

WOMEN

AND

UNIONS

FORGING A PARTNERSHIP

*Dorothy Sue Cobble,  
Editor*

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# Introduction

## Remaking Unions for the New Majority



*Dorothy Sue Cobble*

It has become the fashion to bemoan the stalled march toward women's economic equality and the decline of organized labor (for example, Hewlett 1986; Lipset 1986). Much of this commentary tends to premature death pronouncements. Social movements can be dormant for extended periods without losing their ability to blossom forth. This volume assumes such capacity for regeneration; it also assumes that intelligent and persistent horticultural care can hasten the spring.

The potential for forging a creative, productive partnership between working women and unions is greater now than at any other historic moment. Many of the historic barriers to cooperation have fallen: women make up close to a majority of the work force, the adherence to rigid gender roles has crumbled, and the permanent character of women's work force participation is widely acknowledged. Of equal importance, fundamental economic and social transformations have catapulted women onto the front lines of social change. Women are the new proletariat worldwide and it is the contradictions women are articulating and experiencing (as well as those experienced by men who do "women's work" in the service sector and take on "women's dual burden" of work and family) that are driving workplace reform. It is the needs of these workers that will in large part inform the agenda of any successful labor movement of the future. And in part it is the ability of organized labor to recognize these discontinuities and transform itself to attract this new work

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force that will determine whether workers opt for paternalistic, individualistic, or collective solutions to their workplace dilemmas.

The beginning steps in forging such a partnership must of necessity involve the two parties taking a fresh look at one another. Certain myths and biases have fogged the viewing lens of both groups. The feminist dismissal of unions as male-dominated institutions inherently antagonistic to women's interests has only recently come under reconsideration. A new, more open perspective is emerging among feminist scholars, one that asks under what conditions can unions represent the aspirations of women. Unions are being reconceived as more flexible, gender-neutral institutions—ones that, depending on the leadership or the will of the rank and file, can be more or less open to women's concerns. Feminist scholars also are questioning the class-biased scholarship (from both the right and the left) that assumes unions have unlimited power to enact their agendas (the myth of "big labor") and that holds unionists to standards of self-sacrifice and heroism that are never demanded of other classes (for example, Milkman 1990; Baron 1991).

Similarly, the women's movement itself has moved away from an exclusive focus on the needs of career women and a reliance on affirmative action, equal opportunity law, and access to professional training. The economic problems facing the majority of working women—low pay, job segregation, the added burden of a "second shift" at home—are now central to the feminist agenda. This shift in constituency and in tactics has evoked a new, more sympathetic stance toward unions and their viability as mechanisms for advancing the collective economic needs of working women (for example, Blum 1991; Fiorito and Greer 1986).

The labor movement for its part no longer automatically privileges the needs of white, male workers over those of others, and it has begun numerous initiatives aimed at strengthening its ties with women and minority workers. Yet labor needs to take a closer look at the transformations occurring in the world of work—transformations that primarily but not exclusively affect women—and the implications of these changes for the very nature and structure of unionism. Women (and the new work force generally) occupy jobs that are quite different from those held by labor's traditional constituency, the blue-collar hard hat. The new majority tends to be found in service jobs, in decentralized workplaces with under fifty employees, and in jobs with less of a permanent, continuous attachment to a single employer.

The majority of unions, however, remain wedded to an industrial model of employee representation. The industrial model of unionism emerged in the 1930s and 1940s primarily in response to the needs of blue-collar male workers toiling in large industrial worksites; it is a model that is increasingly outmoded

for today's transformed work force (Kochan, Katz, and McKersie 1986; Heckscher 1988). Obviously, industrial unionism should not be abandoned wholesale. Manufacturing itself is not going to disappear, and many of the practices of industrial unionism may continue to be appealing and advantageous to a wide variety of workers. But just as industrial unionism developed alongside craft unionism in the early twentieth century as technological change and economic restructuring transformed the workplace, so too must other new forms of unionism evolve to meet the changed circumstances of the present. The labor movement must once again think in terms of multiple and competing models of unionism and, in particular, of devising approaches suitable for organizing and representing the growing female, service, and contingent work force.

