

# “A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm”: Workplace Feminism and the Transformation of Women’s Service Jobs in the 1970s\*

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In 1972, a group of tired stewardesses tried to explain their concerns to the incredulous male transit union officials who led their union. No, the primary issues were not wages and benefits, they insisted, but the particular cut of their uniforms and the sexual insinuations made about their occupation in the new airline advertisements. Their words fell on deaf ears. Despite their commonalities as transportation workers, the gender gap separating the two groups was simply too wide to cross. Indeed, male subway drivers could not understand why the stewardesses would object to their glamorous sex-object image. Deeply held gendered notions of unionism and politics also stood in the way of communication. For even if the complaints of stewardesses were accepted as “real,” to many male union leaders they seemed petty: matters not deserving of serious attention, let alone concerted activity.

The gender gap in labor history may not be quite as wide as that between female flight attendants and male subway drivers. But many of the same processes have blocked productive communication and hindered the intellectual development of the field. Labor history scholarship still rests upon gendered definitions of work, politics, and unionism. Just as significantly, the overall narratives that dominate the field incorporate neither the history of female-dominated occupations and industries nor that of women’s particular forms of collective action.

The relative neglect of service work, where the overwhelming number of women wage earners work, is particularly problematic. The history of work and unions in the twentieth-century United States, for example, is tied largely to changes taking place in the manufacturing sector. Thus, taking factory work as the empirical basis for generalization, one oft-told tale is of the overall deskilling of work in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the replacement of craft systems of control by a new managerial class, and the rise of welfare capitalism.<sup>1</sup> The relation of unionism to these organizational reforms is complex. The general consensus, however, is that by the 1930s the industrial unionists had rejected the paternalistic overtones of welfare capitalism while accepting many of the actual managerial practices that were in place. Unionists demanded that many of the benefits provided by employers in the 1920s be continued as rights

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under a union contract rather than as gifts from a benevolent patriarch. They preferred bureaucratic rules governing hiring, firing, and discipline to governance by foremen's whimsy, and they favored wage rates tied to job classification over ones linked to worker morality, personal habits, and family status. Thus, by the 1930s and 1940s, in many unionized settings, the arbitrary personalism of foremen and supervisors was tempered by bureaucratic fiat, and court-backed contracts specifying wages, benefits, and working conditions replaced the unsteady largess of individual employers. From one perspective, this "modernization" of the workplace was but the triumph of hierarchical managerial power masked as bureaucracy, but these same workplace innovations and institutions also ensured equity, dignity, and industrial citizenship.<sup>2</sup>

The story differs, however, if service work rather than manufacturing is taken as the paradigmatic example. In the service workplace, the employee-customer encounter could not be deskilled and monitored to the same degree as the employee-machine relationship. Indeed, despite their low pay and status, department-store saleswomen, for example, retained considerable control over their work pace, work organization, and craft knowledge into the 1940s. Only in the postwar era did managers begin to experiment with "self-service" and look to "buyer-managers" rather than saleswomen for guidance in anticipating customer buying habits.<sup>3</sup>

My own work on the restaurant industry demonstrates that commercial food service also resisted deskilling and bureaucratization until the post-World War Two period: "Fast food" and chain restaurants remained a small part of the industry until very recently. They existed side by side with the leisurely "white tablecloth" sector which employed specialized craft workers and with the "family-style" restaurant in which motherly waitresses often dished out admonishments with the food. Thus, many restaurant workers retained an impressive degree of control over the employee-customer encounter, and managerial styles in the restaurant industry remained personal rather than bureaucratic.<sup>4</sup>

How typical are these two cases? How did the nature of work in the service sector change over the course of the twentieth century? And how has the history of unionism and worker control in service jobs intersected with changing managerial practices? Did service workers explicitly attack managerial personalism and paternalism as did industrial workers in the 1930s? If so, on what grounds and with what degree of success?

I suggest some partial answers to these questions by focusing here on the upsurge of collective activity among women service workers in the United States during the 1970s. Women in female-dominated service jobs had organized formally before the 1970s in a few cases, and they also influenced the nature of their work through informal and individual pressure.<sup>5</sup> Beginning in the 1960s and increasingly in the 1970s, however, women service workers turned to formal collective action to a degree not evident earlier.

