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REVIEW ESSAY:
NEW RESEARCH IN WOMEN'S LABOR HISTORY

by

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As more and more women have entered the paid workforce over recent decades, the ranks of organized labor have become increasingly feminized as well. In 1990, 37 percent of all union members in the U.S. were women -- a record high. Equally significant, and in sharp contrast to the situation earlier in this century, today women of color are *more* likely than their white sisters to be unionized.¹ And in a break with its long history of marginalizing women's concerns, the labor movement has embraced some major feminist issues in recent years, such as comparable worth and parental leave. Despite these gains, however, thanks to the general decline of unionism, only a small minority of the nation's workforce (a mere 13 percent of employed women, and 16 percent of all employed workers) are organized, and the short-run prospects for labor's renewal seem bleak.

Feminist scholars have shown limited interest in the situation of women in the contemporary labor movement.² But despite the current crisis of unionism, research on women's labor history -- a field that barely existed twenty years ago -- has burgeoned.

¹Data are from U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment and Earnings*, 38, no. 1 (January 1991), 228. In 1990 11.7 percent of white women were union members, compared to 12.5 percent of hispanic women and 18.0 percent of black women.

²Important exceptions include: Linda Blum, *Between Feminism and Labor: The Significance of the Comparable Worth Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Dorothy Sue Cobble, ed., *Working Women and the Labor Movement: Forging a New Partnership* (Ithaca: ILR Press, forthcoming); Cynthia Costello, *We're Worth It! Women and Collective Action in the Insurance Workplace* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Sara Evans and Barbara Nelson, *Wage Justice: Comparable Worth and the Paradox of Technocratic Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); and Karen Sacks, *Caring By the Hour: Women, Work and Organizing at Duke Medical Center* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

Although the field still awaits a grand theoretical synthesis, there has been an explosion of carefully nuanced historical studies of gender, work and unionism that go far beyond the exploratory, compensatory writings that characterized the early literature in this field.³

Areas that were once neglected -- women's work and unionism in the service sector, the dynamics of race and ethnicity as they interact with gender and class; the ways in which gender is embedded in unions and other labor market institutions -- are now emerging as central. A review of recent writings in twentieth century women's labor history can help illuminate the roots of the current impasse facing organized labor, as well as revealing the historical conditions that facilitate, and those that impede, women's labor activism.

Among the best new work in this area are three imaginative new studies of women workers and their unions in the early part of this century that radically reshape our understanding of that critical period. Susan A. Glenn's stunning *Daughters of the Shtetl* reexamines the single best known case of female labor militancy, that of the New York garment workers.⁴ Glenn's fresh approach to this much-studied subject stresses the

³I review aspects of the development of the field in Ruth Milkman, "Gender and Trade Unionism in Historical Perspective," in *Women, Politics and Change*, eds. Patricia Gurin and Louise Tilly (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1990), 87-107. Other useful review essays include Lois Rita Helmbold and Ann Schofield, "Women's Labor History, 1790-1945," *Reviews in American History*, 17, no. 4 (December 1989), 501-18; Mari Jo Buhle, "Gender and Labor History," in *Perspectives on American Labor History: The Problems of Synthesis*, eds. J. Carroll Moody and Alice Kessler-Harris (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1990), 55-79; and Ava Baron, "Gender and Labor History: Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future," in *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor*, ed. Ava Baron (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 1-46.

⁴Susan A. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

continuity between the Old and New World experiences of East European Jewish women, and how those experiences helped shape the dramatic women's "uprising" of 1909-10, which established industrial unionism in the garment industry. Stephen H. Norwood's *Labor's Flaming Youth* and Dorothy Sue Cobble's *Dishing It Out* excavate equally dramatic, but previously unknown instances of female labor militancy among telephone operators and waitresses, respectively.⁵ These two groups of service sector workers organized highly effective, female-led unions in the same period as the garment workers, but in settings that could hardly differ more from New York's Jewish working class community.