This volume is designed to extend these emerging intellectual reformulations and hence to stimulate more informed and pointed policy and practice. What, in fact, has organized labor accomplished for working women? This volume documents the oft-ignored triumphs as well as the better known defeats. And what about the future? Are unions the institutional vehicle that can break the logjam on such longstanding issues as pay equity and child care? As the work world transforms and other issues, such as part-time and contingent work, work flexibility, and shorter hours, emerge, can unions meet these new needs as well as continue to serve their traditional constituency? The essays collected here attempt to address these questions and raise others. In so doing, the book aims to formulate the basis upon which a new, more productive partnership between working women and unions can be built—one that will energize labor's current membership as well as address the needs of those outside its ranks.

### ***Why the Decades Ahead May Be Different***

Historically, working women and unions have been at odds. The majority of international unions in the nineteenth century, for example, forbade female membership in their written constitutions. Formal barriers fell in the early twentieth century, but many unions remained skeptical or at best indifferent to the organization of women (Wertheimer 1975; Kessler-Harris 1975). In the 1930s and 1940s, women were swept into the newly emerging CIO unions—in large measure because of “the logic of industrial unionism” that included all workers at a particular worksite regardless of job title, race, or gender—but, even so, the primary objective of the CIO remained organizing the male-dominated mass production industries (auto, steel, rubber) (Brody

1980). Moreover, gender prejudice at times triumphed over industrial inclusiveness: Sharon Strom (1985), for example, has documented instances in which every occupational group within an industry organized with the exception of the clerical sector, the one female-dominated unit. When the dust settled in the late 1940s, virtually every major industry had unionized, boosting the proportion of organized workers to a high-water mark of one in every three workers in 1954 (Estey 1981:2–4). Nonetheless, until the last decade, the male work force consistently enjoyed unionization rates more than double those of female: in 1920, 26 percent of men were organized, 7 percent of women. In the late 1970s, 29 percent of men and 12 percent of women belonged to unions (Milkman 1980:96, 120–21). Only in the 1980s did the gender gap in union membership close significantly. By 1990, unions represented 21.4 percent of men and 14.5 percent of women (USDOL 1991:228).

The record of union action and inaction toward women workers partially reflected the economic competition between men and women, competition fostered by employers concerned with boosting their profitability and authority at the workplace. Male unionists as well sought the exclusion of women from their trades and the continuation of sex-segregated workplaces in order to secure better jobs and working conditions. Psychological concerns, however, undergirded the economic. Frequently, men desired separation from women to retain their status in the eyes of a society that devalued jobs held by women and to sustain their sense of masculinity—an identity that, Nancy Chodorow and others have argued, rested in large part on the definition of women as other and as inferior (Chodorow 1978; Williams 1989; Baron 1991). Lastly, male unionists viewed women as marginal, temporary interlopers in the waged work world and sought (often with the support of women) to enhance the earning capacities of men so that women could return to their duties in the domestic sphere.

The attitudes and actions of women also shaped the nature of their relationship with organized labor. As soon as they entered wage work, women began to form separate-sex unions as well as demand access to the existing male-dominated labor institutions (see, for example, Dublin 1979:86–107; Blewett 1988; Cobble 1991a). Yet even in the instances in which the doors of unionism swung open, fewer women (proportionately) than men crossed the threshold. The poor bargaining position of women as “unskilled” workers and the intense opposition they faced from employers dependent on their low wages inhibited union formation and longevity among women. Union membership also lagged because women themselves made other choices. Some wage-earning women viewed their labor force participation as temporary or as secondary to the problems they faced fulfilling their home responsibilities.



Instead of joining workplace-based organizations directed toward improving their lives as waged workers, some wage-earning women devised alternative vehicles of collective protest. They initiated consumer boycotts, engaged in legislative reforms, and at times supported male struggles to unionize and maintain the family wage (Kessler-Harris 1982; Tentler 1979; Kaplan 1982; Frank 1991; Blewett 1988). Women spent more of their work lives within the family realm than did men and their protest activities historically have reflected this reality.<sup>1</sup>

Long-term economic and social changes have now dramatically altered the situation of both women and unions and created the basis for a new relationship. Women can no longer be considered a supplemental, temporary work force. In 1992, three out of four women between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-four were in the work force (USDOL 1992), women work nearly as many years as men, and the pattern of women's labor force participation increasingly resembles that of men. They begin work early, drop out for only a few years at most, and work into their sixties and seventies (Rix 1990:374–85).