By the mid-1970s, Karen Nussbaum, an organizer of 9to5, a prominent clerical workers' association, predicted that the organization of jobs traditionally held by women would be the next great growth wave of unionism.<sup>6</sup> Particularly

if one uses the yardstick of membership in traditional labor unions, the actual extent of female organizing fell short of Nussbaum's projections. Nevertheless, the rise of collective action among women service workers in this period is significant. If one redefines the labor movement to encompass a wide range of associations and not merely those organizations with collective bargaining contracts, then the numbers of women involved come much closer to meeting her predictions. Moreover, the upsurge is notable in two other respects: First, women in many service occupations were organizing on a widespread basis for the first time; and second, as I argue below, although their activism did not result in large numbers of new collective bargaining contracts, it helped fundamentally transform the gender, class, and racial norms governing millions of women's service jobs.

I focus here on the organizing efforts among three groups of female service workers—flight attendants, clericals, and household workers (or according to 1970s terminology: stewardesses, secretaries, and maids)—groups which experienced significant collective organization on a national basis for the first time in this period. These groups provide a rich evidentiary base for an exploration of the content and form of activism among female service workers. In the 1970s, women composed ninety-five percent of flight attendants, ninety-seven percent of secretaries (the largest group of office workers), and ninety-seven percent of domestic workers.<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, the organizations they created were almost exclusively female. The records of these three groups' collective activity permit a relatively unmediated glimpse into the concerns of women service workers as expressed in their own words.

Moreover, these three occupations allow for speculation about the differences among women by race, class, age, and family status. Women from many different ethnic and economic backgrounds entered clerical work in the twentieth century as it replaced domestic service as the largest single occupation among women. Over a third of all working women held clerical positions in the 1970s.<sup>8</sup> African-American women did not enter clerical work in any appreciable numbers before World War Two, but by the 1970s almost as large a percent of African-American women were in clerical jobs as held jobs in the overall labor market.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to the heterogeneity of clerical workers, only certain categories of women were hired as flight attendants or domestic workers. Although age and marriage bars fell in the 1960s, the airlines continued to prefer young, single, white women for their flight attendant positions. Conversely, domestic work was an occupation composed disproportionately of women of color and older women heads of households. In 1968, of the million and a half women working as private household employees, some sixty-four percent were African American. By the mid-1970s, the percentage of African Americans had dropped to fifty-three percent but the numbers of Hispanic and other ethnic minority women had increased. The median age of household workers was forty-six, some six years older than the typical woman worker, and over one-third were either divorced or separated or widowed.<sup>10</sup>

In the sections that follow, I detail the story of female activism in these three female-dominated occupations, exploring the nature of their jobs, the issues cen-

tral to their collective action, and the impact of their movements. A history of service work and of service unionism does more than challenge long-accepted assumptions undergirding twentieth century labor history. It also offers a new narrative of unionism, one rich with implications for the revitalization of the labor movement in today's service economy.

### *The Reform Decades*

The heightened militancy among women service workers in the 1970s drew on decades of prior struggle for racial, class, and gender justice. The civil rights movement gathering steam since the 1940s burst onto the national stage in the mid-1950s with the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycotts and the subsequent highly publicized racial confrontations on the steps of public schools and at lunch-room counters throughout the South. The 1960s witnessed the passage of federal legislation which prohibited employment discrimination on the basis of race and sex and promoted the unionization of public-sector workers, the majority of whom were minority and/or female. By the late 1960s, however, the civil rights movement was ebbing and the wave of public-sector unionization had subsided.<sup>11</sup>

The women's movement, however, was just taking off. It too drew on prior efforts of gender reformers, although these efforts were not as widespread nor as visible as those on behalf of racial justice. Female reformers had called for an economic and political agenda that was partially realized in the establishment of the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women and the Equal Pay Act of 1963,<sup>12</sup> but this network of social and labor feminists was in disarray by the late 1960s. The passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act brought long-simmering disagreements over the support of sex-based state protective laws into the open. In 1969, the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission ruled that most sex-based state protective legislation conflicted with Title VII and hence was illegal. Virtually overnight, the principal basis for a half century of opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)—defense of protective laws—disappeared. The collapse of this cornerstone of the older labor feminism made possible the emergence of a new, transformed workplace-based feminism.<sup>13</sup>

