Errata/Corrigendum

The brief biographical sketch of Elizabeth Faue was intended to be printed on page 1 of this working paper. Erroneously it was printed on page 2. It has been reproduced here for purposes of introducing the author and her work. Our apologies for the inconvenience.

Editor

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"Outfoxing the Frost": Gender, Community-Based Organization, and the Contemporary American Labor Movement

Elizabeth Faue*

The people always know that some of the grain will be good, some of the crop will be saved, some will return and bear the strength of the kernel, that from the bloodiest year some will survive to outfox the frost.

Meridel Le Sueur, *North Star Country*, 1945 (1)

In a recent article, historian Charles Bergquist names the challenges which face Latin American—and, by implication, US—labor history—the challenges of control, globalism, gender, and post-structuralism. (2) This paper seeks to take on one of those challenges—gender. Given the high unemployment, political uncertainty, and social unrest of the present decade, that may seem an odd choice. And what possible relationship do gender—and community—have to the widespread, fundamental, and radical changes of the postindustrial age? In a time of declining union power and influence, (3) is it wise to ask what gender has to do with the "momentous question" of whether the labor movement shall endure?

Gender analysis may offer us some clues to labor's crisis—and its survival—that more traditional analyses of the labor movement do not. First, in the same thirty years in which the labor movement has seen such a decline, there have been significant changes in the gender ideology and practice that shapes our political and economic life. Further, we have moved from a society that accepted women's inferiority and male domination to one more open to the participation of women. Structural changes in the economy and capital's political response have been deeply gendered—as they were at the turn of the century, in the 1930s, in the immediate postwar period, and today. These changes have affected families and communities in gender-specific ways and have redefined what we mean by "family" and "community." Third, the most significant labor force changes in the twentieth century are entwined: the rise of the tertiary, or information, sector and the phenomenal increase in the labor force participation of women have been simultaneous.

Some observers would argue that the massive changes in the offering for the labor force and the labor movement demand responses that take on the structural—economic and political—problems of
postindustrial society. They advocate that the labor movement's analysis, strategies, and goals should be gender-neutral in design, forging a unity as strong as possible across gender, race, age, and national lines. Yet, the vision which I believe many of us share is of a labor movement in which differences among and between men and women might provide possibilities as well as problems, answers as well as questions, remedies as well as dilemmas.

Addressing the problem of labor's decline from a gendered perspective, moreover, helps us to see the connections—indeed, the indissoluble bonds—between arenas of human life that many people accept as essentially segregated and inviolate—that is, the personal and the political, community and workplace, production and reproduction, private economy and public life. Such connections can provide the basis for a revitalized labor movement, because they both speak to changes in post-industrial society and reestablish the links between past and future developments in the labor movement.

Gender analysis offers us new insights into political strategy, the labor movement as a vehicle for change, and the historical impact of conservatism (whether it be gender conservatism, political anticomunism, or economic retrenchment). It can aid us in evaluating the remedies offered for solving the problem of labor's decline. That is a tall order for a short conversation. But in answering these questions, we begin to unravel the dilemma of how male and female interests can be seen as compatible within a logic of the labor movement which recognizes equal treatment as the basis for collective advancement.

Gendering Labor’s Decline--Structure, Politics, or Culture?

The most recent data from the Monthly Labor Review reveals the extent of decline in labor union numbers and power. In 1992, labor union membership dropped to 15.8 million from 16.1 million in 1991, 16.7 million in 1990, and 16.9 million in 1989. That is a loss of more than a million members in four short years. The unionization rate is down from 34.7% of the labor force unionized in 1954 to 16.1% today. Only 11.5% of private industry is organized, while 40% of government workers belong to unions. By the year 2000, it is predicted that only about 5% of workers in the private sector will belong to unions. (4)

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The sorry state of the labor movement is not only reflected in the diminished membership rolls. Unions have been under siege in the labor relations process, losing about two-thirds of all NLRB elections in the 1980s. There has only recently been a turnaround; in 1992, labor won 50% of NLRB elections. The resistance of employers to unions proceeds from anti-union campaigns (including the illegal firing of union workers) to tactics that range from stalling elections to refusing to bargain with the legally elected representatives of workers.(5)