In addition, by the 1990s, fewer women qualified as "secondary" workers in an economic sense. The rise of single female-headed families and the overall decline in real wages since 1973 have increased the economic pressures on women wage earners. The majority of U.S. families in the 1990s *require* at least two incomes to maintain what they perceive as an adequate standard of living; only one family in five has an adult devoted full-time to unwaged household tasks. Indeed, the living standards of American families would have plummeted further had not more and more women taken on the dual burdens of wage earning and housework (Nussbaum and Sweeney 1989:5–34, 103–26). The increased economic pressures on women also are evident in the skyrocketing poverty rates for women and children. Single-parent, female-headed families make up over half of all poor families, and one-fifth of all children live below the poverty line (Kamerman 1986:42–43).

Attitudinal shifts among women have been equally dramatic. The women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s helped move U.S. society toward a new consensus regarding the status of wage-earning women. It became legitimate for married women and even women with children to work outside the home and to expect equal treatment while on the job. The longstanding division of the work world into men's jobs and women's jobs also appeared increasingly indefensible both legally and in the eyes of the public.

<sup>1</sup>It is important to note that if labor activism is reconceived as encompassing reform efforts in relation to both waged and unwaged work, then women's participation in the labor movement (broadly defined) may have matched that of men.

In particular, women rejected the notion that their identity and sense of fulfillment should come solely (and in some cases primarily) from the domestic sphere. Despite the historic reality that the majority of wage-earning women always worked out of economic necessity (and not for “pin money”), the myth of women as nonessential earners had persisted among women themselves as well as in society at large. As late as the 1960s and early 1970s, sociological studies reported that married blue-collar women often characterized themselves as “supplemental” and “secondary” workers regardless of the essential or nonessential nature of their economic contribution (Komarovsky 1962; Rubin 1976). Only in the last two decades have the majority of women come to define their relation to work differently. Married working-class women as well as “career women” and single heads of household now talk about waged work as central to their identity and essential to the economic well-being of their family (Ferree 1980).

By the 1980s, it was clear that women would not be returning to the home and that the 1950s ideal of the family would never again be the dominant reality. Yet what kind of family structure and what status in the waged sphere did women want? How would the competing demands of work and family be resolved? Rather than choose between them as in the past—aspiring to become either a full-time housewife or deciding to give up all for one’s career—most women now found themselves, by choice and by necessity, trying to “have it all,” to be both the equal of men at work and the primary caretaker at home. Access to waged work and to the best-paying, highest-status jobs were important rights, and the freedom to define one’s womanhood in ways other than the domestic was an equally critical achievement. Yet the pleasures of the private sphere, of emotional relationships, of child rearing, of noncommercially defined productive labor were also compelling.

It is this dual commitment and dual burden that has propelled the women’s movement and women in general to place renewed emphasis on economic issues and the resolution of the tension between work and family. Whether an individual woman aspires to the highest career plateau, desires to work at a decent part-time job and raise a family, or simply seeks the option of spending less time at work and more time with her family, she faces almost insurmountable barriers. The top echelons of the work world are still closed to women; few good part-time jobs are available; and the fall in real wages since 1973 means that fewer women have the option of being at home (Schor 1991:80). Most women must resort to juggling full-time work with household responsibilities. They cope by curtailing their career ambitions and by demanding more support services in the family realm—increased household labor from

other family members and/or paying for some of the traditional household tasks of child care, cleaning, and food preparation.

