

## American Workers and the New World Order in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century

Viewed from the grand sweep of the history of American labor history, Hattie Canty represented an unlikely leader of the nation's fastest growing private-sector union local in the mid-1990s. An African American born in rural Alabama, 62 years old, a widow, the mother of ten children, and a maid at the Maxim Casino and Hotel in Las Vegas, Canty served as president of the 40,000-strong Culinary Workers Union Local 226 (a member of the expanding Hotel and Restaurant Employees International Union, affiliated with the AFL-CIO). Though composed primarily of women, the local had long been led by men workers from the "front of the house" in hotels – bellhops, doormen, and waiters. In fact, Hattie Canty's election was revealing of a larger transformation in the structure of the American workforce, and a new direction for the labor movement, in the late twentieth century. In Las Vegas in the mid-1990s, union maids earned an hourly wage of \$9.25 (more than double the minimum wage), and received health care benefits and a retirement pension. In an interview with *New Yorker* writer Sara Mosle, Canty noted, "My house is paid for. I bought cars while I was a maid. I bought furniture, I bought the things I needed for my family while I was a maid. And the way I did it was through organized labor."

Over the generations, the site of labor organizing had shifted, from the textile mills of Lowell and the shoe factories of

Lawrence in the mid-nineteenth century, to the steel mills of Gary and Pittsburgh and the auto plants of Detroit during the period 1880 to 1975 and finally to the nursing homes, restaurants, and hotel rooms of "post-industrial" America. By the 1990s, moreover, diverse groups of workers fought on a number of fronts, some novel and surprising; wealthy major-league baseball players struck for the right to earn as much as the marketplace would pay them; teaching assistants at Yale University demanded they be considered waged employees rather than privileged apprentices so that they might claim the right to organize and bargain collectively with their employer; workers for the United Parcel Service union, full-time and part-time alike, joined forces to protest the proliferation of part-time jobs.

Throughout most of American history, service jobs had remained outside the purview of organized labor; characterized by high rates of turnover, dominated by women and minorities, these positions seemed to have little in common with those in the heavy-manufacturing sector. Nevertheless, in the 1990s, places like Las Vegas offered a growing number of jobs for workers who lacked formal education and skills; in that sense, these workplaces were the equivalent of the Lower East Side in the early twentieth century – sites of opportunity, and sites of labor militance as well.

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, "Fourth Wave" immigrants helped to change the face of American labor. Hispanic immigrants now took up leadership roles in the Service Employees International Union; Justice for Janitors; the United Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees Union; and the Hotel and Restaurant Employees International Union. These organizations infused life into a labor movement in danger of becoming moribund in the Rust Belt and the Northeast. Said one Las Vegas labor organizer, "Some cities haven't had a strike in forty years, but we've always had a history of fighting for the union in this town. We've had strikes all along."

With their emphasis on worker efficiency and high standards of customer satisfaction, hotel managers of the 1990s

had standardized the responsibilities of chambermaid so that an individual woman might be expected to clean as many as 16 rooms within an eight-hour period (Las Vegas had 90,000 hotel rooms, and was adding more every year). Berenice Thomas recalled that when she started working as a maid in the town, "I had a bucket with soap, and I had this big old brush, and I had to rub and scrub. Nowadays, they got everything so it's spray and wipe – they got the soap in the bottle and you spray it on and you rinse it off." Union members accommodated themselves to the routinization of cleaning; at the same time, they challenged certain eternal verities of the hotel-management business – specifically, the gender division of labor that decreed that only men could work as bar-tenders and room-service waiters. Said Peggy Pierce, who worked in the latter job, "The only women in this country who are absolutely guaranteed to make the same amount of money as the men standing next to them doing the same work are women in unions. If you're not in a union and you're a woman and you work, you're getting screwed."<sup>2</sup>

Las Vegas blended commercial entertainment and big business as part of a multi-billion dollar industry. Yet throughout the United States, other cities exhibited similar configurations of glass-paneled skyscrapers cleaned and tended by an army of service workers consisting of new immigrants and African Americans. Within just four decades, then, the locus of union militancy had moved from the sprawling factories of the Midwest to high-rise hotels and corporate offices, with public white-collar employees and service workers taking up the labor standard. This dramatic shift reflected not only changes in the domestic political economy, but developments on the international stage as well. Now American workers were part of a global assembly line, one that relied as much upon the labor of the cleaning woman as it did upon the high-tech skills of the computer programmer.