Like their middle-class counterparts, working-class and union women engaged in widespread gender activism in the 1960s and 1970s. Nancy Gabin and Dennis Deslippe, for example, have described the remarkable transformations of blue-collar factory women in the late 1960s when they embraced a new vision of gender equality and for the first time en masse rejected the sex-typing of jobs as discriminatory. Rank-and-file union women flooded the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) offices with sex discrimination claims in the 1960s and forced the agency to take the issue seriously. Once stirred into action, the EEOC sought and won major court decisions designed to end sex segregation and discriminatory practices by such prominent employers as AT&T and US Steel.<sup>14</sup>

Working women relied on workplace-based organizing as well as the courts to advance gender equality. Nonprofessional as well as professional women or-

ganized workplace caucuses that took up issues of affirmative action and employment discrimination.<sup>15</sup> They also sought to transform the bargaining and legislative agenda of the labor movement. By 1974, union women had established the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW). A self-consciously feminist organization, CLUW supported the Equal Rights Amendment as well as women’s reproductive rights, and the founders’ goals included moving women into union leadership, increased attention to organizing women workers, and an end to sex segregation and other discriminatory workplace practices based on sex.<sup>16</sup>

What is less known, however, is the activism among women in female-dominated jobs during this period and the ways in which their reform movements changed the longstanding familial and paternalistic norms governing female-dominated service jobs. These women took older reform traditions and reworked them to suit their own realities as woman service workers. They built upon the past, but they broke with it as well. They expanded the vocabulary of workplace rights, made a public and political issue of the gendered construction of women’s jobs, and invented new forms of workplace representation.

*“Sex Objects in the Sky Unite”*<sup>17</sup>

Unlike most women in the female service ghetto, the majority of flight attendants had joined unions in the 1940s and 1950s. The unions representing stewardesses included the Stewards and Stewardesses (S&S) Division of the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA), the Teamsters, and the Transport Workers Union. These unions had secured moderate advances in wages, hours, and working conditions for flight attendants, and under growing pressure from the flight attendants themselves and the impetus of new antidiscriminatory legislation, they had helped undermine the airline policies restricting the occupation to white, young, single, and childless women. Airlines hired a small number of minority women as attendants in the late 1950s, and by the end of the 1960s, flight attendants could marry, have children, and work past age thirty-two.<sup>18</sup>

But by the early 1970s, flight attendants wanted more: They wanted economic rights and opportunities equal to men as well as the right to control and define their own sexuality and “personhood.”<sup>19</sup> To secure these rights, flight attendants put increasing pressure on their male-dominated unions and formed the first all-female national organization of flight attendants, Stewardesses For Women’s Rights (SFWR). As Sandra Jarrell, cofounder of SFWR, explained, “the most obvious tool available for remedying the injustices we are subject to are [*sic*] the unions. Unfortunately, unions do not have the reputation of representing the interests of women.” The male leadership, she continued, blamed stewardesses, but they “will obtain rank and file support only if they stop limiting [themselves] . . . to economic issues.”<sup>20</sup>

The emergence of this new militancy among flight attendants in the 1970s was spurred in part by the new feminist sensitivity to employment discrimination and to male control over female sexuality. Flight attendants, however, were

as much feminist leaders as followers. They helped invent the new feminism in the 1960s, and they were instrumental in the 1970s in demonstrating the power of these ideas when applied to women's jobs.

The rise of activism among flight attendants was also a product of the transformation of the occupation and the kind of women who entered it. By the early 1970s, for the first time, the majority of flight attendants were married and expected to stay in their job longer than the earlier average of eighteen months. Moreover, working conditions had deteriorated. Flight attendants' real wages fell as higher fuel costs and recession-related declines in business travel cut into airline profits.

But most galling, the occupation was sexualized as companies came to rely upon female sexuality to sell seats. The fantasy image of flight attendants in the 1950s had been the fresh-faced girl next door—the kind you wanted to marry. By the early 1970s, however, the image had shifted from the attractive young woman available for marriage to the attractive young woman available for sex. Airlines routinely required flight attendants to wear hot pants and other sexually alluring uniforms. National's rules called for all stewardesses to wear "Fly Me" buttons. The company maintained with a straight face that no sexual innuendo was intended, despite their ad campaign featuring stewardesses panting, "Hi, I'm Linda, and I'm going to FLY you like you've never been flown before." Continental learned from National's success. In 1972, they aired ads in which stewardesses promised that we "really move our tail for you." As one airline executive explained: "It's the sex thing, pure and simple. Put a dog on a plane and twenty businessmen are sore for a month."<sup>21</sup>