Yet many of these individual solutions are becoming increasingly problematic. Despite access to professional training and increased educational achievements, the gender wage gap and occupational segregation persist. The hours spent at work are lengthening. As real wages continue to fall, women must work ever longer hours to provide economically for their families. Family and leisure time is shrinking. Simultaneously, the neighborhood and extended family ties that once supported parents are frayed, if not severed. Grandparents live thousands of miles away; other relatives and even the once-dependable next-door neighbor are working as well. Indeed, if grandparents or other relatives *are* nearby, they are often cared for by an adult child (usually a daughter) who is simultaneously caring for her own children.

In the face of these heightened pressures, some women simply have lowered their expectations. They have given up their careers; or they have (partially) reconciled themselves to raising children with whom they hardly ever spend time. But most women do not see these compromises as permanent or desirable. They are looking for other options and would be the first to tell you that change is necessary.

Despite the overworked media phrase, "post-feminist," most women continue to believe that discrimination exists in the work world. Survey research inevitably reveals that the majority of women still identify with the historic goals of the feminist movement for job equality and equal opportunity (see, for example, *New York Times* 1989). In addition, however, they want their desires for a life outside of work to be an important part of that movement. *Newsweek*, for example, found in 1986 that most of the women they polled wanted *neither* full-time jobs *nor* full-time housework; they wanted a reasonable balance—an alternative our society has yet to offer (March 31, 1986:51). The new generation of women demands not only "equal treatment" and "opportunity," but a work world responsive to their desires for family, community, and leisure (*Time* 1990; Friedan 1981; Schor 1991).

Thus, women are concerned with creating new workplace options, and increasingly, I would argue, they are recognizing that these changes will only come about through collective power, whether it be political or economic. Significantly, there is now a gender gap in union sentiment paralleling the oft-cited gender gap in political attitudes. Countering the conventional wisdom that women are less "organizable" than men, research in the last decade consistently has shown that women workers are more interested in unions than men and, when given the actual choice, are more likely to vote for

unionization. Thomas Kochan's 1979 findings that 40 percent of women would vote for a union if given the chance (as compared to only 33 percent for all nonunion workers) have been confirmed by Freeman and Medoff (1984) as well as others (Freeman and Leonard 1987; Kruse and Schur 1992). Indeed, AFL-CIO organizing survey data for 1986–87 revealed that unions won 57 percent of all campaigns conducted in female-dominated workplaces (units with 75 percent or more women) as compared to 33 percent in those with a majority of men (AFL-CIO Organizing Department 1989:6; see also Bronfenbrenner n.d.).

In part, women are more responsive to unions because the labor movement itself has changed. The feminization of the work force and the unionization in the 1960s and 1970s of female-dominated sectors of the economy—education; federal, state, and municipal government; the health care industry—altered the gender composition of organized labor. In 1954, 17 percent of organized workers were women; by 1988, the figure had climbed to 37 percent (Milkman 1990:4). By 1990, women constituted a majority (or close to a majority) of members in the newer international unions that had emerged in the 1960s—the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and the teacher unions. Women also numerically dominated in such older internationals as the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), The Communications Workers of America (CWA), and the garment unions (see table 1). Women moved into leadership positions as well. Although a “glass ceiling” blocks the rise of women into the top executive positions in the labor movement as it does in every institution in society (see table 1), the emergence of women as local union officers, heads of central labor councils, and as paid staff on the local and international level has been impressive (Needleman 1989; Gray this volume).

Many of the most powerful and vocal internationals within the labor movement are now unions with large female constituencies. As many of the contributors to this volume will demonstrate, it has been these unions that have provided national leadership on a wide range of women's concerns, from pay equity to parental leave, devising what sociologist Ruth Milkman has called a new “gender politics” (Milkman 1991). They have also pioneered more democratic, participatory approaches to organizing and representation—approaches that appear to be more in line with “female styles” of leadership and conflict resolution (Lerner 1991; Gilligan 1982; Hurd this volume). Their sensitivity toward and surprisingly successful advocacy of women's issues have gone a long way toward undermining the longstanding feminist critique of unions as bastions of male power and privilege.