To add to these abysmal statistics, the political and economic context of the 1980s meant that unions engaged not so much in organizing as in concessions. An alarming number of unions have accepted two-tier wage structures (meatpacker demands that led to the Hormel strike, the Caterpillar negotiations, and the 1993 Ford contract); others have reluctantly signed on to cutbacks in health care benefits.(6) Public sector unions have come under attack, as taxpayers and budget deficit hawks have gone on the offensive. As a result, government workers are attacked in local editorial pages. Newt Gingrich, reading from a Reader’s Digest article, uses a $40,000 a year janitor in New York City to represent the waste and corruption of public sector unionism—and, implicitly, of all government workers and all unions. Teachers’ unions are criticized for striking, even after years of low or no pay raises, and city workers are threatened with wage cuts and privatization.(7)

There are many causes for the decline in the union membership and concessionary bargaining. First, there has been a major restructuring of the U.S. economy in the 1980s, with the merger movement, capital flight, deindustrialization, corporate reorganization, automation, and reconfiguring of the internal division of labor.(8) Second, there has been a widespread political offensive against labor unions, which predated the 1980s. Right to work campaigns, labor law reform aimed at the supposed “labor monopoly,” racketeering charges, and the notorious “featherbedding” attacks of the 1950s and 1960s set the stage for a broad based attack on labor. In the intervening years, employer opposition to unions added up to major investments to de-certify unions and prevent labor union organization. Unions are charged with being “special interests” in politics; the government has intervened to investigate union financial abuses and intervene in internal union affairs. All have contributed to the decline of the labor movement in political and economic terms.(9)

The most obvious of cause of labor union decline, however, is the demographic and economic shifts in the work force which labor has to organize and in which the differential experiences of men and women workers play a major role. In the twentieth century, for both women and men, there has been a movement (gradual, with occasional swings backward) away from mass production jobs (the engine of U.S. economic growth and strength) toward work in the clerical and service (or tertiary) sector. While industrial
reorganization—with its constant reconfiguring of the division of labor—makes it difficult to describe a simple pattern, the fastest growing occupational sector between 1900 and 1940 was white collar (clerical, trade/sales, service, professional)—and that was true for both men and women. With the exception of wartime production during World War II, the pattern for the rest of the century was much the same.

In his book, The End of Ideology, Daniel Bell showed that numbers of productive workers were shrinking relative to the number of nonproductive, clerical and service employees. Even in primary industry, firms hired increasing numbers of clerical, managerial, and technical workers. In 1947 when blue collar workers composed 40.7 percent of the labor force; in 1963, they made up less than 37 (36.4) percent; white collar workers, on the other hand, grew from 45.3 to 57 percent over the same period. By 1965, the proportion of the labor force in productive work had shrunk to less than 50%. By the 1980s, this had diminished further. (10)

These trends worked out differently for men and women. Women, who were in the front lines of the industrial revolution (the first workers employed by mass production industry, as in the Lowell textile mills), were also the footsoldiers of the information revolution. Between 1870 and 1900, women dominated the clerical labor force in insurance, banking, and business, even as those sectors developed ever more minute divisions of labor. From 1900 to 1940, the trend was toward the development of a hierarchically differentiated white collar labor force with women performing routine tasks of typing, filing, and secretarial labor, and men serving in professional-technical capacities and as managerial personnel. (11) As economist Claudia Goldin argues, during this period, wage discrimination on the basis of sex was formalized in white collar occupations. Marriage bars and occupational segregation accounted for a growing wage gap between men and women, not different educational levels. The increasingly white collar character of the labor force created major problems for a labor movement rooted in the skilled trades and mass production industry. These factors were only exacerbated by the feminization of secondary industrial work and the global reorganization of manufacturing. (13)