Historically, attendants had taken pride in their appearance and the company's celebration of their attractiveness, but the more crass approach was objectionable to many. The new sexy image encouraged harassment by male passengers; it also meant that they had become less respectable. As one explained: "It represents a lack of respect for hostesses. We have always projected pride, a class kind of image and this slogan is barroom talk. We're professional career women and mothers . . . not fly girls."<sup>22</sup>

Flight attendants initially took their concerns to the three chief unions that represented them, but they made little headway. In exasperation and somewhat reluctantly, stewardesses began organizing in opposition to their unions as well as their employers. Not only did they form their own national organization in 1972, SFWR, but by the end of the 1970s they had deserted the male-dominated transportation unions in droves, setting up a bewildering array of independent flight attendant unions.<sup>23</sup>

The SFWR dedicated itself to "fighting the policies of the airlines which strip us of our individuality and dignity," chiefly the airline's manipulation of the flight attendant's sexual image.<sup>24</sup> The SFWR attacked the problem from a number of angles. They picketed films that depicted flight attendants as hypersexual women. They filed lawsuits against Continental and National alleging that their airline ads created a hostile work environment. They distributed buttons reading, "Go Fly Yourself" and "National, Your Fly is Open" bumper stickers.<sup>25</sup>

And they initiated an elaborate media campaign to publicize their alternative image of the flight attendant as a career woman and professional. The campaign culminated in the release of a “countercommercial” aimed at ending what they called “sexploitation.” In it, they defined themselves as professionals responsible for passenger safety, not passenger sexual titillation. “The sexpot image is unsafe at any altitude,” the script proclaimed, because “people do not obey the safety orders of their sexual fantasies.” Or, as one SFWR leader put it in a letter to *Time* magazine: “We’re in the business of saving tails, not serving them. The airlines are ass-king for pecuniary returns with a part of my anatomy that is not for sale.”<sup>26</sup>

Although the SFWR took the lead in this campaign, they were joined by some union officials, particularly those leading the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA), the former S&S Division of ALPA which had decided to go independent.<sup>27</sup> The SFWR also worked with flight attendant unions to change the rules governing appearance, demanding that airlines change stewardesses’ uniforms and abolish their archaic grooming and weight requirements. The S&S Division of ALPA had led the battle in the 1960s with some success. Girdle checks disappeared as did most airline charm classes. In the 1970s, SFWR and union pressure helped convince airlines to let flight attendants choose their own make-up and hair style.<sup>28</sup>

But the airlines drew the line at weight: Thinness was the one nonnegotiable aspect of female attractiveness. Airlines weighed attendants weekly, held them to weight standards which were detrimental to their health, refused to adjust requirements as women aged, and fired more flight attendants for violations of weight regulations than for any other reason. The SFWR argued that such rules were discriminatory since only female attendants were required to be pencil thin, that the airline “appearance supervisors” used highly arbitrary standards, and that the only acceptable work rules an employer should impose were those related to a person’s ability to perform his or her assigned job.<sup>29</sup>

Other issues included demands for enforcement of affirmative action policies and the end of mandatory layoffs during pregnancy. Their health and safety task force objected to the airline’s claim that stewardesses’ health problems were “primarily self-inflicted and psychosomatic” and called for a serious research program “to find out just what is happening to our bodies.”<sup>30</sup>

The SFWR made a splash despite its brief organizational life. It captured media headlines.<sup>31</sup> It also moved new issues of control over one’s body and personality into the center of union politics, ultimately reinvigorating unionism among flight attendants.

When the SFWR folded in 1976, many former SFWR activists turned full-time attention to union work. A number ran for union office and won. In their new capacity as union officers and activists, they continued the flurry of lawsuits and press releases. They also threatened airlines with strikes, sick-ins, and the old International Workers of the World (IWW) tactic of slowdowns—what Kelly Rueck of the AFA described as “a spontaneous loss of enthusiasm” for the job.<sup>32</sup> By the end of the 1980s much had changed. Weight restrictions were lift-

ed; new, more dignified uniforms appeared; and flight attendants no longer looked like mass-produced life-size Barbie dolls.

