turned to unionism as well in this era, enabled by President Kennedy's 1962 Executive Order 10988 and inspired in part by the civil rights and women's movements. The 1968 Memphis sanitation strike – which ended with a settlement in the workers' favor only after the tragic assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. riveted world attention to the substandard wages and working conditions of the African-American garbage collectors – was part of an upsurge of organizing among minority and blue-collar workers in municipal service jobs that spread public sector unionism throughout the South, boosting the





membership of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) over the million mark.

The growth of feminism in the 1970s helped spur a parallel wave of unionism among white and pink-collar women, including thousands of government social workers, librarians, clericals, classroom aides and others. Unionization among these same groups increased in the private sector as well in the 1970s (Cobble, 2005). To be sure, the valiant efforts by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) District 925 and other unions to organize private sector clericals in insurance and banking floundered. But clerical and administrative staff in quasi-public settings such as colleges and universities, in publishing houses, and elsewhere successfully organized, raising overall office-worker unionization to 16 percent by the end of the 1980s (Cobble, 1999).

Of equal importance was the continuing growth of unionism in the 1980s and 1990s among low-wage service workers in both the private and public sector, led largely by the SEIU. Launched in the early 1980s, SEIU's "Justice for Janitors" campaign succeeded in organizing some 200,000 private sector janitorial and maintenance workers in little over a decade. By the end of the 1990s, re-built and expanded janitorial locals existed in most of the major metropolitan centers outside the South (Cobble, 1996; Milkman and Wong, 2001). SEIU also reached out successfully to the home care aides who assist the elderly and disabled in their homes. By 1995, some 45,000 home care workers, predominantly Black and Latina women, had signed up in California alone and flourishing union locals existed in Chicago, New York, and other cities. In 1999, after a twelve-year campaign, an additional 74,000 home care workers in Los Angeles County voted for union representation, making it one of the largest single union victories since the massive organizing campaigns among mass production workers in the 1930s (Delp and Quan, 2002; Boris and Klein, 2007). Since the 1999 L.A. victory, momentum continues to build with current home care membership topping 300,000 (SEIU, 2007b).

Most recently, SEIU launched a national campaign among child care workers. One of their first large-scale breakthroughs occurred in April 2005 when 49,000 Illinois family child care providers voted to unionize and then, shortly thereafter, secured a historic contract which not only helped more families afford child care but also raised pay and guaranteed training and access to health care for the providers. Although some center-based child care workers organized with the United Child Care Union, an AFSCME-affiliated union based in Philadelphia as well as with SEIU, the successes have been overwhelmingly among home-based child care providers, with 90,000 joining SEIU in the last two years (SEIU, 2007a; SEIU, 2007c; Smith, 2004: 426–30).

Lastly, SEIU, like the AFT and other unions, has sought to expand





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unionism in the health care field, often by affiliating nurses and other health care workers already organized into professional associations. Although the American Nurses Association (ANA) dropped its opposition to bargaining in the late 1940s, few of its affiliated state nurse associations seriously pursued the union route. Yet in the last decade, as the registered nursing shortage reached crisis proportion and the conditions of staff nurses worsened, dissatisfaction within nurse associations over how to represent the divergent interests of staff nurses and nurse managers flared. In 1995, the 60,000-member California Nurses Association left the ANA over the issue. By 2004, they had set up a new independent national union for registered nurses and had a growing membership outside California. Seventeen percent of nurses are now affiliated with one of the many unions vying to represent them, making them among the more organized occupational groups in the U.S. (Gordon, 2005b).

Expanding Service Worker Unionism

The obstacles to expanding service worker unionism are formidable, particularly in the U.S. private sector, where employers wield enormous power, largely unconstrained by law or political considerations. Despite polls showing that a majority of U.S. workers desire collective representation at work (Freeman, 2007: 83–5), actually winning a union election and securing a contract is far from easy. The National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), the federal law passed in 1935 to foster private sector collective bargaining, currently exempts from protection some one-third of the private sector labor force, including domestic and agricultural workers; professional, managerial, supervisory and “confidential” employees; and the so-called “independent contractors” or “self-employed” (Cobble, 1994; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2002). In addition, many organizing campaigns conducted under NLRA auspices face legal delays and employer opposition that render guarantees of freedom of choice and the right to collective association farcical. The number of workers fired in organizing campaigns continues to rise in the U.S., and because many employers refuse to negotiate first contracts even *after* a majority of workers has voted for union representation only a third of all union victories currently result in a signed contract (Compa, 2003: 32–52; Freeman 2007: 80–2).

