

History, Women's Work, and The New Unionism

by Dorothy Sue Cobble

I have been thinking and writing about New Unionism for over a decade. But my perspective is somewhat different from that held by many of my colleagues because my perspective is based primarily upon historical research and because gender is a central and shaping category in my work.

Both of these orientations make me atypical among scholars who study work and labor relations. But both of these orientations, I think, can help illuminate the transformations that are occurring in the workplace and in the economy. They can also help us evaluate the degree to which our current system of workplace representation suits today's workforce.

History allows us to step back and take the long view. From this perspective, present-day trends are easier to decipher and present-day practices don't appear immutable. History offers a sense of possibility. We can learn from the past; we don't have to invent the future out of whole cloth.

The study of women's jobs can be particularly illuminating, because women's jobs are harbingers of the future: More and more jobs are coming to resemble the jobs women have held historically. The work world is feminizing. Service and contingent work are becoming the norm rather than the exception. For women, these kinds of jobs are not new.

Women have always done service work, whether in the home or in paid employment. And they have always held a disproportionate share of contingent jobs—jobs that typically are part-time, low-paid, and without benefits and promotional opportunities.

Studying women's work, then, allows us to better understand the jobs of the future and the experiences of the men and women who will hold these jobs, while challenging many of the standard generalizations about what the work world of the future will look like.

Daniel Bell and others, for example, argue that we have

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crossed a divide into a post-industrial society based on knowledge work and the exchange of information. I agree.

Yet the study of women's jobs makes it clear that we are also moving into a world in which service work is as central as knowledge work and relational skills as needed as technical. Manual labor is being replaced not just by mental labor but by what some sociologists are calling emotional labor.

I want to draw on my historical and gender studies to help us think about New Unionism in higher education. I will begin by showing you just how old the New Unionism actually is. For I think that in our quest for alternative models, we are often reinventing older forms of unionism—unionisms that have been lost from public memory.

To convince you of these continuities between past and present, I'll elaborate upon some of my own historical discoveries. Then I'd like to lay out the implications of my research for higher education faculty and staff and the unions that represent them.

I began thinking about forms of unionism some 20 years ago in graduate school when I began looking for alternatives to what I later came to see as factory or industrial unionism. I wanted to know if unions were inevitably tied to the

blue-collar factory worker and, if manufacturing declined, would unionism also.

Had unions ever successfully represented non-manufacturing workers and, if so, how? Could these earlier successes help point the way toward how to best represent the current service and knowledge-based work force?

What became apparent quickly was that unions had indeed successfully represented non-manufacturing workers. Before the triumph of mass production unionism in the 1930s, the majority of organized workers were not in factories. They worked in transportation, trade, construction, and services. But what was harder to reconstruct was how this non-factory unionism operated.

Eventually, it became clear that the majority of workers before the New Deal had created forms of workplace representation that differed markedly from the forms of unionism that later arose among factory workers.

What blinded me to this discovery initially was a misconception that I fear is still quite widespread. Far too many analysts equate the current institutional form of unionism with unionism per se.

But history shows that unionism is a changing, evolving institution. Unionism cannot be conflated with a particular set of practices or

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philosophies. The unionism that is dominant today is not the unionism that was dominant in the past.

Many may think they are protecting unionism by defending the institutional practices of today's unions. But, in fact, they may be dooming the labor movement to an increasingly marginal status by insisting upon the preservation of one particular institutional manifestation of that movement.

The unionism that was dominant before the New Deal—what I call “occupational unionism”—had more in common with the practices of early craft unions and with professional associations than with the industrial unionism of mass production workers.

In my first book, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century*, and in a series of articles that followed, I identified four key elements associated with occupational unionism.

One, workers' identities were with their occupation or craft, not with a particular company, employer, or worksite. Their unionism followed their work; where their work went, so did their unionism. Their unionism was not dependent on the stability of particular employers, nor was it physically rooted in a geographical place.

Two, union benefits and protections were tied to the occupation

rather than to a particular job or employer. That is, benefits were portable and moved with members as they moved with the work. Health and welfare benefits, as well as wage and hour standards, were linked to union membership, not employee status or location.

Three, union members set the standards for craft or professional competence, and the union took responsibility for enforcing those standards in the workplace. In many instances, the union itself made those difficult decisions about whether a person would continue to work at a particular job site and, indeed, whether a person would continue in the craft or profession.

I call this “peer management,” and before the New Deal it was a widespread function of unions that only later came to be claimed by managements as their prerogative.

Four, occupational unions relied on collective bargaining as a principal mechanism for improving the lives of working people, but they also turned just as frequently to other strategies. They engaged in lobbying and political action, for example. They also emphasized the importance of setting up licensing and certification procedures and maintaining control over training.

These unions used strikes and other forms of direct economic action, but unions also used mediation, joint labor-management

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boards and committees, consumer and producer boycotts of "unfair" employers, and legal action. Unions in the 19th and early 20th centuries defined themselves broadly. Collective bargaining was not the litmus test for inclusion in the labor movement.