All three authors emphasize the pride in craft that informed the unionizing efforts of the women they studied. Whereas earlier accounts stressed the unskilled character of women garment workers, Glenn shows that many of the women who immigrated to New York brought with them the craft traditions of needleworkers in Eastern Europe. While the organization of work in the New York garment industry often threatened their artisanal identities, many of the leaders of the 1909-10 strike were in fact skilled women workers. Boston's Irish-American telephone operators, the protagonists of Norwood's story of the rise of a major national woman-led union in the 1910s, were subjected to more systematic deskilling than their counterparts in the garment trades. Yet Norwood's story is similar in that here too it was those women with the greatest autonomy and pride in their work, the toll operators, who led the unionizing drives. The issue of craft identity also figures centrally in

⁵Stephen H. Norwood, *Labor's Flaming Youth: Telephone Operators and Worker Militancy, 1878-1923* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

Cobble's analysis of waitress unionism, whose strongholds were among native-born white women in union towns like San Francisco and Detroit. Cobble shows how waitresses successfully adapted classic craft union tactics -- depicted in most previous literature as quintessentially patriarchal -- to their needs in building all-female local unions.

Both Glenn and Norwood explore the influence of the cultural ideal of New Womanhood on the self-conception and organizing efforts of the youthful, unmarried women workers of this era. In an explicit critique of earlier work that constructed the peer culture of young working women as a deeply conservative influence, promoting romance and marriage as an escape from the rigid discipline and grueling working conditions of the sex-segregated industrial shop, these authors stress the ways in which female youth culture fueled workplace militancy in the early twentieth century.⁶ Glenn shows that New York's Jewish immigrant working class women were eager to maximize their earnings and to move up into the garment industry's more skilled occupations. Their female peer culture *did* celebrate romance and the emerging culture of consumerism and leisure, but this coexisted with a collective commitment to aggressively resist employer abuses. "For along with their fantasies about romance, marriage or clothing, eastern European Jewish women shared with one another their dreams about the possibilities for social justice and economic equality -- possibilities that many had imagined would be fulfilled in America."⁷

Similarly, Norwood highlights the involvement of the Irish-American telephone

⁶For the earlier view, see Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women: Industrial Work and Family Life in the United States, 1900-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

⁷Glenn, 166. See also Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

workers in the flapper culture of the 1910s, and the ways in which their union -- far from being weakened by its members' interests in leisure and romance -- capitalized on those interests by organizing dances, beauty contests, and other social activities. Norwood also suggests that going out on strike, far from being incompatible with the culture of romance, was a festive, highly social activity that served as an escape from the tedium of the work world and its rigid discipline. The militancy of these telephone operators was also rooted in their high school experiences, which helped them develop the self-confidence and the organizational skills they would later use in union-building, as well as cementing the peer networks that facilitated their organizational efforts.

In the early twentieth century, Cobble reports, waitresses were generally older than their counterparts in the telephone and garment industries, and unlike most women workers in this period, many waitresses were married, divorced or separated. Their peer culture was therefore quite different from that of women in other industries and occupations, and since many lived outside traditional family settings, co-workers were a major source of support and community. This relatively homosocial women's culture, however, was no more conservative than the more romantic world of the younger women workers Glenn and Norwood describe. "The waitress subculture," Cobble writes, "worldly and pragmatic, hardly reinforced romantic visions of escape into marital bliss."⁸

Another difference between the waitresses and their younger counterparts in garments and telephone was that while the latter groups enjoyed their greatest unionizing victories with the moral and material support of middle class women's groups, most importantly the

⁸Cobble, 57.

Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), the most successful waitresses' unions instead depended primarily on unionized men as allies. While waitresses did have WTUL support in eastern cities, their greatest organizing successes were in heavily unionized cities like Detroit and San Francisco where the predominantly male local labor movement supported their organizing drives. "Working class men, then -- often depicted as universally hostile or indifferent to female organization by feminist scholars -- proved instrumental in extending unionization among female food servers," Cobble points out.⁹ Another example of similar cross-gender solidarity is documented in Nancy Hewitt's work on Tampa's Latin cigar workers in the early twentieth century. Despite a rhetoric imbued with *machismo* and a clearly male-dominated union structure, in this community the militancy of women workers won enthusiastic male support and helped produce a gender-integrated labor movement.¹⁰