Any expansion of private sector service worker unionism in the U.S. will depend in part on the degree to which this hostile legal and social environment can be modified. Indeed, U.S. labor law presents particular obstacles to organizing many service workers (Cobble, 1994; Cobble and Merrill, 1994). U.S. labor law assumes a long-term, continuous relation to a single employer. Bargaining units are worksite based and elections are conducted over a period of months or years. Yet many service workers





move from job site to job site, “working the circuit” as it is known among waitresses. The long, drawn-out election procedures typical under the NLRA framework make organizing a mobile workforce difficult, since few stay with one employer long enough to utilize the conventional election procedures and card-signing associated with NLRA-based worksite organizing. The restraints on secondary boycotts, sympathy and secondary strikes, mass picketing, and other kinds of economic action inscribed in U.S. labor law also make it difficult for workers, particularly those in small establishments or in sectors of the economy where sub-contracting is prevalent, to exert much economic pressure on their employers.

In order to organize successfully in today’s service sector, U.S. unions must figure out innovative ways of exerting pressure on recalcitrant employers and bypassing an ill-suited and archaic legal framework. And not surprisingly, many of the most successful campaigns to date in the U.S. have relied on such nontraditional organizing strategies as will be detailed later in this chapter. U.S. unions, both in the CTW federation as well as within the AFL-CIO, also are mounting political and public relations campaigns to call attention to the constricted state of worker rights and freedom of association and to push for a major overhaul of labor law.⁴

These ongoing efforts to address the problems of employer hostility and legal constraints on organizing in the U.S. are necessary and commendable. Yet service worker unionism in the U.S. as well as in many other service economies will remain a marginal and minority movement until there are comparable efforts to transform unions themselves. Labor movements as we know them today arose over a half century ago as institutions premised largely on meeting the needs of a mass production factory workforce. The *majority* of workers, however, are now doing different kinds of work, often in quite different kinds of work settings. In part, the ability of organized labor to recognize these discontinuities and remake itself to attract this new workforce will determine whether this new majority opts for paternalistic, individualistic, or collective strategies to improve the terms and conditions of their employment. The re-making of unions will need to be fundamental, involving a transformation of union institutions, cultures, and values. New models of unionism must be invented – models that are more appropriate for a post-industrial service workforce.⁵

Service workers are often found in work settings that differ dramatically from those common to the manufacturing workforce of the recent past.⁶ Many tend to be found in smaller establishments (restaurants, retail shops, dental offices) where employee-employer relations may be personal and collaborative rather than adversarial, formalized, and highly bureaucratic. The employment relationship is not the classic one described by Marx, nor is it even the conventional us-versus-them world view that often prevails in large bureaucratically-run enterprises. The line between employee and





employer is more indistinct than in the traditional, blue-collar, mass production factory.⁷

In addition, a new third party, the customer, complicates and transforms the old dyad. Many service workers, in fact, perceive this third party as *more* important in determining their wages and working conditions than the employer (Cobble, 1991a: 44–8). This attitude prevails regardless of whether the worker's income is derived wholly from the customer (the professional in private practice or the self-employed home cleaner), only partially so (the waiter, bartender, or cab driver), or not at all (the nurse or teacher).

Lastly, many jobs in the service sector are occupationally rather than worksite-based, and therefore exist more in an external than an internal labor market. In the former, lateral mobility is crucial for improving one's wages and career prospects as well as for escaping bad management or a declining customer base. Furthermore, the education and training required for these occupations is usually external to the employer and less firm-specific. A unionism modeled on the worksite-based unionism dominant among industrial workers, with its emphasis on job security in an individual firm, firm-based rather than portable benefits, and vertical rather than lateral mobility is a poor fit for today's service workforce. In a break from industrial union traditions, many service workers need a unionism that facilitates rather than retards employee "exit," and that continues to represent and advocate for them as they move from job to job. In other words, they need an organization that provides portable benefits, enhances access to life-long learning and training opportunities and increases their employability and so-called "human capital." Cobble (1991a; 1991b) has called this approach "occupational unionism" and has documented its appeal to waitresses and other non-factory workers before the rise of mass production unionism in the 1930s. Aspects of this model would appeal to a significant portion of the service workforce today.