Table 1. Female Membership and Leadership in Selected Labor Organizations, 1978–1990

Labor organization	Year	Women members (thousands)	Women as percent of all members	Women officers and board members	Women as percent of all officers and board members
National Education Association	1978	1,240	75	5	55
	1985	1,000	60	3	33
	1990	1,600	72	4	45
International Brotherhood of Teamsters	1978	481	25	0	0
	1985	485	26	0	0
	1990	400	25	0	0
United Food and Commercial Workers	1978	480	39	2	3
	1990	663	51	3	8
American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees	1978	408	40	1	3
	1985	450	45	4	4
	1990	600	50	5	17
Service Employees' International Union	1978	312	50	7	15
	1985	435	50	9	18
	1990	420	45	13	34
American Federation of Teachers	1978	300	60	8	25
	1985	366	60	11	32
	1990	455	65	11	32
Communications Workers of America	1978	259	51	0	0
	1985	338	52	1	6
	1990	338	52	1	6
International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers	1978	304	30	0	0
	1985	330	30	0	0
	1990	240	30	0	0
Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers	1978	331	66	6	15
	1985	228	65	3	9
	1990	160	61	5	20
International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union	1978	279	80	2	7
	1983	219	85	3	13
	1990	145	83	4	22
Hotel and Restaurant Employees	1978	181	42	1	4
	1985	200	50	2	8
	1990	143	48	1	4

*Sources:* 1978 data are from CLUW 1980: tables 3 and 5; 1983–85 data are from Baden 1986:236, 238; 1990 data are from a survey of unions conducted by Dorothy Sue Cobble with the help of Joyce Miller and Sandy Pope of the Coalition of Labor Union Women. The author thanks Ruth Milkman, who designed this table. See Milkman 1993 for further interpretation of the data.

Significantly, the increased power of women in certain sectors of the labor movement may even be responsible for the enhanced economic dividends women are now reaping from unions. Union membership has always offered women higher earnings. In 1988, for example, median weekly earnings of women union members were over \$100 higher than for nonunion women workers (USDOL 1989). But in the public sector and in white-collar jobs where women have achieved the most power within their unions, the union premium (or the amount unionization raises wages) is now higher for women than for men (Freeman and Leonard 1987).

In addition, although some sectors of the labor movement remain wedded to tradition and appear bogged down in institutional protectionism, others—whether female-dominated or not—have shown considerable interest in reaching out to the new work force and in experimenting with new initiatives on the political and economic front. The AFL-CIO itself published a thoughtful and surprisingly candid document calling for concrete institutional reforms as well as for a recognition that the current generation of workers has needs that differ from those of the past (AFL-CIO 1985). In 1988 SEIU sponsored a major conference—“Solutions for the New Work Force”—in which some 250 scholars, policy analysts, and practitioners gathered to forge new policy and tactics (Nussbaum and Sweeney 1989). SEIU, the United Food and Commercial Workers, and the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, in particular, have turned successfully to “community-based” organizing and realized substantial union victories among Black and Hispanic low-wage service workers, many of whom are female (McMahon, Finkel-Shimshon, and Fujimoto 1991; Bronfenbrenner n.d.; Lerner 1991; Kelleher 1986).

Given these positive developments on the part of women and of unions, what keeps them apart? Why did 9 to 5 founder Karen Nussbaum’s prediction that the 1980s would see a resurgence of labor activism among wage-earning women that would rival the great organizing campaigns of the 1930s fail to materialize? (Plotke 1980). Most obviously, the potential for collective action among women remains unrealized because of adverse external forces—hostile employers, restrictive labor laws, a new competitive global economy, technological transformations—all of which at times appear beyond the immediate control of women or of unions (Strauss, Gallagher, and Fiorito 1991). Yet despite these hostile forces, I would argue that the potential for organizing the new work force remains unfulfilled in part because the reforms occurring within the labor movement have not gone far enough. A new work force has arisen whose collective power will remain dormant until new forms of unionism are devised.