To some extent, the size and structure of the American labor force had always reflected what was happening in other parts of the world – when war and revolution sent refugees to American shores, when military conflict elsewhere provoked

American involvement and defense mobilization. Yet in the post-World War II period, the onset of the Cold War shaped domestic labor politics in new and striking ways. During the war, organized labor had abided by a "no strike" pledge, and workers had grudgingly endured speed-ups in order to meet higher production quotas. In 1946, 4.5 million workers struck to reverse the wage losses they had suffered since 1941. Yet President Harry Truman was quick to label collective action as intrinsically harmful to the national interest; he managed to suppress a strike of miners in 1946 by alternately threatening to send military troops to restore order in the mine fields, and appealing to the men's patriotic impulses – to "keep America warm" during the ensuing winter. A year later, Congress passed the Labor-Management Relations Act of 1947 (the Taft-Hartley Act), a direct attempt to weaken the Wagner Act and roll back labor's gains of the 1930s. The Taft-Hartley Act severely curtailed the real and potential power of organized labor by outlawing the closed shop (workplaces where all employees were automatically members of a union), and by mandating a "cooling off period" in order to delay strikes.

The memory of labor's bloody battles just a decade earlier fresh in their minds, leaders of the country's largest labor unions seemed to have good reason to want to consolidate their gains in terms of higher wages and better working conditions, to demonstrate their loyalty to America by distancing themselves from radicalism in any form, and to concentrate on insuring job security for their members. Men who had risked their lives on picket lines and in sit-down strikes a few years before now dined with the President of the United States and members of Congress. In 1956, when the AFL merged with the CIO, the president of the giant union, George Meany, could point with satisfaction to the 4 percent rate of unemployment, rapid economic growth, stable prices, and low inflation that seemed to serve the interests of everyone, managers and workers alike.

Union members (whites at least) now joined with other Americans in an exodus out of the cities and into the suburbs, where their children attended brand-new public schools (built

for the post-war baby boom generation) and where they could partake more fully of the blessings of 1950s prosperity. It was during this period that some large manufacturers began to construct new plants in the farmland surrounding cities in order to take advantage of cheap land; at the same time these employers aimed to bring the worksite closer to the white laboring population and to decentralize the industry so that it would be less vulnerable during an enemy air attack. For example, in the 1950s, Ex-Cell-O, a large Detroit machinery manufacturer, constructed six new plants in the virtually all-white hinterland regions of Ohio and Indiana, and simultaneously reduced its Detroit employees through attrition and the introduction of new forms of machinery. This process of industrial relocation would eventually drain American cities of their multi-class vitality, leaving behind the poorest people of color in tenements and the wealthiest whites in penthouse condominiums.

Composed of both white-collar and blue-collar workers, new suburban housing tracts served an overt political purpose during the Cold War era by glorifying the nuclear family, which was now apparently safely ensconced in its own little paradise stocked with the latest in appliances. The full-time wife and mother played an integral part in this brave new suburban world; she was supposed to view homemaking as a profession, a career. Women's magazines provided hints on turning last night's leftovers into tonight's gourmet meal, while chauffeuring the children – to scouts and music lessons, ball games and birthday parties – became an ever more prominent part of the housewife's responsibilities.

The "feminine mystique" of the 1950s represented a rhetorical turn not unlike the "Cult of True Womanhood" of the antebellum period, with a couple of crucial differences. First, the 1950s version lacked the earlier stress on religious piety inspired by evangelical Protestantism – now, a peculiarly American brand of consumption constituted the country's secular religion. Second, an emergent group of psychologists, primarily popularizers of the theories of Sigmund Freud, warned that housewives were in danger of becoming obsessive about

their own importance in the home, and that single-minded devotion to their children would ultimately smother and stunt them, yielding effeminate sons and neurotic daughters.