New Organizing Strategies

Some unions, as we have seen, have risen to the challenge and successfully organized in the service sector. What lessons can be learned from these successful campaigns? Can they be replicated in other settings, among other groups of service workers? Are these victories the advance guard of a more large-scale revitalization of service worker unionism that might rival the industrial upsurge of the 1930s?

The home care organizing drives of the 1990s offer the richest case for analysis. In many ways, home care unionization is the model for how organizing low-wage service workers, particularly those in front-line or interactive service jobs, can occur. The home care campaigns built on the





strategies used in organizing janitors in the 1980s, but they also moved beyond them. The strategic key to the janitorial victory, according to Stephen Lerner (1991), director of the Building Service Division of SEIU, was a rejection of the site-by-site NLRA-style organizing typically used by most unions. Rather than organize the individual subcontractors or cleaning vendors who hire and supervise a janitorial workforce scattered across hundreds of cleaning sites in downtown office buildings, SEIU targeted all janitors in a particular region or labor market.⁸ They also used civil disobedience, political pressure, community boycotts, and “shaming” publicity, going after the subcontractor’s employer – mainly commercial landlords – and their tenants (Howley, 1990). But they cleverly wielded the carrot as well as the stick, proposing in the recent Houston campaign, as in others, that the wage hikes agreed to by unionized employers would not take effect until a majority of employers in the local labor market had agreed to sign. This awareness of the need to lower the union wage penalty on organized employers helped to gain the initial cooperation of employers and positioned the union as an ally of high-road employers in ensuring that the bottom-feeders would not gain an undue share of the market.⁹

Home care organizers adopted many of these same non-traditional approaches. Home care aides, like janitors, are scattered across various worksites; typically, they work alone in individual homes tending to the needs of the elderly and the disabled. Many of the leaders of the home health-care organizations were steeped in the community-based organizing approaches of the National Welfare Rights Organization, the United Farm Workers, and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). These community-based strategies blended well with SEIU’s desire to move beyond worksite campaigns in their labor organizing. The union orchestrated campaigns that embraced all home care aides within a particular locale and that drew upon local institutions and community leaders for support (Kelleher, 1986, 1994; Walker, 1994; Boris and Klein, 2007). In the case of janitors and home care aides, ethnic and racial bonds as well as occupational ties helped forge and sustain worker solidarity across worksites. In Los Angeles, for example, where the “Justice for Janitors” campaign secured its initial crucial breakthrough, four-fifths of cleaners were Hispanic, with many recent immigrants from Mexico (Pastreich, 1994). Similarly, home care aides, as noted earlier, are primarily African American and Latina women (Kilborn, 1994).

Many home care groups reached out to the clients as well, making the case that raising wages for aides would help clients secure the best aides and maintain uninterrupted quality service. Since social service agencies often pay the wages of home care aides from Medicaid and other public funds (although clients may hire and supervise their aides), clients could support wage increases for their “employees” without having to pay their





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increases themselves. Clients did express fear, however, that unionization might lessen their control over aides (Walker, 1994).

In California, SEIU was particularly successful in building alliances with home care clients. In the early stages of organizing, SEIU realized that a political campaign would be necessary simply to overcome the legal obstacles. Home care aides were not “employees” under the NLRA definition; neither was there an “employer” with whom the union could bargain. SEIU therefore began to organize the clients as well as the aides. Many of the clients had been active in the disability movement for years and were not only “organizable” but also politically sophisticated. Their support helped convince the state to set up an “employer of record” who could bargain with the union over the wages and working conditions of home care workers. In other regions, SEIU created important alliances with civil rights organizations, churches, and senior groups (Boris and Klein, 2007).