In addition to emphasizing the role of male support for female organizing, Cobble shows how waitresses in this early period turned the then-prevalent craft union model -- often depicted as an obstacle to female organization -- to their own ends. While they were less skilled than the male workers who pioneered this type of unionism, waitresses used many of the same tools to build solidarity within the food service trade in the early part of the century. Their unions set standards of competence for entry to the occupation, trained new workers, and disciplined those with substandard job performance; they also set up hiring halls and offered workers benefits and services that would travel with them from one job to

⁹Cobble, 110.

¹⁰Nancy Hewitt, "'The Voice of Virile Labor': Labor Militancy, Community Solidarity and Gender Identity among Tampa's Latin Workers, 1880-1921," in Baron, ed. (n. 3 above), 142-67.

the next. All of these techniques paralleled those used by male craft unionists in such fields as the building trades. While many feminist commentators have stressed the exclusionary side of this sort of craft unionism and its irrelevance to the generally less skilled female workforce, Cobble urges that we rethink this conventional wisdom. "The success of waitress unionism," she argues, "demonstrates how an organizational structure based on the logic of craft, rather than being incompatible with female mobilization, proved instrumental in its creation and maintenance."¹¹

The occupational unionism developed by these waitresses was, however, highly sex-segregated, with women and men forming separate local unions within the culinary trades. By World War I, over two-thirds of all organized waitresses were in all-female local unions, which women apparently preferred -- although the exact reasons for this preference are unclear. Cobble does recount instances of male hostility toward female organization in the food service trades, which was sometimes a serious obstacle to waitress organizing. But where waitresses did successfully unionize (with male support), the sex-segregated union structure gave them opportunities for participation and leadership that would otherwise have been absent. On the other hand, the waitresses duplicated the worst of the period's craft union model in their racial exclusionism. Most waitresses were of northern European extraction, and their union excluded blacks as well as Asian workers outright until the 1930s.

Two other new books further illustrate the dynamics of female organization in the occupationally-based unions and professional associations of teachers and nurses: Marjorie

¹¹Cobble, 8.

Murphy's *Blackboard Unions* and Darlene Clark Hine's *Black Women in White*.¹² Murphy traces the origins of teacher unionism among women from the beginning of the century, underscoring the feminist impulse behind the initial formation of unions among women public school teachers in Chicago and other urban centers. Issues like gender discrimination in salaries and promotions, and the right of married women to work, were central concerns for the fledgling teachers' unions, and these organizations were also active in the suffrage movement in this early period. Murphy says surprisingly little about the racial dynamics of the union in these years (although race emerges as a central issue in her account of the later evolution of teachers' unionism, particularly in the 1960s). However, it is clear that most local teachers' unions, like the schools themselves, were racially segregated until the 1930s.

The other major "female profession" of this period, nursing was (like teaching) an avenue of upward mobility for women who were able to secure the necessary education. Unlike teachers, nurses did not unionize in the early part of the century, but they did form what is today the American Nurses' Association (ANA), which has in recent decades become a *de facto* union, in 1896. Blatant racial exclusion in the ANA and in the nursing profession more generally led black women to establish their own, separate organizations and training institutions starting in the 1890s, and this is the focus of Hine's important study. Excluded from or segregated within white health care institutions, blacks essentially created parallel institutions, black nursing schools among them. In 1908, black nurses formed their own

¹²Marjorie Murphy, *Blackboard Unions: The AFT and the NEA, 1900-1980* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Women in White: Racial Conflict and Cooperation in the Nursing Profession, 1890-1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

professional association, the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses (NACGN). This organization, Hine recounts, served to shield black nurses "from the excessive racism, hostility, and denigration of their white colleagues, behind which they developed and honed leadership skills essential to attaining the ultimate objective of integration and acceptance into the mainstream of American nursing."¹³ This goal was finally achieved in the 1940s, and the NACGN formally dissolved itself in 1951, after the ANA agreed to integrate black nurses fully into its organizational structure.