The popular television show *Leave it to Beaver* represented an idealized image of the 1950s American waged and unwaged workforces. The father, Ward, left the house each morning in his gray flannel suit to go off to a job that was never identified, but there was no doubt that he sat at a desk, used the telephone, and earned a good living. His wife, June, vacuumed the house and made dinner decked out in a dress and a string of pearls. The Cleavers' gleaming kitchen – with a five-and-a-half-foot-high white refrigerator as its centerpiece – symbolized the superiority of American capitalism compared to Soviet communism in the famous "kitchen debate" between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in Moscow in 1959.

Under the bland veneer of TV-land lay a much more complicated reality, as American workers became an ever more diverse, and ultimately divided, lot. No doubt stocked in the Cleaver's refrigerator and lining their kitchen shelves were the fruits of the labor of several groups of migrant workers – the African Americans, and, increasingly, off-shore migrants from Puerto Rico and the Bahamas, who went "on the season" up the coast from Florida to the vegetable fields of Maryland, Delaware, and New Jersey; the Mexican Americans who travelled to the North Central and Mountain states working the sugar-beet and wheat harvests; the native-born whites, who began their trek in Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Western Tennessee, and picked fruits and vegetables; and the multi-ethnic, multi-racial workforces that harvested a variety of crops in the California valleys. On both coasts, American agribusiness employers welcomed with open arms refugees from Latin America and Southeast Asia. A report issued by the President's Commission on Migratory Labor in 1951 noted, "We depend on misfortune to build up our force of migratory workers and, when our supply is low because there is not enough misfortune at home, we rely on misfortune abroad to replenish the supply."

Left out of the New Deal system of worker protection, migrant workers continued to toil without the benefit of a minimum wage, social security, health insurance, or unemployment compensation. In the 1950s, journalists initiated a cycle that would repeat itself for at least the next half century – a hard-hitting exposé would reveal migrants' deplorable working conditions, the public would express indignation, lawmakers would debate and then defeat proposed reform legislation, and the issue would recede for another few years. In 1953, one New York reporter described the way migrants were transported out of Florida and into the Northern truck-farm fields "packed like animals on the way to market.... Crowded in trucks equipped with crude benches or orange crates for seats, men, women, and children roll through the Carolinas and Virginia, sharing their common misery and exhaustion. Sometimes they stop for a hamburger and a Coke. Mostly they just keep rolling along." Concluded the reporter, "The Federal government has established rules for the shipment of cattle.... Migrant workers have no such protection."<sup>3</sup>

Rural Southerners in general faced hard times during the "affluent decade" of the 1950s. In Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, the mechanical cotton picker displaced thousands of African-American sharecroppers. In their trek north, they joined white families fleeing the depressed coal industry of Appalachia. Although both groups left home with little in the way of formal education or work experience in modern factories, their paths diverged significantly once they reached the Midwest. By and large, black men remained confined to day labor and unskilled factory jobs; their white counterparts however more often secured the semi-skilled factory jobs that represented the bottom rung of internal ladders of labor mobility. In the Miami Valley of Ohio, whole communities of transplanted mountain folk followed a classic "chain migration" pattern and dominated the workforces of individual factories, where personnel officials tended to favor the kin of the workers they already had.

Whether in the Uptown section of Chicago, or the Lower Price Hill community of Cincinnati, inner-city enclaves of

Southern white migrants underwent a continuous process of fragmentation, as more settled workers gradually gained stable jobs and managed to move their families to better neighborhoods – a working-class section on the fringes of town, or even a middle-class suburb. In their freedom to go as far as their paychecks would take them – to find better jobs for themselves and better schools for their children – Appalachian migrants possessed a distinct advantage over blacks, who remained confined to poor and increasingly all-black neighborhoods. These black ghettos were political entities shaped by racist neighborhood "improvement associations" and real estate agents, by the discriminatory loan policies of bankers, and by the mandates of city councils and zoning boards.

In the 1950s, then, the distinct liabilities of Northern blacks' relative residential immobility became abundantly clear; in many cases they faced long commutes to work, as factories receded further and further from the inner-city core. Left behind were service jobs that paid only a fraction of blue-collar manufacturing positions. The reluctance of local white-dominated school boards to continue to invest in increasingly segregated inner-city schools meant that the children of black workers would remain at a disadvantage compared to their white counterparts, now that more and more jobs came to require formal education.