But what does occupational unionism have to offer today, particularly to those of us in higher education? Let me first make clear that I am not advocating a "one-size-fits-all" approach to reforming unions. Many complain that New Unionism means so many different things to so many different people. But I think this is as it should be. No two industries are alike; nor are any two school districts the same.

In other words, occupational unionism is not a universal panacea for union decline. Nevertheless, aspects of occupational unionism, judiciously chosen and recombined, would help reinvigorate many of today's union institutions.

The study of occupational unionism suggests, for example, that we need to pay more attention to what binds us together, that is, our craft of teaching.

We may come from multiple disciplines and hold widely divergent political views, but the vast majority of us care deeply about what does or does not happen in the classroom. How can we engage our

students? How can we maintain control over our teaching content and our pedagogical techniques? How can we ensure that we as a profession are recognized, valued, and adequately rewarded for our contributions to society?

Education unions today must be the leaders in advancing the teaching craft. This means, like the occupational unionists of the past, taking more control over the training and licensing of teachers. It also means setting the standards for competence and taking responsibility for enforcing those standards in the workplace—what I termed "peer management."

Moving toward peer management is a difficult and painful transition for unions because, in the postwar era, most unions came to embrace the labor relations practice—standard in mass production settings—of ceding discipline and discharge decisions to management.

Yet it is important to realize that the widely accepted axiom, "management acts, the union grieves," was always better suited to a factory setting of semi-skilled and virtually interchangeable workers than to a white-collar and service enterprise dependent upon skilled, professional labor.

Reclaiming our union traditions of peer management would help

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improve the public image of unionized teachers. Union labor was once associated with the production of goods and services of the highest quality. A product bearing the union label signaled to the public that here was a product that was well-crafted by highly-trained skilled workers and would last. Having a union teacher in the classroom should once again guarantee a quality service. Union membership should be a publicly recognized signifier of teaching excellence.

But what constitutes quality teaching and how is excellence achieved? Education unions need to be leaders in defining good teaching and determining how large numbers of teachers can acquire the skills they need for excellence.

As part of this undertaking, it is important to remember that the skills that make up our craft are multiple. We are knowledge workers engaged in mental labor, but we are also service workers engaged in the work of nurturing and reproduction. As educators we must impart social and psychological competencies as well as technical skills, and we need "emotional intelligence" as well as other kinds of resources.

Historically, higher education teaching, especially at the university level, was dominated by men. Today, this is changing. The femi-

nization of teaching makes it increasingly important for men, as well as for women, to challenge the devaluation of women's work and the invisibility of the skills associated with female occupations.

So-called women's jobs typically have involved caring and emotional labor. Teaching is no exception, whether done with 5-year olds or 50-year olds. As we move into a world in which women are close to the majority of all workers, arguments that challenge the historically invisible and undervalued skills of women's work will be crucial to keeping wages and working conditions competitive for all workers.

In closing, let me turn to the institutional practices of unions and examine how these can be refashioned to appeal to the workers of the future.

Unions must not give up the struggle to offer workers economic security and protection. Nevertheless, they will need multiple mechanisms to achieve this age-old demand.

For some teachers, economic security will come from career advancement and mobility as much, if not more than, from long-term tenure at an individual worksite. Education unions, then, will need to be more institutionally varied and flexible if they are to meet the demands of an increasingly

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diverse and contingent work force.

Education unions will need to assist workers with their professional advancement both within and across occupations. They will need to offer portable benefits and membership. They will also have to grapple with the fundamental inequities that divide their membership.

In this context, the historic call for equal pay for equal work may apply as much to the wage gap between full-time and part-time faculty as to the long-standing wage inequities based on gender and race. The disparity in wages and working conditions between and among part-time and full-time faculty is particularly problematic for a New Unionism that would base its "community of interest" on the craft of teaching.

How can we justify such inequities in reward, given the comparable quality and quantity of effort between part-timers and full-timers in teaching?

Lastly, teacher unions must rethink their own internal organizational practices and culture. I believe people still do and will continue to join voluntary organizations. Nevertheless, the voluntary organizations to which people are drawn in the future will not look like the ones of the past.

We are at a historical juncture

in which union structures, like those of many other institutions in our society, will have to be rethought. Many of the union institutions we have today were built in the late nineteenth century and then elaborated in the New Deal period. These union institutions, like their business counterparts, were hierarchical, vertically integrated, bureaucratic organizations. But these kinds of enterprises are increasingly dysfunctional in today's environment.

Union institutions cannot remain static as everything around them changes. The new generation of workers is demanding decentralized, democratic, open organizations that allow for autonomy and creativity. Unions will have to invent new forms of participation, leadership, and accountability. They will have to be as diverse as the workforce they seek to represent.

History shows that diversity is not new either in the workforce or in union institutions. History also reveals that the unions that endured were the ones that could evolve as the environment around them evolved.

The unions that meet the challenge of the next century will be those that reclaim these traditions of diversity and reform, that have the courage to risk change and invent New Unionisms. ■