Both the unions and the professional organizations that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century tended to peak in strength in the World War I years, and then declined in the face of the employer counterattacks and economic crisis of the 1920s and 1930s. This was the case (with some minor variations) for the heavily female garment, telephone, waitress and teacher unions as well as for the nurses' organizations. Only in the late 1930s, when mass production unionism swept the U.S. and generated a broader revival of unionism, did these organizations enjoy renewed growth, which in some cases brought changes in structure as well. The culinary unions, for example, shifted toward a more industrial structure and away from their occupationally-based strategy in this period. Moreover, racial exclusiveness was challenged in union after union in the 1930s and 1940s, with considerable success.

Most previous scholarship in women's labor history has constructed the emergence of industrial unionism in the late 1930s as a major breakthrough, arguing that its commitment to

¹³Hine, 94-95.

recruiting unskilled workers and its abandonment of racial and gender exclusiveness offered far more promise to women workers than the earlier period when craft unionism was hegemonic.¹⁴ The major exception was the successful organizing of garment workers in the 1910s that Glenn (among others) studied -- the "new unionism," as it was called at the time. Clothing workers in fact accounted for fully 43 percent of all unionized women in 1920.¹⁵ But this case is easily incorporated within the dominant view, since the garment unions prefigured the industrial form of unionism that became generalized in the late 1930s. We have already taken note of Cobble's contention that feminist scholars have overlooked the positive potential of the craft union model for organizing women. Although Murphy does not advance such a claim, her account of the history of early teachers' unions also supports it, for as professionals, teachers had much in common with craft workers.

Adding further complexity to the picture are two new books that focus on the cultural embeddness of gender subordination within economic categories generally, and specifically within the new, nominally inclusive form of industrial union organization which emerged under the banner of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s and 1940s. Elizabeth Faue's *Community of Suffering and Struggle* and Alice Kessler-Harris' *A Woman's Wage* offer important new contributions to our understanding of these issues.¹⁶ Industrial

¹⁴This is an explicit theme in my own work, for example. See Milkman, "Gender and Trade Unionism," (n. 3 above) as well as my *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

¹⁵Leo Wolman, *Growth of American Trade Unions, 1880-1923* (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1924).

¹⁶Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991);

unionism, in structural terms, was indeed a step forward, insofar as it embraced the principles of non-discrimination and inclusion. Yet, at the same time it reflected the prevailing gender ideology of the period -- specifically, the association of women with domesticity and community, whether or not they were gainfully employed, and the cultural construction of the sphere of wage labor as male terrain.

Faue's imaginative study of the labor movement in Minneapolis from the 1910s through the 1940s argues that women were marginalized by the process of union bureaucratization and the simultaneous separation of unions from the broader community politics out of which industrial unionism had initially emerged. She stresses the importance of women's contribution to building local CIO unions at the community level in Minneapolis, making their ultimate fate within the city's labor movement all the more poignant. Ironically, as unions reached the peak of their strength in the 1940s, the community base that had made their success possible, and to which women's contributions were so vital, became increasingly irrelevant to their institutional life. In the end, the pre-CIO period of craft union hegemony, because it offered more opportunities for community-based organizing, may have been more open to women's participation than the industrial unionism that emerged later, at least in its "mature," bureaucratized phase, beginning in the 1940s.

This part of the argument is lucid and persuasive, if not entirely original. The same general point has often been made within the "new labor history" about the consequences of union bureaucratization for rank-and-file workers of either gender, and the role of women in

Alice Kessler-Harris, *A Woman's Wage: Historical Meanings and Social Consequences* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990).

community-based labor organizing has been a perennial theme in women's labor history.¹⁷ The importance of women in community-based labor movements and their marginality to more bureaucratic forms of "business unionism" is also the focus of a wonderful new essay by Dana Frank on the role of women in consumer organizing -- through cooperatives, labor boycotts and union label campaigns -- in Seattle during the 1920s. She shows how women's support (or lack thereof) for such efforts determined whether or not they were effective, and she traces the internal struggles between the genders over their form and content. From this case study, Frank draws a broader lesson. "We have tended to accept the 'labor movement' as a given, based on strikes, organizing drives, and tactics at the point of production," she notes. "We need instead to stress more fully the particular incarnation of trade unionism at each point in time, and then ask how that formation was gendered."¹⁸ Like Faue, Frank argues that much was lost when women's domestic and community-based concerns became marginal to the self-definition and culture of organized labor -- in this case before the emergence of the CIO, in the late 1920s, when conservative business unionists came to power in Seattle.