Many of today’s successful organizing drives across a wide range of work settings combine grassroots or “bottom-up” pressure with “top-down” pressure on employers (Milkman and Wong, 2001). The janitorial and home care campaigns confirm the importance of adopting this dual strategy. Yet the home care example points to one of the key reasons why unionization has risen among service occupations since the 1960s and why it continues to outpace unionization in other sectors. Like earlier campaigns among teachers, nurses, and other front-line service workers in health care and education, home care workers were conscious of creating a unionism which could help solve the problems of both service producers and service consumers. Not only would the union work to advance the economic status of its members; it would seek to improve the lives of those in the larger community.

The child care campaigns, now modeled in large part on the winning strategies in home care, reflect this same emphasis. SEIU and other unions organizing child care workers are careful to forge alliances with parents and repeatedly stress the ways in which improving caregiver pay and working conditions enhances the quality of care recipients receive (Whitebook, 2002; Smith, 2004). The first union contracts negotiated by family child care providers in the states of Washington, Illinois, and California translated these ideas into reality by expanding state child care subsidies to working families, increasing the number of nutritious meals available to children, and instituting pay raises based in part on meeting higher standards of quality care (SEIU, 2007c; SEIU, 2007d). The July 2007-June 2009 Collective Bargaining Agreement between SEIU Local 925 and the state of Washington, in addition to guaranteeing higher wages, training and benefits to 12,000 family child care providers, pledges increased access to quality child care for every Washington state family and specifies that “the





rights of the Consumer (s) to select, change or terminate their child care provider” will be protected (SEIU 2007d).

New Representational Practices

Finding innovative ways of relating to all three parties of the “service triangle” – employers, workers, and customers – proved key to successful union organizing in service economies. But unions must transform their representational practices as well as their organizing strategies if they are to win the allegiance of the twenty-first-century workforce. In particular, they will need to move beyond a representational model based on the realities of the mass production factory floor and pay greater attention to the lives and concerns of what MacDonald and Sirianni (1996: 3) call the new “emotional proletariat.” Wages will remain an issue, of course, as will restraining abusive employers. Nevertheless, service workers want unions that help them affect the rules governing the employee–customer/client/patient relationship and that help them move toward more of a “bread and roses” unionism – a unionism, that is, which not only secures a decent standard of living but also fosters individual growth and more satisfying relationships between workers and between workers and those they serve. In the section that follows, we will discuss the new models of union representation that are emerging among clericals, teachers, and nurses. Then we will assess the degree to which these new representational practices might be appropriate for other service workers, particularly those in more “working-class” service occupations.

The Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW), organized in 1988 after over a decade of struggle, is one of the best examples of a union that is attuned to the particular needs of the workers it represents (Eaton, 1996; Putnam and Feldstein, 2003; Savage, 2007). As epitomized in one of the union’s organizing slogans, “You don’t have to be anti-Harvard to be pro-union,” the Harvard organizers refused to conduct an anti-boss, anti-employer campaign. Instead, they assumed that clerical workers cared about the enterprise in which they worked and about the quality of the service they delivered and so they emphasized open-ended concerns such as dignity, voice, and the recognition of the value of clerical services.

Once HUCTW secured recognition, it pushed hard on economic issues, including a long, drawn-out battle over winning raises and benefit parity for part-time employees. Yet the union also invested a lot of energy in meeting the nonmaterial needs of members as well. Union priorities included making work more interesting and rewarding, creating opportunities for learning and problem-solving, and improving the quality of relationships between employees at work and between employees and others with whom they interacted on a daily basis such as students, faculty, and





administrators. When the Harvard administration offered “skills training” for clerical workers in how to handle “customer encounters” with irate and demanding students and faculty (the worst) with one lesson instructing the attendees to “think of yourself as a trash can” – a vessel that would simply fill up with everyone’s ill humor throughout the day and then could be dumped after work – the union decided it needed an alternative. It insisted on its own training classes in “negotiating relationships.” Their goal was to end the “customer is always right” rule and develop more humane norms for clerical-customer interactions.

In her 1983 book, *The Managed Heart*, Arlie Hochschild argued that many service jobs require “emotional labor” or the expenditure of energy to create an emotional state in the customer, client, patient, or passenger. She called for a new workplace movement that recognized workers’ right to protect their emotions (their heart) and to establish their own “feeling rules” in much the same way as factory and other manual workers insisted a century ago on the right to protect their bodies from unwarranted abuse. Unions interested in representing service workers need to heed her call, whether it involves challenging the top-down scripting of Harvard secretaries, the “smile rules” for grocery store clerks instituted in 1999 by Safeway in Oakland, California, or the intensive personality remodeling that was once required of flight attendants (Cobble, 1996; 2001).