The origins of the contemporary crisis of labor are to be found not in changes that began long before the precipitous decline of the past ten to fifteen years. Much earlier, there were signs of decline. Efforts to organize new workers, to use one example, did not keep pace with the growth of the labor force. George Meany, head of the unified AFL-CIO, best summarized this attitude when he said, "Why should we worry about organizing groups of people who do not want to be organized?... Frankly, I used to worry about the size of membership. But quite a few years ago, I just stopped worrying about it, because to me, it doesn't make any difference." (14) At the same time, changes in the industrial
sector cost unions members. Between 1948 and 1957, two of the largest unions--auto and steel--lost almost 20% of their members. Service workers, even at that time, presented the only sector of the labor force that was unionizing. The Teamsters union between 1953 and 1959 increased their numbers by 18%; Retail Clerks and Butchers saw increases of nearly 35%.(13)

As Daniel Bell (like many other industrial relations' experts) argued in "The Prospects for Union Growth," labor reached its "saturation" point in manufacturing by the mid-1950s. All other sectors of the labor force--agricultural labor, small firms, southern and rural industries, white collar clerical, service, and professional work--were, from this perspective, "unpenetrable." Automation caused worker alienation and played into the employers' hands by creating redundant labor. Government was not longer amenable to "helping" labor as it had in the 1930s. It was not, however, merely political and economic obstacles that stood in the way. According to Bell, the 'language' of labor stood between the new workers--especially concerned with young female workers in clerical occupations--and the blue collar industrial unions which were, by implication, male arenas of contestation with management.(15)

The attack on labor unions and the erosion of their structural underpinnings were almost simultaneous with unions' acquisition of economic and political power in the 1930s, the membership figures have had their most drastic downturn since 1980. The question is are we merely experiencing the inevitable lag between structural changes and cultural/political response? Or, as Charles MacDonald argues in his recent article, will union membership figures experience first an "abatement" and then "a reversal of the trend... without a major shift in union mission"?(17)

I want to contest McDonald's optimistic forecast and to say that a major shift is required. It is only by adding a sharp gender analysis of the problems and remedies that we can reverse labor's decline. Why? First, the decline in blue collar jobs relative to the white collar clerical and service sector was in gear by 1960; it has been a disproportionately female shift. Second, the supposed resistance of white collar workers has its roots in the identity and tactics of unions and in their refusal to accommodate the new workers, despite the glimmerings of white collar and clerical organization at the turn of the century.(18) Third, the growth of women's labor force participation has been in place for roughly the same period of time. Finally, the small but growing proportion of the labor force employed in the public sector (clerical and service jobs in health care, social services, teaching, administration) has been the most receptive to unionization in the past thirty years; public sector work is also, at least at the lower levels, disproportionately female.
These phenomena were not and are not unrelated; they also connect with changes in family structure, including a growing number of single parent households and the increased dependence of working women on day care. (19) Women's participation in the labor force was predicated by growing consumption needs and by increased corporate and government demand for clerical and service workers (most of which was assigned, by the prevailing division of labor, to women and part of the information revolution of the postwar period). Any solution to labor's "crisis" must take these factors all into account.

Gender and the Decline of Labor, or, What Role Does Gender Play?

Before we proceed, we should ask if part of our perception of crisis is not linked to the fact that labor is different—located in different sectors of the economy, not as tied to production as it is to services, and performed by different people. Crisis can be seen in the divisions that occur between workers, unionized or not, that tend to erode solidarity, influence, and commitment to labor.

Second, we need to ask ourselves if the problem here is really the resistance of women of all races or minority men, as labor commentators have often portrayed it. There is plenty of evidence to suggest, rather, that the gender problem of the labor movement is the disaffection and disempowerment of white working class men that has taken place over the past thirty years. Most successful unions were located in the primary industrial sector; this is no longer true. While white women's unionization rates are still low (14%), women represent an increasing proportion of union members (37%); black men represent the most highly unionized group in the labor force (24%). (20) That means that deunionization has taken place, significantly, among white working class males. Union men also were the group most targeted by corporate restructuring and the global reorganization of labor.