However, Faue's most daring and original contribution is not so much her analysis of the eclipse of community-based unions, powerful as that part of her book is. Rather, it

¹⁷Particularly influential examples include Ardis Cameron, "Bread and Roses Revisited: Women's Culture and Working-Class Activism in the Lawrence Strike of 1912," in *Women, Work and Protest: A Century of U.S. Women's Labor History*, ed. Ruth Milkman (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 42-61; and, in a more theoretical vein, Temma Kaplan, "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918," *Signs*, 7 (Spring 1982), 545-66.

¹⁸Dana Frank, "Gender, Consumer Organizing and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929," in Baron, ed. (n. 3 above), 273-95. The quote is from p. 276.

comes in a chapter that explores the development of the language and culture of industrial unionism, tracing the emergence of a highly masculinized labor iconography in the CIO. Through a careful analysis of labor newspapers in the 1930s, she shows how the symbolism of unionism "romanticized violence, rooted solidarity in metaphors of struggle, and constructed work and the worker as male."¹⁹ Women were either totally invisible in this imagery, or depicted in auxiliary roles -- typically as wives, not as workers. Thus women's marginality was built into the culture of CIO unionism from the outset, making their limited representation among union leaders -- and in some industries, even among members -- a foregone conclusion.

Kessler-Harris' new book, although it says little directly about unionism, helps illuminate the larger context in which the masculinist labor culture that Faue documents took shape. Kessler-Harris demonstrates the embeddedness of gender in economic discourse generally over the course of the twentieth century, and particularly in ideas about the wage. She argues that what are generally conceived as "economic" processes, such as those shaping wage rates, are inextricably entwined with the wider culture. As she puts it, "the wage participates in social custom and practice."²⁰ Among other insights, she shows how wages historically have been based on explicitly gendered notions of economic need. Hence the idea of the "family wage" for men and the complementary idea of women's wages as supplementary. Tracing the fate of this conception over the course of the twentieth century, Kessler-Harris shows how it gradually gave way to the contemporary, gender-neutral notion

¹⁹Faue, 71.

²⁰Kessler-Harris, 3.

of equal pay -- first in the demand for equal pay for equal work, and later, in the face of growing recognition that in a sex-segregated labor market few women perform work "equal" to that of men, to the campaign for pay equity or comparable worth.

The shift from emphasis on gender difference to demands for equality began in the aftermath of the suffrage victory and was further encouraged within the labor movement by the CIO's ideological commitment to seeking equal treatment for all workers, regardless of race, creed or sex. While in practice the legacy of patriarchal ideology competed fiercely with this principle, the CIO did open new possibilities of women in this respect. Nancy F. Gabin's *Feminism in the Labor Movement* traces the emergence of the idea of gender equality within the CIO and its impact on the labor movement, generating a more optimistic assessment of the impact of industrial unionism on women than Faue's.²¹ Through a study of the history of women in the largest CIO union, the United Auto Workers (UAW), Gabin reconstructs the history of women's struggles in the auto industry and its union from the 1930s to the 1970s. While acknowledging the pervasiveness of male domination in the culture and institutional life of the UAW, Gabin maintains that "union membership serves not only as a constraint but also as a resource for female collective action."²² Women workers, she suggests, were in fact able to create a political space within the UAW to advance their interests as women. The union established a Women's Bureau in 1944, under the impact of the dramatic feminization of the auto industry workforce during World War II, thus formally

²¹Nancy F. Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement: Women and the United Auto Workers, 1935-1975* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

²²Gabin, 5.

institutionalizing women's concerns within the UAW bureaucracy. Despite the continuing marginality of women's issues to the broader politics of the union, Gabin shows that working women's demands were a constant undercurrent within the union, and she stresses the links between the union's female activists and the second wave of feminism that emerged in the 1960s. UAW women were in fact among the founders of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in the 1960s, and the UAW was the first union in the nation to endorse the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).