### *Office Wives Organize*

Like flight attendants, clericals' working conditions were declining as their needs and expectations rose, spurring protest. According to some chroniclers, clerical work had been in decline since the late nineteenth century as female workers replaced male, and wages, status, and promotional opportunities plummeted. But conditions deteriorated further in the post-World War Two decades. As larger, more bureaucratic organizations became the norm and the new office technologies spread, many secretaries found themselves reorganized into office clerical pools. Others saw their jobs downgraded to a monotonous routine of typing and filing.<sup>33</sup>

Accompanying this decline was a shift in the needs and expectations of the women employed as clericals. The majority were married (as they had always been), but a growing proportion were single or heads of families without a partner. They spent more years at work and felt frustrated by their "secondary earner" wages and the lack of promotional opportunities.<sup>34</sup>

In addition, the messages of the new feminism stirred discontent. If flight attendants did not take kindly to being seen as mistresses, many secretaries no longer found solace in their role as "office wives." Not only did they have to attend to the bosses' personal needs, but like housewives their labor was rarely acknowledged or respected. And since few job descriptions for secretarial positions existed, there were no protective boundaries, emotional or otherwise. Of course, secretaries did have their one day of token recognition, National Secretaries Day, begun in 1951.<sup>35</sup> Being taken out to lunch and given roses by the boss once a year was supposed to compensate for poor working conditions the rest of the year.

Organized clericals set out to change this state of affairs. Public-sector clericals had organized along with teachers, maintenance workers, and others in the 1960s; now the focus shifted to the millions of unrepresented office workers in the private sector.<sup>36</sup> Margie Albert, a twenty-five-year office veteran and a steward for the Distributive Workers of America spoke of a "new spirit" sweeping America's secretaries in a 1973 *New York Times* opinion editorial piece; New York Congresswoman Bella Abzug had it read into the *Congressional Record*.<sup>37</sup>

Albert claimed the movement erupted in 1969 when employers imposed a "no pants, dresses only" rule on office staff. Women rebelled, she reported, signing petitions, organizing delegations to the boss, and threatening mass walk-outs.<sup>38</sup> Albert may have exaggerated the extent of the discontent, but certainly the acceptance of conventional office etiquette was eroding.

Within the next few years, over a dozen independent office-worker organizations sprang up, perhaps the most effective being 9to5. Launched in 1973, 9to5 grew quickly from its origins as a luncheon gripe session for Harvard secretaries (led by fellow University of Chicago refugees Karen Nussbaum and Ellen



Cassedy) to a citywide organization with hundreds of members.<sup>39</sup> Similar groups emerged in Chicago (Women Employed), New York (Women Office Workers), San Francisco (Women Office Employees), and elsewhere. By the end of the decade, twelve local groups (with a total membership of some ten thousand) had united under the umbrella of the National Association of Working Women.<sup>40</sup> Like flight attendants, clericals wanted higher wages and promotions; they also wanted their occupation professionalized and upgraded. The objectionable quality of interpersonal relationships in the office or “insulting male behavior,” however, angered women the most.<sup>41</sup>

As Karen Nussbaum remembered it, the “most powerful motivator was the issue of respect. Women did not want to feel they were office wives. They were real workers with real jobs.” They also wanted their personhood acknowledged. Nussbaum recalled with chagrin her experience of being looked “dead in the eye” and asked, “Isn’t anybody here?”<sup>42</sup> Other clericals spoke bitterly of being “invisible,” of having people not “really look at you as a person,” and of the indignity of the “servant role.”<sup>43</sup> In short, clericals rejected being an “office maid” as well as an “office wife.”

But how best to transform the nature of the secretary–boss relationship? Rosabeth Moss Kanter has written eloquently of the boss–secretary relationship as the “most striking instance of the retention of patrimony within the bureaucracy,” a dyad governed more by personal whimsy, status, and loyalty than by objective criteria and bureaucratic rules.<sup>44</sup> In many ways, the office-worker movement looked to modernize and depersonalize the boss–secretary relationship. They called for evaluations based on more objective criteria, such as skills in typing, office management, and budget administration, rather than on a pleasing personality or good looks. They wanted to be promoted on their own merits rather than rise as appendages to their boss. More “precise job descriptions,” some thought, would limit the almost total discretion bosses had over them.<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, the office-worker movement also believed that bureaucratization and depersonalization were not the ultimate solution. Rather than banish the personal, they sought to transform it. They hoped to rewrite the cultural scripts governing office relationships and change the larger cultural norms that underlay the “micro-inequities” of daily office encounters.<sup>46</sup> In brief, they sought to change attitudes as well as practices.