The unions that represent teachers and nurses also are pioneering new models of representation. Before the spread of collective bargaining in the 1960s, the professional associations in this sector 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 enterprise or sector. Gradually, these organizations shifted their emphasis to more traditional union matters: salaries, benefits, seniority rights, and job protection. Yet, as Charles Kerchner and Douglas Mitchell (1988) observe for teacher unions, many are now moving toward a “third stage of unionism” in which they are concerned with the welfare of the overall educational system and with meeting the needs of their students as well as with protecting their own interests as employees (see also Kerchner et al., 1997).

Indeed, the most appealing organizations for professional service workers may be those that meld the best of both the professional association and collective bargaining traditions into a new organizational form. In her work on nurses, Pat Armstrong argues that, taken separately, neither the older model of professionalism nor the traditional collective bargaining unionism “neatly fits” the needs of nurses. In her view, a reconceived nurses’ organization would concern itself with preserving the “ethic of care” as well as the status of the occupation. It would build on the best of the professional traditions – the concern for the patient and for expanding





health care as a social right – without abandoning the union emphasis on “equity, collective rights, and improving conditions of work and pay” (Armstrong, 1993, p.320).

Macdonald and Merrill (2002) have made a similarly compelling argument for how child care unions should develop a strategy for upgrading or professionalizing child care work that retains a “vocabulary of virtue” and a notion of nurturance as skilled and worthy of recognition. The self-esteem and moral identities of the child care workers they studied were intimately bound up with being “altruistic carers” as well as being “good” at what they did. They wanted their “nurturing capacities” recognized through higher pay – a desire they legitimized as both good for them and for those they served. They also wanted “their willingness to make sacrifices for the benefit of care recipients” acknowledged and valued (Macdonald and Merrill, 2002: 68, 75).

Some would argue that for those stuck at the bottom of the income hierarchy, the union promise to raise wages is enough. We would say that wages are a good place to begin but not to end. Workers at every step of the ladder deserve and desire both monetary and social/subjective recognition (Macdonald and Merrill, 2002). Employers have been surprisingly successful in winning the loyalty and effort of non-supervisory workers by instituting what some have called a more modern form of “welfare capitalism.” In this new “psychological contract,” employees are not offered high wages or job security or even health or pension benefits. Rather, they are provided with skill training and other kinds of individual empowerment and cultural capital. In one study of young workers in “white-collar working-class jobs” involving a high degree of autonomy and work-flow management, Vicki Smith (1996) found that the communication classes the employer offered were seen as “real benefits” by the workers. The workers felt empowered in negotiations with customers over work specifications; they also believed they had gained valuable cultural capital that would help them move into management. Their personal relationships off the job improved as well.

Unions too should pay attention to the nonmaterial needs of workers. College-educated workers certainly have higher expectations about what the workplace should provide in the way of challenge and intellectual stimulation. But those stuck at the bottom also need “roses.” Opportunities for learning and self-improvement, and a workplace that provides a sense of community and belonging are important to all workers and hence should be important to their unions as well.

Beyond Collective Bargaining

Winning contracts with employers and increasing union density are crucial to improving the lives of service workers. Having a contract at





work has often meant a lessening of employer autocracy and unfairness, opportunities for worker participation and leadership at the workplace, and greater economic and personal security. The economic benefits in terms of enhanced wages and benefits are sizeable. As Andy Stern, President of SEIU, puts it: "Unions are the best anti-poverty program America has invented."¹⁰

Yet it is important to emphasize that historically the labor movement has always relied on a range of strategies to improve the status of workers. It has lobbied for fair labor standards, including wage floors, hour limits, and health and safety controls; it has utilized law suits and public pressure to change employer practices. As we move into the twenty-first century, it is crucial that the new service worker unionism not forget this expansive history.