The Reagan era's assault on the welfare state wasn't just directed at welfare queens and affirmative action; it was aimed at driving a wedge between working class constituencies, union resources, and the Democratic Party. It homed in on workers in primary industry (where white men were the dominant labor force), demanding cutbacks in wages, and basically eroded the political base of the labor movement. What we are talking about here is the exile or disaffection (since working men did not all leave industrial unions of their own choosing) of white working class men from a social movement which has quintessentially been labelled as their own for the past century.

Gender—as that word has come to represent "women"—is not a problem for the labor movement in the way that 19th century labor leaders thought it was. In the 19th and early 20th century, for
example, the identity of the "trade unionist" was linked with masculinity, whiteness, respectability, and brotherly solidarity, attributes which only on occasion could be possessed by those working women and minority/immigrant working men who came into the labor union realm. Exclusionary rules for membership, apprenticeships that were almost hereditary in nature, citizenship requirements, and internal union conduct (social networks, bureaucratic procedures, resource distribution, tolerance) prevented women and some minority and immigrant men from feeling at home in the labor movement. While the egalitarian rhetoric of industrial unions of the 1930s made the labor movement a more hospitable place for women and minority men, seniority lists, sex and race segregation of the labor force, women's disproportionate responsibility for family and domestic labor, and differential access to leadership positions did little to change the overall race and sex configuration of the labor movement.

By the 1990s, it had become obvious that, whatever the history has been, men were not necessarily the best unionists and women reactionaries and resisters. It is the conditions under which workers labor and in which they are forced to organize to protect their collective and separate interests that is at issue. Gender ideology—whether progressive or conservative—has proven to be both sustaining and undermining for the labor movement. It can create conditions of hostility or solidarity, fragmentation or unity. But where gender has proven to be problematic is exactly in this regard. When major shifts in the labor force have added millions of women to the constituency of labor unions, the labor movement at times resisted their inclusion and helped to perpetuate sex discrimination in ways informed by gender identity and ideology. That has, in the context of a feminizing labor force, impeded and eroded labor union recruitment, allegiance, and solidarity. It has also meant that labor unions do not fully understand their own community origins or how they might capitalize on innovations today.

Analyzing the Remedies

There are a number of remedies suggested for a reinvigorated labor movement. For those who believe the problem lies in the confrontational and competitive labor relations of the postwar years, there are arguments for greater labor-management cooperation, including an argument for rescinding Wagner Act restrictions of company unions. Others advocate political and legal changes that would create a new atmosphere for labor recruitment and bargaining, including the rather drastic step of repealing the Wagner Act and its modifications—Taft Hartley and Landrum Griffin. Such calls for political action rely on a new will for coalition-building with various interest groups and social movements and renewed interest in a labor party.
Almost every analysis of the prospects for labor union recovery and growth, however, have one thing in common: new organizing is the key. (25) The question is—what kind of organization? Among the critiques of what went wrong is the notion of a highly centralized bureaucratic unionism that had divorced itself from the rank-and-file, a revived business unionism that possessed only in prosperous times. Based on this critique, numerous labor activists and scholars rely on the notion of solidarity, social, or community-based unionism. This form roots itself in the local and cultural configurations of labor, relies on shopfloor and union democracy, and reinvests in communities to drive union organization. It surfaces in the renewed use of churches and voluntary associations by unions, in coalition-building, in a willingness to bring in non-union participants into campaigns, and in the personal, face-to-face organizing that had characterized earlier union drives but which was forgotten since the dues check-off was introduced in the 1940s. (26) Finally, it places concerns about family and community at the center—concerns about health care, family leave, parental leave, child care, job security, and equal pay.

Any solution would need to combine the approaches of community, workplace, and political activism. It would require us to ask not only for more organization but whom and how to organize; not only for better labor laws but to whom they apply and in which way they will be implemented; not only for greater political organization but for a different political organization; not only for the integration of strategies in community, workplace, and politics but for the integration of workers—into those strategies. Finally, it would require unions to pay attention to continued gender and racial inequities, occupational segregation, and discrimination.