To effect these ends, office-worker groups relied on a range of tactics: lawsuits, petitions, pickets, as well as more unorthodox tactics—described by one reporter as a combination of “street theatre and Madison Avenue hype.” Their public relations skills served them particularly well in their attempt to “repossess” National Secretaries Day. Their demand for an office-worker “Bill of Rights” and their slogans “Respect, rights, and raises” and “Raises not roses” instigated a public debate over the working conditions of clericals and the cultural norms governing boss and secretary interaction. Their call for secretaries to refuse participation in such a longstanding and widespread public ritual as National Secretaries Day set off confusion in offices nationwide.<sup>47</sup> Did secretaries really prefer raises to roses? As with the male union officers who had repre-

sented flight attendants, few male bosses could understand why their female support staff would want to reject what many saw as flattering forms of male attention. But for a significant segment of the clerical work force, National Secretaries Day represented an outmoded paternalism perfectly symbolized in the demeaning rituals of one-way gift-giving.<sup>48</sup>

9to5 and other groups also devised innovative tactics to draw attention to the non-job-related duties often required of clericals—the duties, as one secretary explained, “that have no purpose but to make the boss seem, and feel, important.” They held “worst boss contests” to publicize the most outrageous requests bosses made of secretaries and on occasion they picketed individual bosses. Karen Nussbaum tells the story of one secretary whose boss screamed at her because the corned beef sandwich she brought him was on white bread rather than rye. When she refused to give up her own lunch hour and go back out in the rain for a different version of the sandwich, he fired her. She contacted 9to5 and forty women turned out to picket his office, carrying placards reading, “Boss Says Rye Bread or No Bread.” The woman never got her job back, but as Nussbaum remarked years later, that “was one satisfied secretary.”<sup>49</sup>

Office-worker groups like the SFWR had an impact way beyond their small numbers. By the end of the 1970s, the movement had helped win millions of dollars in back pay and equity raises, spurred the development of employer affirmative action plans, turned National Secretaries Day into a contested ritual, and inspired a hit “9 to 5” song, movie, and TV show.<sup>50</sup>

Ultimately, the office-worker movement helped transform the daily office encounters that had done so much to humiliate and demean secretaries. As *Business Week* noted in 1980, 9to5 changed public “notions of fairness,” of “what a boss may fairly ask a[n] office worker to do.” Personal errands, coffee-making, and numerous other requests were no longer acceptable business practice in most offices.<sup>51</sup> By the 1990s, even the time-honored tradition of “rug-ranking,” or basing a secretary’s pay on her boss’s status rather than on the content of her job, was in retreat. Like their counterparts in the home, secretaries were no longer a perk of the powerful or a mere appendage; they were emerging as individuals.<sup>52</sup>

These gains, as significant as they were, left many problems unresolved. Countless office workers got raises, promotions, and enhanced job control. But many, particularly those who occupied the lower rungs of the occupation—typing, filing, and processing forms in huge faceless offices—still faced low wages and poor working conditions.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, it was often the secretaries with the “preferred spots in small, private offices” who experienced the most dramatic improvements. The women relegated to the more impersonal, assembly-like conditions stayed put; not surprisingly, women from the working-class and women of color held a disproportionate number of these jobs.<sup>54</sup>

From the beginning, however, many office-worker activists had pushed for changes affecting “the entire class of women who are being discriminated against,” not just the few.<sup>55</sup> And, by the end of the 1970s, many office-worker groups turned to unionization as a way of broadening the movement and addressing the particular concerns of the lower echelons of the clerical sector.

9to5, through its new sister organization Local 925 (later Service Employees International Union [SEIU] District 925), decided to focus on organizing women in insurance and banking, because, as Nussbaum explained, it was “the heart of the clerical work force—some 30 percent” and “the majority came from working-class neighborhoods.”<sup>56</sup> District 65 and other unions also targeted clericals in banking and insurance as well as publishing, legal offices, and universities.<sup>57</sup> Their decision reflected in part the more union-minded orientation of clericals and their new willingness to self-organize.<sup>58</sup>

Employers fought with every weapon available, particularly in the insurance and banking sector. “We never knew what hit us,” Nussbaum remembered some fifteen years later. “We got smashed over and over. These businesses [insurance and banking] had not traditionally been unionized, and they were damned if they were going to be the first ones in the new wave.”<sup>59</sup> By the end of the 1980s, the banking industry had changed some of its most egregious discriminatory pay and promotion policies, but union density had actually fallen over the course of the decade.<sup>60</sup> The insurance industry was equally invincible. After a hard-fought organizing and contract victory at the Syracuse offices of Equitable Life, the company closed its Syracuse branch and laid off all its unionized workers.<sup>61</sup>