But who is this new work force and what kind of union representation do they desire? The work force of the 1990s is new because for the first time the majority of workers are female and minority: in the 1980s, the white, male worker lost his majority status. Women currently make up 46 percent of waged workers and may be half by the close of the century. In 1991, minorities constituted 20 percent of the work force; by the year 2000, they will comprise 25 percent, with the greatest increases posted by Hispanics and Asians (*Business Week*, July 8, 1991; AFL-CIO 1990). Black women will outnumber black men in the work force (Johnston 1987). Clearly, the changing gender and racial composition of the work force has significant implications for employee representation; of equal importance, however, are the transformations occurring in the work environment itself. The typical jobs of the postindustrial work force are ones whose very nature and structure differ profoundly from the blue-collar industrial world of labor's historic constituency. If the work force of the future is to be organized, the work lives and work needs of this new majority must be seen not as deviant or as a "special interest" group but as the norm, as expressive of the dominant reality.

### ***The New Service Work Force***

But what is so different about the work lives of the new majority? Aren't the problems plaguing them largely the same ones that have always troubled workers? Hasn't the proposition that the postindustrial work force would be a radical departure from the old—that it would mean the disappearance of the working class and the emergence of a bright new work world comprised of white-collar technicians and professionals—been thoroughly discredited? (Bell 1973). Well, yes and no.

Currently, the fastest growing occupations are not the highly skilled and well-paid knowledge workers but jobs such as janitor, food server, retail salesperson—jobs that are low-paid, lack promotional opportunities and benefits coverage, and exhibit high turnover (Silvestri and Lukasiewicz 1985; Nussbaum and Sweeney 1989). Given this new working poor, the wisdom has been that the primary implications for unions of the rise of the service sector are obvious. Workers need the basics unions have always provided: wages, benefits, improved working conditions, and job security. I agree. These issues will remain central for the new work force just as they are for the old. Yet there are discontinuities as well as continuities that warrant attention. It is to these discontinuities and their implications for labor that I now turn.

At least four fundamental transformations are reshaping the world of work. First of all, 90 percent of all new jobs in the last decade have been created in

the service sector. Many of these jobs—low-level and professional—often involve personal service or interaction with a client, customer, or patient. The employment relationship is not the classic one described by Marx nor even the conventional adversarial one. A new third party, the customer, complicates and transforms the old dyad. Some service workers, for example, perceive the customer as more important in determining their wages and/or working conditions than the employer (for example, Cobble 1991a:44–48; Hochschild 1983:174–84). This attitude may prevail regardless of whether the worker's income is derived wholly from the customer (the professional in private practice or the home cleaner or handyman listed in the newspaper), only partially so (the waiter, bartender, or cab driver), or not at all (the nurse or salesclerk). The customer, described by saleswomen as “our friend the enemy,” may also engender more strong emotion—usually anger, sometimes affection—than the employer (Benson 1986:258; Woods 1979). The quality of service provided and controlling the interaction with the client is central to service worker dignity. A union campaign based merely on an antiboss message may have little relevance to these workers.

Second, the relationship between employer and employee is changing in other fundamental ways, affecting service and nonservice employment. The dominant employment arrangement (at least since World War II) consisted of a continuous forty-hour week and the expectation of long-term tenure, benefits, and promotional opportunities. This traditional relationship—with its defined boundaries and its progressively deepening mutual obligations as employees accumulated seniority, pension contributions, and presumably increased their skills and productivity—is now eroding. Roughly one-quarter or more of all workers in the United States are part-time employees; are hired on a “temporary,” subcontracted, or leased basis; or are defined as “independent contractors.” Their numbers also are predicted to grow at a much faster pace than the total labor force for the rest of this century (Belous 1989). Few put in a nine-to-five workweek at the office, shop, or factory, and fewer still have long-term continuous relations with a single employer (Pleues 1988; Christensen and Murphree 1988). This “casualized” work force may not see the employer as either friend or enemy: their relationship with individual employers is brief, distant, and often mediated by a subcontractor or temporary agency.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Historically, women have been more likely than men to reside in the “casualized” sector of the economy, and this trend persists. What is changing, however, is that this typical female work status is now more widely shared by men. A similar point was made earlier in regard to men taking on “women’s work” in the service sector and experiencing increasing tension between work and family.



Moreover, even in the so-called “core” sector of full-time, permanent, high-wage employment, the traditional reciprocal loyalty between employer and employee has slackened. Job turnover has increased in the face of employer reluctance to expend capital on human resources and lower employee commitment to an individual firm (Leinberger and Tucker 1991; Howes 1990).