In recent years, for example, the unionization of women increased while men’s declined. In a recent survey, 14.8 percent of women workers were in unions and 21.3 percent of men in the labor force. At the same time, women constitute the majority of new union members (66%). Women are not, however, adequately represented in labor union leadership. A recent International Labour Organisation survey found that while women accounted for thirty-seven percent of union members, they make up less than ten percent of union governing boards and head only two major unions. While women play a local and regional union leadership, their influence does not percolate to the national level. The future will bring increasing numbers of women both to the labor force and to the union movement. Currently women comprise 47 percent of the labor force. By the year 2000, women will be an absolute majority of the labor force; their union membership, in the context of deunionization and inadequate recruitment, remains uncertain. (27)
In a search for greater participation and membership of the growing female labor force, will labor unions revamp their strategies and tactics? We should consider the growth in public sector unions, which have been one bridgehead for the new unionism of the 1990s. While the organization of government workers traditionally has been hampered by public opinion, it also has been aided by the freedom of federal, state, and local government employees from the constraints of Wagner, Taft-Hartley, and Landrum-Griffin labor laws. Contrary to the fears of the industrial relations prophets, the greatest growth in union membership in the past thirty years has been in public sector employment and private sector service and clerical work, especially in health care.28 Between 1968 and 1978, union membership among government employees tripled, increasing from 764,000 to 2,205,000. By 1978, better than 1 in 3 (36%) government employees were members of unions.29 In the latest report in Monthly Labor Review, the statistics are astounding: Currently, 4 in 10 (40%) union members is a government employee.30 The most dynamic unions in this matter have been the white collar unions of AFSCME and SEIU and the teaching federations, AFT and NEA; there were only small gains in light industrial work (for example, the United Food and Commercial Workers and the ILGWU campaigns among new immigrant workers).31

Further, the arenas of the most innovative tactics and experimentation have been in the service and clerical sectors. Groups like 9 to 5, the SEIU's Justice for Janitors campaigns, the transnational organizing of La Union de Trabajadores Fronterizos (UTAF), the return to community-based organization campaigns—even the reinvention of one-to-one, building-by-building organization and the revitalization of cultural life of unions—have occurred in the sectors which sociologists predicted would be most problematic for unions.32 To capitalize on these gains requires us to think not just about the politics of labor but also about the politics of gender in the labor movement.

The broad based and successful efforts to organize clerical workers in higher education are another avenue to explore.33 At Yale, Harvard, Columbia, the University of Minnesota, and Illinois, successful organizing led to some of the most innovative and effective labor union campaigns in recent memory. At Harvard, 3,700 clerical, service, and technical workers were organized under the auspices of an independent union led by Kris Rondeau. Eighty percent of the clericals at Harvard were women (2900 at University of Minnesota with 93% of clericals women; at the University of Illinois, there was a similar situation.) Rondeau, the head of the campaign, began to organize the campus with the aid of seven other former organizers for UAW after a failed campaign. Using a one-on-one organizing method (with very little reliance on union literature), they managed to bring together the staff from diverse occupations and locations into a strong community-based union, employing cultural and political techniques, to recruit. The key
issues in the campaign were not the $19,000 a year average salary but child care availability and cost; health benefits, insurance, and pensions.(34)

The Harvard President at the time was Derek C. Bok, an eminent labor scholar. Despite the already existing agreements with blue collar unions at the university, Bok resisted the campaign of the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (later affiliated with AFSCME). His opposition led to an intensive anti-union campaign, which argued that unions were a "disruptive force." Despite the alumni’s negative reaction to Bok’s anti-union tactics, the university went to court to enlarge the bargaining unit and pursued other legal tools to oppose the unionization campaign.(35)

As AFSCME head, Gerald McEntee said, "As goes Harvard, so goes the unorganized white-collar sector of the economy." The campaign encountered many of the obstacles that clerical/white collar unions have in the past century—the obstacles of the white collar workplace, middle class identification, alienation from and hostility to unions, the supposed difficulties in organizing women, the professional or paraprofessional nature of the jobs and of occupational identification, the insensitivity, hostility, and jurisdictional competition of established labor unions. But, as in other successful white collar campaigns, the union won out by employing innovative techniques and focusing on non-traditional issues.(36) In a hotly contested election, the union won. After defeating a court challenge, they were able to begin negotiations.(37)