The major successes were among university clericals, especially at prestigious schools such as Harvard, Yale, Vassar, and Columbia. Even these privileged institutions, however, balked at the notion of sharing control and wealth with their largely female clerical staff. Harvard, for example, engaged its support staff in an exhausting twelve-year campaign before conceding defeat.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, some seventy percent of the campaigns among university clericals conducted in the 1970s and 1980s emerged with union contracts despite employer opposition.<sup>63</sup>

By the end of the 1980s, office-worker unionization (sixteen percent) was comparable to the work force as a whole (seventeen percent).<sup>64</sup> The 1980s did not witness the reversal of union decline—one that began for the private-sector work force in the 1950s—but the fault cannot be laid at the door of office workers.

### *“Taking the ‘Mammy’ Out of Housework”*<sup>65</sup>

The household-worker movement also burst into public view in the early 1970s. In 1971, some six hundred mostly black and middle-aged women gathered for the first national conference of household employees. Under the banner, “pay, protection, and professionalism,” they applauded enthusiastically as speaker after speaker spoke of a new day for domestics. The conference received extensive press coverage, encouraging hope that a fundamental shift in the employment relations governing domestic work was underway.<sup>66</sup>

The events of the 1970s were the culmination of trends long in motion. Household employment had changed fundamentally over the course of the twentieth century. By World War Two, day work predominated over live-in

arrangements, and outside the South, African-American and other women of color replaced Irish and Scandinavian immigrants as the typical domestic. In the decades following the war, wages and working conditions also improved slightly for household workers as demand exceeded supply and opportunities for alternative employment opened for minority women.<sup>67</sup> Household workers themselves had provoked many of these changes through their daily acts of individual defiance.<sup>68</sup> Yet prior to the 1960s, organized efforts to reform domestic work, largely led by middle-class white reformers, had been sporadic.<sup>69</sup> Local organizations of household employees—inspired by the civil rights and poor people's movements—had begun forming in the late 1960s. In the 1970s, for the first time, a national movement organized primarily by household workers arose.

Dorothy Bolden, a veteran community and civil-rights activist who had started cleaning houses in 1935 at the age of twelve, founded a domestic-workers organization in Atlanta in 1968. Its aim was to improve working conditions and build "respect for the women in this low-income field of labor." Bolden wrote: "I have been a maid all my life, I have rocked cradles and given guidance to little boys. Now we're going to give them some guidance when they are grown."<sup>70</sup> Similar groups organized in some two dozen other cities across the country. As one participant explained, "The garbage men have been upgraded to sanitation workers, with all the benefits, and that's just what we have to do. If you're tough enough to talk back to your big man on Sunday, don't tell me you're afraid of Miss Suzy on Monday."<sup>71</sup>

By the early 1970s, the majority joined in a loose national movement headed by the National Council of Household Employees (NCHÉ). The NCHÉ, formed in 1965 under the auspices of the Women's Bureau, grew out of the long-standing commitment of labor feminists like former Women's Bureau director Esther Peterson to revalue household labor. By 1968 the NCHÉ had secured funding from the Department of Labor for a series of eight pilot projects to "upgrade household employment standards"; by 1970, they had funding from the Ford Foundation. Initially, the NCHÉ focused on training household employees and on fostering minority contractors in the private household-services sector. Many thought this approach would give minority entrepreneurship a boost, expand the availability of household services, and benefit domestic workers whose terms of employment would be set formally through a contracting agency. In the early 1970s, under the leadership of Edith Sloan, a young African-American woman with legal training as well as experience as a domestic worker, the NCHÉ redefined itself as an advocacy organization promoting the interests of female domestic workers first and foremost. Instead of fostering small businesses, which usually were owned by minority men, the NCHÉ put its energy into building a national movement of household workers.<sup>72</sup>

The household-worker movement differed in many respects from that of flight attendants and clericals. In part, this divergence reflected differences among the women activists themselves: Household workers were older, and much more likely to be women of color and single heads of household. Further,

household workers worked alone in private homes supervised almost wholly by women, and the norms governing these highly privatized encounters were rooted as much in racial and class prejudices as in gender. Hence, the movement relied upon different tactics than did the others, and it drew its inspiration more from traditions of race and class justice than from gender. Indeed, rather than attack the gender status quo, at times the household-worker movement used traditional gender values to justify their assaults upon the oppressive norms under which they worked.<sup>73</sup>

Nevertheless, all three movements had remarkably similar goals. Like flight attendants and clericals, household workers sought to upgrade and professionalize their occupation. They wanted their skills as cooks, care-takers, and cleaners recognized. They sought dignity and respect for their person as well as concrete economic benefits. And at the heart of the movement was the effort to transform the nature of interpersonal relations at work.