Third, work sites themselves are changing. Economic restructuring and the growth of service work has meant the proliferation of smaller workplaces and the decentralization of production. Even industrial workplaces have followed this pattern (Nussbaum and Sweeney 1989). The seamstresses, legal transcribers, and business consultants toiling alone in home work sites scattered across the decentralized residential landscape represent but the furthest extreme of this trend (Boris and Daniels 1989).

Fourth, the long-standing separation between home and work is being challenged. With the continuing entry of women into the waged sphere beyond the home, the dissolution of the traditional family, and the aging of the work force, the problems of household production and human reproduction have become business concerns. Those juggling work and family—primarily women but some men as well—are demanding family support services such as child care and family leave. They are also calling for a “new work ethic” and asking that the workplace adjust to family needs rather than vice versa. Why, for example, should waged work be structured along the traditional male model of a nine-to-five, five-day (or more) week?<sup>3</sup> Why should intermittent, noncontinuous, and part-time work be penalized? Why should productivity gains be taken in the form of higher wages rather than shorter hours? Why should leisure or retirement years all be taken in one’s sixties—a time when many women are still quite healthy and are free of child care responsibilities? Why not, as Swedish economist Gösta Rehn suggests, provide paid time off from wage work in one’s early and middle years when household responsibilities are the greatest? (AFL-CIO 1990; Howe 1977; Hochschild 1989; Schor 1991; BNA *Daily Labor Report* May 1, 1992; Deutsch 1991; Kerr 1991; Brandt 1990; see Ratner 1979, pp. 427–28, for Rehn’s ideas).

Partially in response to these demands, employers have implemented so-called flexible work arrangements: flextime, job sharing, temporary and part-time jobs, and “mommy tracks” for women professionals. The question is,

<sup>3</sup>When *Newsweek* asked working mothers in 1986 what work arrangement they would prefer if “they had a choice and finances were not a problem,” only 13 percent stated they wanted full-time, regular hours while 16 percent preferred “not to be employed at all.” A whopping 69 percent wanted to continue working but in a restructured work environment: 34 percent wanted part-time work; 23 percent wanted full-time, flexible hours; and 12 percent wanted to work from their home.

Are there union forms of flexibility and contingency that could be advocated—ones that would provide workers with increased leisure, autonomy, and choice without undermining job security and income? When the *New York Times* can report that 59 percent of women and 32 percent of men would give up a day's pay for a day of free time, clearly "the politics of time" must be given more attention (Sirianni 1988; Kerr 1991).

In sum, then, the new majority breaks with the past in that it is predominantly female and minority; it is also a work force whose daily realities have been radically transformed. Economic restructuring has fundamentally altered the nature of work, the employment relation, and the separation between work and family.

### *Hastening the Spring*

The implications of these and other changes for employee representation are profound, and those concerned with organizing and representing the new work force have just begun to sketch out possible new approaches. Clearly, an openness to new issues is required. But, simply adding work and family issues to the collective bargaining agenda will not be enough. Fundamentally new forms of organizing and representation may be necessary to empower the new service occupations and the more mobile, contingent work force. The issue is not just how to organize women and minorities but how to organize the jobs they hold and the industries in which they work. In 1985, the AFL-CIO itself asserted that "unions must develop and put into effect multiple models for representing workers tailored to the needs and concerns of different groups." Charles Heckscher, in *The New Unionism*, has called for an "associational unionism" that would be suitable primarily for semiprofessional and managerial workers. I've argued for a reformulated "occupational unionism" and advocated the use of "worker-run temporary agencies" and "peer management"—two approaches historically relied upon by craft unions (Heckscher 1988; Cobble 1991a and 1991b; see also Sockell 1990). Others insist on new organizational styles and a "union culture" more amenable to women and minorities (Kessler-Harris 1985; Feldberg 1987). No consensus has emerged, however, on which changes should be given priority or which specific approaches would be best for particular workplaces and particular kinds of workers. But the dialogue has begun.