In his 1970s study, Labor and the American Community, President Bok wrote, "Unions are the most potent organized body to represent the political interests of workers and to a lesser extent of the poor and disadvantaged."(38) By the 1980s, had labor’s potential changed? Or was it that Bok’s study, written at a time when the United Auto Workers, came to represent responsible, concerned, politically active unionism, was written about an industrial union, of production line workers, most of whom were men and not white collar female employees of an institution of higher learning? Did labor’s long history as a social movement of men stop even its advocates from accepting unionism outside industrial settings?

Clearly, in the Harvard campaign, many of the assumptions about labor’s goals, strategies, and constituencies were stripped away, as neither the supposed economism of unions nor their blindness to issues of social reproduction were operative. The lessons of the Harvard campaign went beyond speculating whether public representation of labor, as well as of gender, impede the organization of working men or women. Kris Rondeau and Gladys MacKenzie of AFSCME spoke to the issues in a recent interview. They argued forcefully for the need to tailor unionism to the
workers on a community basis, through person-to-person connections and with an emphasis less on issues than on what the workers wanted the union to be. As McKenzie said, "In our model, the goal is to build a community, not win an election." At Harvard, Minnesota, and other universities, the clerical and technical labor force is predominantly female, which has meant that the community model—one which also embraces the social issues of childcare and health—is no longer a choice but a necessity, if the labor movement is to have a future. While labor law reform would be required to make the AFSCME campaigns more broadly applicable, they point the way to a revitalized labor movement through a community base. (39)

The Purpose of Unions

Our overview of the current crisis of the labor movement and its gender implications raises questions of women's role unions, the relationship between ability to recruit women, and what the purpose of unionism should be. They are questions that place us on the primary divide in labor history and in class politics—which is to say, what is important—or more important—the workplace or the community, the individual or the family? How can we balance the needs of communities, workers, and employers?

We might argue along the lines suggested in Alice Kessler-Harris's essay, "Treating the Male as Other," playing out the implications of making "households" the center of labor analysis and strategy. (40) To use the words of Peter Roberts, an early twentieth century sociologist, "the question of wages" to workers means their "whole living." (41) The logic of the labor movement, of worker opposition and resistance implicit in this is the logic of reproduction. Such a logic places the fulcrum of labor's demands and needs within households, and its community support at the center, not the periphery, of campaigns to revitalize the labor movement. (42)

But that logic also demands we answer other questions. If the household (or community or the reproductive sphere) is the touchstone of union politics, does it necessarily set its agenda or assume center place? Where does the workplace fit in? To ask a 1990s question, what is the usefulness of "household" in a time of increasing numbers of single-person households and identity politics? Beyond the introduction of familial, social, and community concerns into the union agenda, what role can the household play in the union movement? Given conservative political times, is it inevitable that unions surrender that ground which is easiest to give up—namely the very demands and needs of its marginal constituencies—women, nonmembers, and the young? What if households internally disagree or their members have disparate interests?
Rebuilding and sustaining a democratic labor movement, one in which women are understood to be equal partners in both responsibility and benefit, requires understanding the labor movement as encompassing three bases of activism—community, workplace, and politics. They should be interrelated but not conflated. During periods of the labor movement’s historical growth, these three bases have been relatively well-integrated. And the labor movement has been well served by their integration.