The NLRA may limit its coverage to "employees" and hence exclude independent contractors, the self-employed, and a range of others with "managerial" or "entrepreneurial" characteristics. But the labor movement need not draw its membership boundaries in the same way. A number of unions have experimented with organizing "independent contractors." This kind of big tent movement should be encouraged since a smaller and smaller proportion of the workforce are now technically "employees" in the old-fashioned sense of the term, which emphasizes lack of decision-making, dependence on a single employer, and income solely through wages or salary.

The labor movement must also define itself as about more than collective bargaining. As Janice Fine (2006) and Jennifer Gordon (2005a) have documented, new worker-run community-based organizations among immigrants, often referred to as worker centers, now exist in over a hundred cities across the country. Relying on litigation, negative publicity, and direct action organizing, some have had a substantial impact on low-wage service workers, chalking up impressive political and economic gains. Members of the Long Island Workplace Project, for example, lobbied the Unpaid Wages Prohibition Act past a Republican-dominated legislature and New York's Republican governor in 1997, requiring hefty penalties on employers who failed to pay for work and upgrading the enforcement of minimum wage and other labor laws (Gordon, 2005a). In 2003, the domestic worker center in New York won a municipal ordinance setting wage floors and other standards governing the lives of the army of nannies who now take care of the children of more elite New Yorkers and is making progress on state legislation (Fine, 2007).

Historically, self-help and fraternal organizations of workers existed prior to and alongside traditional contract unions. Today they are multiplying, with various websites facilitating the discussion of training, employment opportunities, and "tips of the trade," all activities long associated





with professional development and advancement. One thriving and public-relations-savvy group, Working Today, founded in 1995, brings together freelancers and other “independent workers” for advocacy, health insurance, and professional services such as job referrals and negotiating techniques.¹¹

New forms of cross-class solidarity are emerging as well with the flourishing of NGOs and other kinds of organizations whose members, primarily middle-class and professional, are dedicated to improving the conditions of workers. The involvement of middle-class allies has been crucial in instigating and sustaining movements across the globe that have drawn attention to the undervaluation and indignities of much service labor. The International Labor Organization’s (ILO) campaign to make all work “decent work,” for example, will disproportionately affect service workers, concentrated as they are at the bottom of the heap as well as initiatives to raise the global wage floor and convince more nations to honor the basic labor and human rights set forth by UN declarations and inscribed in various ILO and other international conventions and treaties. These developments are particularly important for the new migrant service workforce which often is not covered by either labor or discrimination laws in the countries in which they work (Ontiveros, 2007). Representing these workers will take a new service worker unionism. It will also take a transformation of labor law, government regulation, and public opinion.

Intellectual Allies or Adversaries?

We think intellectuals have a role to play in this transformation. Theory does matter. Public opinion (as well as public policy) is influenced by the failure of economists and others, for example, to move beyond the older industrial paradigms that still dominate their accounts of labor productivity and value. Since at least the 1960s, economists have predicted that the transition to a service economy would lead to an inevitable slow-down in the rate of productivity growth; and, consequently, to the end of the continually improving living standards that have been the hallmark of the industrial age (Baumol, 1967; Fuchs, 1968). Services are, according to this line of thought, inherently resistant to the kinds of productivity gains that have marked goods-producing sectors since at least the industrial revolution, primarily because of the posited labor-intensive character of most service work. Productivity gains could be and have been realized in the goods-producing sector, so the argument goes, because most goods can be made by machines and with their assistance, a given hour of labor can be made to yield more goods, more cheaply. Machines cannot, however, reduce the labor content of most personal services. They cannot, for example, raise children, care for the sick or disabled, groom bodies, or





flatter vanities as well as people can, and it seems unlikely that they will ever be able to do so. Because they cannot, it is held, service work is inherently resistant to traditional productivity gains; and, as a result, service employers will ever only be able to pay low wages.

How much can service sector employers pay? Will it ever be enough to provide service workers a decent standard of living? In the goods-producing sectors, the revenue required to pay workers well has come in part from raising productivity – i.e. increasing the number of items a given worker can make – and then selling this increased output at lower prices in order to expand the total revenue earned by the firm. It is now clear that in many service industries technical innovation can yield significant productivity gains.¹² Does anyone doubt that Wal-Mart could afford to raise employee pay as well as provide employees with better health care, education, and pension benefits? All that seems to be missing from the equation is what Charles Craypo (1986, p.28) has referred to as “the ability to make employers pay” – an organized presence in the industry that raises the bargaining leverage of its employees.