In suburbs around the country, the local, brand-new public schools served as community centers that not only provided excellent education, but also sponsored athletic programs and offered instruction in art and music. These institutions depended on the labor, both paid and unpaid, of women. School-teaching, especially at the lower grades, became the almost exclusive domain of women, though the positions of principal and superintendent more likely than not went to men. Cafeteria workers tended to be mostly female; in certain rural counties, the public school served as the largest source of jobs for unskilled women in the area. Just as significant as these employees, however, were the mothers who devoted a considerable portion of their waking hours to school-related activities,

coordinating bake sales to raise money for new playground equipment; serving as teachers' aides and as chaperones for field trips; sewing cheerleaders' uniforms and painting scenery for the school play.

Prominent among the ranks of those dedicated to their local parent-teacher organization however were increasing numbers of women who worked fulltime outside the home, apparently in defiance of the standards set by the Cleaver family and excolled in women's magazines. During the 1950s and 1960s, the "pink collar ghetto" expanded, swollen with middle-class married women who worked as beauty parlor attendants, office receptionists, medical technicians, sales clerks, and social workers so that their families could afford to buy a second car, put an addition on the house, or send the kids to college. Women's work paid less than men's, and few "pink collar jobs" held much promise of promotion or professional advancement; these were jobs that offered no "tomorrow." In government office buildings, some clerical employees engaged in time-honored forms of resistance to mind-numbing work and arrogant supervisors; they "messed up" on their typing, left work early, called in sick, and went out of their way to ridicule their male bosses.<sup>4</sup>

The compartmentalization of American workers – the racial and gender segregation of the work force – carried within it the seeds of change in the 1950s. The southern system of Jim Crow had long rested upon the economic subordination of black men, women, and children confined to the most menial kinds of work the region had to offer. It was no coincidence then that the first concerted, grass-roots challenge to Jim Crow, the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955–6, depended on the commitment and staying power of a generations-old fixture of southern labor – African-American women domestics. Over the next decade, a variety of black workers would come to the fore, workers with their own set of grievances against white employers, yet united in a common cause. Sharecroppers like Mississippi's Fannie Lou Hamer dared to challenge exploitative rural labor practices and the lily-white Democratic Party that sustained them throughout the South.

The schoolteachers of Selma offered a new kind of civics lesson for their pupils when they marched and sang in defiance of Jim-Crow voter registrars and policemen. Lawyers working for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People put their skills to work on a critical battlefield – the federal courtroom.

In the South, traditionally stolid Chambers of Commerce provided some unexpected support for black protesters. Well aware of the riches awaiting businesses that could tap into the so-called military industrial complex (federally subsidized private companies that fueled America's Cold-War machine at home and abroad), these white men became increasingly conscious of, and self-conscious about, the disturbing image of the South that was coming into focus on the television screen each evening. German shepherds attacking school children, firemen pulling the corpses of black girls out of bombed churches, public officials from sheriffs to governors vowing to resist segregation today, tomorrow, forever – these sights and sounds were bad for business. As long as shocking images dominated the evening news, Northern industrialists would resist moving their plants to the South, cheap labor or no, and federal authorities would withhold contracts from Southern corporations. This realization helped to pave the way for the Sunbelt South of the 1970s.

In the early 1960s, in a development reminiscent of the antebellum period, when women's rights advocates derived inspiration from the abolitionist cause, women from all walks of life began to challenge the dictum that biology is destiny, and to take their case to the public via print and electronic media. The women's movement, which assumed institutional form with the founding of the National Organization for Women (1966), was a creature of 1950s suburbia. In her ground-breaking book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan provided a first-hand critique of women ensconced in comfortable, well-appointed homes, women suffering from the "problem that has no name." She thereby identified a particular group of women – college graduates with husbands who were professionals or white-collar workers. According

to Friedan, the malaise that accompanied full-time homemaking – what she identified as the boredom, the seemingly endless round of chores and ultimately meaningless volunteer activities – could only be banished with a well-paying job. In her call to action, she underestimated the difficulties faced by women who tried to re-enter the work force after the hiatus of their child-rearing years, and she overestimated the redemptive power of paid employment for women of all kinds. Indeed, many African-American women yearned for the day when they could quit the white woman's kitchen and attend to their own children, and many white women lacked the educational background that would help them secure well-paying, challenging jobs.