The growth of "the new unionism" at the turn of the century was predicated on precisely its inclusiveness; that industrial unionism lost ground to other forms of union activity may be attributed both to the restructuring of the economy and to the greater political influence of employers and the bureaucratic state in the post-World War period. (43) During the 1930s, the growth of the labor movement was predicated on a similar three-dimensional challenge to employers’ power—in the community (and in cultural terms), in the workplace, and in the arena of the state/politics. It was the decision of many industrial unions (based on their community orientation) to incorporate not only women’s activities but a broad social and cultural program and political activism that sustained union growth and strength. (44)

Unfortunately accompanying such a broad-based approach to union institution-building is the process of bureaucratization, in which some of the very methods by which one builds a union become marginalized—stigmatized—and abandoned. Dissent becomes delegitimized within the new procedural bureaucratic democracy of the union. Bureaucratic institutions do not take well or happily to the presence of opposition, unless it is itself institutionalized. How does this process happen? How do unions lose their edge? How did the bureaucratization of the labor movement keep it from responding not only to labor force changes but to the innovations of labor organizers in the 1970s and 1980s?

What seems to be at the crux of the problem is the degree to which the labor movement has failed to recognize both its historical origins in a broadly based, flexible social movement and its contemporary challenge—that is labor unions have, for the most part, been out of sync with the labor force. Labor leaders have not responded—or have only responded slowly and only in dire need—to the changes in labor force composition, occupational and sectoral shifts, and political realities. As bureaucratic institutions, organized and sustained to meet the needs of their current members, they have not been—and perhaps should not be expected to be—foresighted or aware of the unorganized and the nonunion.

In a sense, their logic is like the logic of employers, with whom they contest, compete, and even cooperate at times—that is, labor unions too often have accepted the productivist vision. The conflict, in their view, is about work—controlling access to it
and rewards for it—and the short term future of that work. This is where Selig Perlman was right in his vision of a “job-conscious labor movement.” It was accurate as description, if not prescription, for the labor unions he saw fight to survive the doldrums of the 1920s. In their own way, unions, too, sought control in order to maximize their gains: How can they get the most for their members and, incidentally, for themselves?

In the postwar period, labor embraced not only a bureaucratic but a single-generation vision, one which denied the need and desire of people to reproduce the conditions of their existence and themselves (vis a vis children, relationships, etc). It is the optimal perspective for employers, but is it for labor? This vision requires individuals to make “rational” decisions (in capitalist terms) and seeks to shave off as much of the costs of human reproduction as possible from the production process. How could capital reduce the costs of the reproduction of human labor power—at least in a generational sense—but by having individual workers seek the same end? That is, labor had to cooperate in the drive to reduce the financial burdens of families on the individual firm and its individual employees. Labor’s choices—for concessions or certain political gains—need to be examined in this light.

At the same time, we should say is that there is no particular reason why labor unions—or the labor movement writ large—should have been the political weapon of choice in responding to the bad news of the 1960s or the 1980s and 1990s. Structural changes do not generate immediate responses from the principals involved; nor, for that matter, should anyone think that labor unions have been or should be the only, primary, or inevitable response to economic and social disorganization and political crisis of late 20th century capitalism.

Indeed, a lot of folks think quite the opposite. We can refer to the work of sociologists Manuel Castells (The Urban Question) and Jurgen Habermas (The Theory of Communicative Action). They argue that productivist movements (those based in the productive sphere) have lost ground to movements in the sphere of social reproduction, those concerned with distribution and cultivation of resources and the restoration of labor power. To put it more simply, the agents of change in the postwar period were social movements concerned not with work per se but with families and gender (women’s movement), race and ethnicity (civil rights), environment (ecological movement), and sexuality. Production has lost out as a concern to reproduction; politics (whether formal or cultural) has beaten out economics. Citizenship (which is to say public sphere activism) has become the vehicle by which workers make demands, not union membership.
This characterization of the labor movement as a movement centered in the realm of production is, as I have asserted, misguided. In some ways, what gender analysis tells me—thinking about the demands for the family wage, the transmission of union apprenticeship opportunities from fathers to sons, the commitment of working men and women to unions—is that the labor movement, to paraphrase Mary Heaton Vorse in Labor’s New Millions, is about families, communities, relationships—collective interests and power that are intergenerational, if not consanguineous. (This is why concessions to two-tier wage systems ultimately will undermine the future of unions; it alienates the young—and the future.) Labor has been and can be a social movement about reproduction—as well as production. When the labor movement or union leaders or members forget that simple fact—that the labor movement is about the sustenance, enhancement, and transmission of human culture across generations of workers, when we accept the perspective of management that labor unions are only concerned with the workplace and control of the work process, or about servicing members as though they were individual consumers, not human beings rooted in families and communities, then unions do decline. They lose their vision of the future, and subsequently their hold on the future-become-present.