However, where caring and emotional labor are as important, if not more so, than information processing, productivity-enhancement will require a different strategy. In these cases, productivity gains depend less upon technical innovations than upon improvements in (perceived) quality and what economists call “demand elasticity.” Head for head, turning a \$5 barber into a successful \$50 hair stylist raises their productivity ten-fold, even if it changes their work not at all. It all depends on whether customers are willing – and able – to pay ten times more for a hair cut. In other words, for the most labor-intensive service sectors, an increase in productivity is as much dependent on customers’ perceptions of the service they are receiving as it is upon their effective willingness to pay more for it. Where the customers receive, or at least *believe* they receive, a different, more desirable service, they have shown themselves willing to pay the price.

To put the point differently: the productivity of most front-line service work is dependent upon the imputed value that the wider society places on the work and on those who do it. It is also dependent on the ability of those who want the service to pay more for it. The first of these issues is closely bound up with efforts to raise the social position of low-status work, especially personal service work, and of low-status workers, especially women and people of color. In these respects, the effort to organize service workers has been, and will remain, closely connected to feminist and other social movements seeking liberty and justice on an expanded scale. Similarly, winning intellectual support and thus legitimacy for efforts to raise service sector wages by recasting theories of productivity and value will need to be a broadly-based academic enterprise that draws on the





now widespread literature challenging the devaluing of women and of historically female activities (see, for example, Devault, 1994).

On one level, this revaluation literature calls into question the usefulness of traditional notions of “productivity,” which focus on physical outputs when measuring the relative contribution of jobs that require mental or emotional labor. Without a tangible product, the effort involved in service work often seems invisible. Moreover, even where “effort, skill, and responsibility” can be calculated, however imprecisely, ideology shapes the quantities measured. “productivity” and “value” are deeply subjective, despite the quantitative apparatus involved. Mothering and other domains of female expertise, for example, are often thought instinctual and hence devalued. The perceived worth of the person affects the perceived worth of what they produce, whether it be tangible or not. A vicious cycle ensues in which those paid more are seen as being more worthy and hence more productive. And, conversely, those paid less are judged as less productive.

In this regard, many feminist scholars have zeroed in on the work of “caregiving” and its devaluation, arguing rightly that its underpayment in the market must be understood in the larger context of household exchange and the sexual division of labor (for example, England and Folbre, 1999). Raising the standards for service workers then is as much about gender hierarchies as it is about class inequalities. The debates among care work theorists over how to dismantle the former, particularly when care work is defined broadly to include the physically-demanding cleaning labor done predominantly by minority women (Duffy, 2005), have much to offer economists and others writing from within a more quantitative tradition in which gender is still largely absent as a category of analysis.

But service employers must not only be *willing* to pay more, they must also be *able* to pay more. If raising the productivity of service work in the most labor intensive occupations depends in part on raising the price of those services (as in the barber to hair stylist example above), the ability of customers to pay the higher costs must also be raised. In this sense, the improvement in the conditions of service workers is dependent upon the continuing betterment of the rest of society. Such is precisely the “historical tendency of capitalist accumulation,” as described first by Marx (1863: 927–30), and then subsequently rediscovered by Clark (1940), Fuchs (1968), Bell (1973) and other mainstream economists and sociologists. With this difference: where Marx believed the end result of the historical tendency of capitalist accumulation was an increasing number of immiserated industrial proletarians and heightened class conflict, the mainstream economists and sociologists who came after him have generally been happy to celebrate the arrival of a new class of “knowledge workers,” whose ambiguous class position they believed helped to explain the apparent softening of class conflict in the developed world.





It is certainly true that since the 1920s industrial capital in the developed countries has been “disaccumulating,” to use Martin Sklar’s term (Sklar, 1992: 143–96; see also Warsh, 2006), bringing with it the progressive disappearance of industrial workers and the continuing expansion in the number of service workers. But the drive to improve the economic and social conditions of service workers is directly dependent upon the continuing improvement in the economic well-being of society as a whole, and not, as in Marx, upon its “immiseration.” The new service workforce will do well only if the rest of the society also does well along with it.