During the 1960s, homemaking came under scrutiny as a highly political and politicized activity. Some feminists conflated the scrubbing of floors with the tending of children, and suggested that all manner of duties carried out within the home were by definition damaging to a woman's sense of herself as an independent human being. These critics scorned the notion that women served to "contain" all sorts of threats – the spread of godless communism, with its denigration of American values like family life, and the contagion of unbri-dled sexuality represented by decadent European movie actresses. It was time, feminists claimed, that women climb out of the bomb shelter and assume their rightful place in the workforce – making a good salary in the office, suites long dominated by men.

Founded in 1963, the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) offered a strikingly different perspective on the issue of family and work compared to that of the emerging (middle-class) women's movement. In communities hit hard by deindustrialization and long-term structural employment – rural Appalachia and inner city black ghettos prominent among them – the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program had evolved from a stop-gap welfare program into the economic mainstay of a growing number of families. In the words of Johnnie Tillmon, the first Chairwoman of the NWRO, "Welfare is a women's issue," and entangled in the

morass of bureaucratic red tape were certain fundamental assumptions about poor women – the notion that an AFDC recipient must sever the relationship with the father of her children ("the man in the house rule" forbade a husband or father to live with a family receiving aid), that she must abide by her case worker's strictures about "what to buy, what not to buy, where to buy it, and how much things [should] cost." Middle-class women were exhorted to stay home full-time with their children, but poor women who stayed at home with their children were perceived as lazy and immoral. Well-to-do Americans thus rendered "womanhood" in explicitly class terms; for, according to Tillmon, the poor woman "learns that a 'real woman' spends her time worrying about how her bathroom bowl smells; that being important means being middle class, having two cars, a house in the suburbs, and a minidress under your maxicoat. In other words, an A. F. D. C. mother learns that being a 'real woman' means having all the things she isn't and having all the things she can't have."<sup>5</sup> The stigma attached to "welfare" revealed that child-care and homemaking did not qualify as productive labor as long as that kind of work was performed by poverty-stricken women, whether or not they worked for wages.

The NWRO represented a novel form of labor organization, shaped as it was by poor, mostly African-American urban women whose work on behalf of their own children earned them little but the contempt of "affluent America." At the same time, other minority workers began to transform the face of the American labor movement. In the lush fields of California's central valleys, Chicano workers led by Cesar Chavez launched a campaign for worker organization, and gained national attention (in 1969) by calling for a boycott of table grapes as long as growers refused to bargain collectively with their workers. Eventually, in California, the United Farm Workers won passage of a state act that guaranteed them and certain other agricultural laborers the protections that the National Labor Relations Act had afforded industrial workers for more than 35 years. Chavez inspired a whole generation of activists, young people like Maria Elena Lucas, a

Mexican-American born in Brownsville, Texas. Lucas approached field workers with the question, "Have you ever heard of Cesar Chavez? He is like Moses in the Bible. He took into his hands a whole nation of farm workers and has tried to lead us out into a better land."<sup>6</sup>

In Detroit auto assembly plants, young African-American men blended the rhetoric of black nationalism with resistance to the assembly-line speed-ups; the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (including plant-based organizations like the Eldon Avenue Revolutionary Union Movement (ELRUM), a group of Chrysler employees) launched a multi-pronged attack on supervisors who instituted speed-ups while disregarding basic safety precautions. In 1970, Gary Johnson, a 22-year-old Vietnam War veteran and Eldon employee, died when the defective motorized cart he was riding turned over and crushed him. A report by a UAW safety director confirmed official negligence as the cause of Johnson's death: "I examined the equipment and found the emergency brake to be broken; as a matter of fact, it was never connected. The shifter lever to the transmission was loose and sloppy. The equipment generally was sadly in need of maintenance, having a loose steering wheel in addition to other general needs."<sup>7</sup> As workers at the lowest echelon of the plant hierarchy, blacks were most vulnerable to the lay-offs, compulsory overtime, and frenetic pace that were now the hallmark of auto work. Detroit blues singer Joe L. Carter put their grievances to music: "Please, Mr. Foreman, slow down your assembly line/ No, I please, Mr. Foreman, slow down your assembly line/ No, I don't mind workin,' but I do mind dying."<sup>8</sup>