The World War II years were the one period during which women's employment in the basic industries that were the CIO's stronghold approached a critical mass. One way of appreciating the differences between the gender politics of the CIO and those of its craft union predecessors is to compare the wartime experiences of women in a union like the UAW with those in industries whose workers were represented by craft unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in the same period. Amy Kesselman's *Fleeting Opportunities*, an oral history-based study of women's experiences in the Kaiser shipyards of Portland and Vancouver, offers an intriguing example of the latter sort.²³ Although she does not explore the union issue in much detail, Kesselman does report that the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, an old-line AFL metal trades union which controlled two-thirds of the shipyard jobs at Kaiser, lived up to its name and did not even admit women as members until 1942. Even then, it did so reluctantly, under the pressure of the peculiar circumstances of the war, and women were admitted on a strictly segregated basis. The

²³Amy Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver During World War II and Reconversion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

machinists and electricians' unions at Kaiser were nearly as hostile. Moreover, after the war, most of the shipyard unions terminated women's membership cards outright, on the grounds that they had been "temporary workers." Compared to this, the treatment of women in the UAW and in the CIO more generally under otherwise similar circumstances seems rather benign.

Neither craft nor industrial unions ever recruited significant numbers of women in the very largest female occupations, however. In the early part of the century, domestic service accounted for more women workers than any other type of work; by the postwar period, the most numerous category had become clerical work, which today accounts for about one-third of all women workers. With the exception of public sector clerical work in recent years, both have always been overwhelmingly nonunion. New studies of these occupations offer some insight into the reasons for this, although the peripheral nature of unionism in these fields is mirrored in the research about them, which is largely silent on the union question.

Phyllis Palmer's *Domesticity and Dirt* examines the relations between domestic servants (most of whom were women of color) and their (mostly white) employers in the interwar years through the occupation's dramatic decline during World War II, which increased the responsibilities of middle-class housewives.²⁴ Although there were some attempts on the part of domestics to unionize, these made little headway even in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the period of organized labor's greatest growth. Advocates for

²⁴Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989)

domestic workers' rights were unable even to win them coverage under the social legislation of the day -- minimum wage and maximum hours laws, social security coverage, or workers' compensation. Palmer suggests, however, that in this period of wide-ranging labor reform, domestic workers developed aspirations of being treated like workers in any other occupation, with the same rights and benefits. Although unrealized for domestics themselves in this period, this vision contributed to "transforming service work into a business and caring for food, people and laundry in commercial enterprises, a shift that would accelerate after World War II."²⁵ Service sector workers today, however -- whether employed as domestics or in the formal economy -- remain underpaid and largely unorganized.

Unions never saw recruiting domestics as a high priority, and the long hours and isolation of the work were major barriers to organization. It is less obvious why clerical work, which long ago displaced domestic work as the largest female occupation, should have been so lacking in unionization. But we can glean some clues from two new books on the early history of the occupation, Ileen A. DeVault's *Sons and Daughters of Labor* and Lisa M. Fine's *The Souls of the Skyscraper*.²⁶ Both are local studies of clerical workers in Pittsburgh and Chicago, respectively, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, although each takes up a different problem. DeVault is primarily interested in the impact of the rise of clerical work for social stratification and social mobility generally, and the

²⁵Palmer, 149.

²⁶Ileen A. DeVault, *Sons and Daughters of Labor: Class and Clerical Work in Turn-of-the-Century Pittsburgh* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Lisa M. Fine, *The Souls of the Skyscraper: Female Clerical Workers in Chicago, 1870-1930* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

relationship between class and gender as it was played out within the emerging office occupations. Fine focuses more specifically on the feminization of clerical work and on women's own role in that process, as well as the changing meaning of the occupation for the young, white, native-born women who entered it.