Of course, the distribution of income will need to flatten, with the bottom and the middle having more and the top having less. A flatter distribution of income would more accurately reflect the distribution of actual effort and productive contribution than it currently does, and would be an overall gain in fairness and efficiency wholly to the society’s benefit. As things now stand, the large gains accruing to those at the top of our “winner-take-all” global economy, where a slight competitive edge yields disproportionate and continuing rewards, both economically and politically, have thrown the social structure seriously off center (Frank and Cook, 1996). The continued expansion of service unionism and the rise of a larger social justice movement will do much to expand the middle class and to ensure a more balanced distribution of social power, just as did the political and economic reform efforts of industrial workers two generations ago.

Notes

- 1 The concept of the “imaginary,” introduced into contemporary social theory by Cornelius Castoriadis (*The Imaginary Institution of Society* [1975: trans. 1987]), evokes the whole array of imaginative resources – metaphoric, theoretic, linguistic – with which people both constitute social reality and attempt to understand it.
- 2 The CTW federation consists of unions representing almost six million organized workers. These unions left the AFL-CIO at the July 2005 Convention and set up their own rival federation.
- 3 In the U.S., union density is a measure restricted to dues-paying employees in workplaces where employers have signed collective bargaining contracts.
- 4 For further information on the educational and political campaigns now underway, see American Rights at Work at www.americanrightsatwork.org.
- 5 New global union structures will be necessary as well but are beyond the scope of this chapter. For the problems of current global union institutions and a proposal for a new global unionism, see Lerner 2007.
- 6 Ritzer (for example, 2004) stresses the deskilling and rationalization of work in the service sector, positing the continuing spread of McDonald-like processes to an ever wider array of work settings. We agree, however, with Herzberg, *et al.* (1998: 11–14, 42–43) that “tightly-constrained” rationalized work systems make up a small minority of all service environments. Even when employers favor rationalization, they are constrained in its implementation by





- their dependence on the creativity and judgment of those providing the service (Benson 1988; Cobble 1991a; Leidner 1993; Korczynski 2002).
- 7 We part ways with scholars who emphasize inherent impediments to organizing service workers and assume that mass production workplaces are easier to organize and factory workers more amenable to “class” or collective consciousness. Before the advent of mass production unionism, construction, trucking, garment, restaurant and other workers scattered in dispersed work-sites organized quite successfully in the U.S. (Cobble 1994). In addition, many service workers may not exhibit the same kind of “class consciousness” associated with mass production workers but that does not mean they are devoid of collective sentiment or of a sense of solidarity with those in similarly-exploited situations (see, for example, Korczynski 2003).
 - 8 Here our emphasis differs from the now extensive literature which sees union revitalization as a matter of pursuing an “organizing or social movement unionism” as opposed to a “service or business unionism” (for example, Turner and Hurd 2001; Lopez 2004). Clearly, if unions are to organize workers, they will need to commit themselves to do so. At the same time, the most successful unions organizing in the U.S. today, including the majority of unions in the CTW federation, are former AFL “business unions,” and they draw liberally on the occupationally-oriented approaches relied on in their past (Cobble 1991b; Milkman 2006).
 - 9 Our analysis in this section underscores the conclusion of Heery (2002), Korczynski (2002), and others that researchers need to move beyond the either/or debate over “adversarial unionism” versus “employer partnerships.” Both strategies are necessary and the fastest-growing unions such as SEIU employ both effectively to advance worker interests and power. For further information on the Houston strategy, see <http://www.seiu.org>, accessed July 6, 2006. For an analysis of how SEIU and other U.S. unions use card check and neutrality agreements to lower employer hostility to unionizing, see Eaton and Kriesky (2001).
 - 10 Stern Interview conducted by Leslie Stahl and aired on “60 Minutes.” To view, www.ctw.org, accessed July 3, 2006.
 - 11 Consult www.freelancersunion.org, accessed July 26, 2007, for more information. See also TECHSUNITE.org, sponsored by the Communications Workers of America, AFL-CIO.
 - 12 See Gregory and Russo (2007) for a recent study documenting that the service sector is as productive as the goods sector, across a range of countries and over time, when measured on a product supply basis.

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