Citizenship and Gender in the Labor Movement

That brings us back to the question about what the purpose of unions was and is. Unions were and are organizations based on “work” and “class.” Their purpose is the advancement of the material and political interests of the workers/working classes. That means that the real struggle is not to define the labor movement as a movement for individuals of one sex or or group per say but to redefine class interests as incorporating and depending on the interests of working class men and women. It also demands we consider children’s needs as well. Gender analysis is fundamental to this. It means, in the long run, equating gender and racial equality with the future prosperity and influence of the working classes and organized labor. Some good examples of such a perspective are making the fight that unions make against sex segregation and unequal or unfair pay (such as in comparable worth campaigns) integral to union strategy and seeing childcare as a problem for workers—not for women alone. Certainly, AFSCME’s growth in the 1980s was predicated partly on this strategy. (45) Unions also can redefine job security as a family and community matter.

Such a strategy does mean reordering gender relations, but any effort will require coalitional politics. It would mean reawakening men and women to community responsibilities and reminding them that women’s politics could benefit—rather than impede—working men’s. Men, after all, have household—reproductive—interests, too. As Hal Benenson once argued, fathers
and brothers (and mothers and sisters) sometimes did understand that their working sisters, daughters, and wives needed their support and their gains could supplement and complement their own. (46)

If the community, in other words, becomes a part of the strategy and perspective of labor unions, it will probably not be as the locus of needs and demands that are seen as peculiar to women—or to men or of particular social groups—but rather as part of the general uplift (a good 19th century word)—and specific benefit—of the working classes and the union movement. That can be seen as a kind of working class feminism; it also insists on the centrality of women’s needs, rights, and politics to a successful and revitalized labor movement. It is to understand feminism—and gender—as involving not just the liberation of individuals from exploitation and injustice (although it means that too) but to see gender analysis, gender politics, and gender issues as involving women and men in a collective struggle for justice in the workplace, the community, and the state.

Fifty years ago, in her book, North Star Country, Meridel Le Sueur spoke to the need for the struggle—and life itself—to continue. She reflected, “The people always know that some of the grain will be good, some of the crop will be saved, some will return and bear the strength of the kernel, that from the bloodiest year some will survive to outfox the frost.” (47) So, in this winter of labor’s discontent, what will it require to “outfox the frost” of a drastic decline in membership, political hostility, worker indifference, and weakened social conscience? Will some of the grain be good; can it survive? While there is no room for an unequivocal “yes,” neither is there any doubt that the possibilities for labor’s revival exist.

ENDNOTES


10. Daniel Bell, The End of Ideology. On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the 1950s, (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960), was, of course, not the only one to note the phenomenon or to describe its effects in increasing alienation and the circumscription of labor’s power. See also C. Wright Mills, White Collar: The American Middle Classes, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956); among others. Bell also forecast much of our contemporary dilemma in the drastic restructuring of the economy; see his The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting, (New York: Basic Books, 1973). For some preliminary figures on labor force changes, see Foster Rhea Dulles and Melvyn Dubofsky, Labor in America, 4th ed, (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1984), 365.


36.Hurd, "Learning from Clerical Unions."


40.Alice Kessler-Harris, "Treating the Male as Other," Labor History 34:2-3 (Spring-Summer 1993): 190-204.

41.Peter Roberts, Anthracite Coal Communities, (New York: Macmillan, 1904), iii.

42.Elizabeth Faue, "Reproducing the Class Struggle: Perspectives on the Writing of Working Class History," presented in the "Feminist Perspectives on Working Class History" roundtable, Social Science History Association meeting, Minneapolis, October 19, 1990.


47. Le Sueur, North Star Country, 321.