DeVault is concerned with the "collar line" between white and blue collar work, mediated as it was by gender, that helped shape the emerging twentieth-century class structure. Through an imaginative analysis of the records of the "Commercial Department" of Pittsburgh's public high school, the training ground for most clerical jobs in that city, she shows that most clerical workers (male and female alike) in the late nineteenth century came from the families of skilled manual workers. The fathers of these students were members of Pittsburgh's labor aristocracy, and were themselves not only union members but disproportionately activists and leaders in the local labor movement. They could afford to educate their children, and facing attacks from employers in this period on both their skills and on their union organizations, they often chose to meet the threat of declining status by giving their children the opportunity to train for white collar jobs. "For the sons of Pittsburgh's skilled workers, clerical work was an alternative to the newly problematic conditions in their fathers' trades," DeVault points out. "For daughters, office positions provided remunerative work with a social status that could reinforce their families' otherwise declining position within the working class."²⁷ The white collar workforce that resulted from this was deeply torn between its working class social background and its apparent "middle class" status. DeVault does not explore the problem of why these sons and

²⁷DeVault, 99.

daughters from union families so seldom unionized, but the ambiguity of their class position implies a partial answer.

Fine points out that in the late nineteenth century, stenographers -- then a male group -- did organize in Chicago, in unions that had "characteristics of both a professional association and a craft union."²⁸ These unions certified their members as competent stenographers and ran hiring hall-like lodges which provided jobs for their members. However, these organizing efforts never fully succeeded, in part because the occupational group they targeted became feminized in this period. However, Chicago's female stenographers and typists engaged in unionizing efforts of their own, along similar lines to those of the male unions that preceded them. An AFL-affiliated union was chartered in 1909, with some assistance from the WTUL, but collapsed a few years later. It was succeeded by a new organization, the Office Employees Association, founded in 1912, which grew rapidly during the World War I years, but which recruited primarily civil service clerks, still primarily male. Women clericals, Fine reports, seemed to have little interest in unionization, since they saw themselves as professionals, not "wage earners." She also attributes the union's failure partly to the unsuitability of the craft union model to an occupation that was already being subjected to deskilling and rationalization. Yet the successful unionization of Chicago teachers in the same period, documented by Murphy, suggests that professional identity was not necessarily a barrier to organization, and Cobble's study of waitresses shows that the craft model could be adapted to the needs of semi-skilled women workers employed outside conventional industrial settings. Indeed, efforts to

²⁸Fine, 15.

establish industrial unionism in clerical work has not been especially successful either, although some gains were made in the 1930s and 1940s.²⁹

The nonunion status of private sector clericals that Fine exposes for the early part of the century has been preserved intact ever since. In the 1970s and 1980s, clerical unionization emerged on a massive scale in the public sector and in universities and other nonprofit agencies, as well as among public sector service workers.³⁰ But in the private sector, clerical and service work remain nonunion strongholds: in 1990, less than 3 percent of workers in the "finance, insurance, and real estate" industry (which includes the majority of private sector clericals), and only about 6 percent of those in sales and service occupations, were union members.³¹ These are the expanding occupations in today's economy, and organized labor's failure to penetrate them is a major element (though hardly the only one) in its precipitous decline.

It is difficult to imagine a revival of private sector unionism without broader political changes that would constrain employers' greatly expanded abilities to avoid or eliminate labor organization. The only possible basis for optimism about labor's future is that workers in past eras have overcome similar setbacks and have turned again and again to collective organization to pursue their goals. Should that occur once more, the dramatic expansion of women's role in the labor force since the last period of union expansion in the middle of the

²⁹See Sharon Strom, "'We're No Kitty Foyles': Organizing Office Workers for the Congress of Industrial Organizations, 1937-50," in Milkman, ed. (n. 17 above), 206-34.

³⁰See Deborah E. Bell, "Unionized Women in State and Local Government," in Milkman, ed., 280-299.

³¹See *Employment and Earnings*, (n. 1 above), 38, no. 1 (January 1991), 229.

century suggests that gender issues will have to be central to the effort. The fine new works in women's labor history reviewed here offer many valuable lessons to inform such a project.