It is the aim of this volume to further that dialogue and help lay the basis for a reinvigorated labor movement. The volume is unique in that it combines an informed, sympathetic yet critical assessment of the labor movement with a feminist analysis. There are many excellent policy-oriented critiques of the

labor movement (see, for example, Kochan 1985 or Strauss, Gallagher, and Fiorito 1991), as well as a growing number of feminist studies that reassess particular aspects of social policy affecting women workers (see, for example, Christensen 1988). Yet rarely are the two projects joined. Moreover, numerous studies are now in print that dissect the historic relation of women and the labor movement (Milkman 1985; Gabin 1990), and a flood of work has appeared on the current dilemmas of working women (Brown and Pechman 1987; Koziara, Moskow, and Tanner 1987). The need remains, however, for a volume that places both organized labor and working women at the center of its analysis, that explores not only the concerns of the new generation of women workers but the oft-overlooked potential for those concerns to be realized through collective organization at the work site.

*Women and Unions: Forging a Partnership* does not seek to provide definitive answers; it seeks to stimulate controversy and debate. The contributors to the volume represent a range of voices and backgrounds. They are university professors, international and local union officers and staff, labor educators, community activists, government policy makers, graduate students, and independent policy analysts. They are minority women and nonminority women; industrial, white-collar, and service workers; scholars, activists, or some combination of the two. Their opinions are diverse and sometimes at odds. Taken as a whole, the perspectives emerging from this book are those honed from the best of recent scholarship and then tested against the hard realities of life on the front lines of organizing, bargaining, and public policy-making.

The volume is structured as a series of conversations, in part to encourage maximum reader participation and responsibility. Following the foreword, the essayists present their views on six broad themes. Commentators respond to the arguments in the essays and to the larger topic under consideration. They ask, How convincing are the essays? What policy and research implications do they raise? What other aspects of the topic need attention? It is hoped that the reader will become part of the conversation, interacting with the authors and, along with the commentators, attempting to reconcile contradictions in the text and push the discussion forward to the next plateau.

The first two sections of the book reexamine the concerns that have preoccupied labor and women's activists in the last decade. Part 1 looks at the historic commitment of labor to closing the wage gap; part 2 assesses the new policies that have emerged from the labor movement to meet the family needs of workers. What progress has been made toward these goals? What strategies have proven effective? Which should be discarded? Which retained? How

compelling will these issues be as rallying points for the work force of the future?

Parts 3 and 4 detail the rise of new forms of work and attempt to spin out the implications of these changes for workers and workplace representation. Is organized labor's historic commitment to retaining traditional on-site, full-time, and permanent forms of employment still desirable in an economy rapidly moving toward more part-time, home-based, and "flexible" job assignments? Should these workers be organized into unions? Can they be? In the eyes of many, management appears to be taking the lead in responding to the needs of the new work force. To what degree is this judgment warranted? What has been the impact on workers of the implementation of employer forms of "flexibility"? What alternatives has labor presented?

The essays in parts 5 and 6 assess the current state of union organizing and the degree to which union women are reshaping labor institutions to meet their needs. The essays reveal potential new models for organizing and representing workers—models that are being forged largely by women union leaders and activists. Whether it is mobilizing Chinese immigrant women to demand day care centers, organizing Harvard clerical employees, or handling grievances in a public sector bureaucracy, women union leaders emphasize the importance of worker involvement, of the necessity of democracy and participation. Can these new approaches organize men as well as women? Will the culture and structures of unions alter as more and more women enter their ranks? Can we speak of female "ways of knowing"? What about black female "ways of knowing," as one commentator suggests? Is the feminization of labor a positive development or simply another case of "male flight" from a devalued and weakened enterprise?

This volume is committed to furthering economic justice for working women. It assumes such a task requires collective as well as individual initiatives. It also assumes that social movements can only achieve their goals of democracy, human dignity, and individual liberty when they are committed to a process that reflects those goals. Tolerance for difference and encouragement of intellectual debate and study must be at the heart of that process. Only then can the participants realize their own potential. Only then will the movement remain a vehicle for progress rather than an end in itself.

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