Household workers, however, were much further from achieving these goals in the 1960s and early 1970s than were flight attendants and clericals. Household workers were denied the basic statutory protections governing wages, hours, and working conditions afforded other employees. The average yearly income of household employees was below poverty level, and many domestics still worked from sunup to sundown. Moreover, despite the formal end of slavery some one hundred years earlier, the relationship between mistress and maid was often reminiscent of slavery. As a worker in the big house, the domestic still was seen as part of the white family, despite her own outside household. Her wages and hours were often arranged informally, and many household employees were expected to work long hours out of loyalty and love for the white family. As one NCHE official asserted, “In no other industry is the modern day worker so completely at the mercy of her employer.”<sup>74</sup>

Like clericals, household workers wanted their tasks and their compensation more formalized. “We want to be treated like an employee,” explained one maid. “Everyone tells you you’re in the family and then they won’t even give you a holiday.” They wanted compensation in cash rather than in gifts of old clothes and food; they wanted their job to be defined as a set of discrete tasks that they themselves could manage. Like other service workers, they wanted occupational criteria that revolved around objective skills rather than the more subjective criteria of personality and the right attitude.<sup>75</sup>

The “right attitude” for household workers differed from that expected of flight attendants and clericals. Domestics had to meet the psychosocial needs of female employers rather than those of male bosses or customers. Female bosses did not need sexually attractive subordinates; indeed, they preferred older, more matronly figures with whom one could develop intimacy. At the same time and in part due to this emotional connection, household employees were expected to reinforce the unequal power dynamic by displaying deference. Domestics became adept at “learning people,” as one expressed it. They knew when to be invisible, when to be best friend and spiritual guide, and when childlike obedience was required.

The consequences of “misreading” one’s employer or “sassin” could be severe. Maids who strayed from the familiar scripts found themselves without a job or worse. When Dorothy Bolden refused an order to wash dishes and walked out, her employer had her arrested for insubordination. “They said I was mental because I talked back. . . . I was in jail five days.” She was only released after her uncle hired two psychiatrists who testified to her mental health.<sup>76</sup>

Household workers wanted to be adults, to be treated with “the respect due any human being”; they objected to the “common use of first names, and uninited familiarity by employers.”<sup>77</sup> They wanted to replace the oppressive one-way personalism with a relationship that was “a two-way street,” one with “promptness, integrity, and courtesy” from both parties.<sup>78</sup>

The dilemma for the reform movement was how to bring about these changes and push domestic work, “the last holdout against modernization,” into the twentieth century.<sup>79</sup> A range of answers emerged. Some groups, such as a statewide organization in Massachusetts, focused primarily on extending state protective statutes to household workers.<sup>80</sup> Others, like the Detroit Household Workers Organization (HWO) and the Atlanta-based National Domestic Workers Union (NDWU), acted as a combination “lobby group, training program, placement service, and grievance committee.”<sup>81</sup>

Dorothy Bolden, head of the Atlanta-based NDWU, spent much of her time staffing the union’s employment placement service, accepting requests from employers who would agree to abide by the union’s wages and working conditions. She also leafleted maids at bus stops to spread the word about the new standards: fifteen dollars a day plus carfare. “After we set the price,” she explained, “you had to teach these women how to ask for it. You had to learn how to communicate with the lady and tell her about the cost of living.” In their career center program, the NDWU offered “human relations training on how to *handle* employee–employer relationships including ‘rap’ sessions with employer volunteers.” The NDWU, like the Detroit HWO, sought to improve the bargaining power of individual women by fostering self-esteem, creating “an awareness of the value of their labor,” and upgrading household workers’ skills and marketability.<sup>82</sup>

In 1970, Bolden initiated one of the NDWU’s most successful projects, what she called “Maid’s Honor Day.” Maid’s Honor Day quickly turned into a well-attended annual Atlanta affair with distinguished women speakers such as Mrs. Herman Talmadge, Mrs. Lillian Carter, and Mrs. Andrew Young. Yet as with National Secretaries Day, the affair and its rituals became contested terrain. This annual occasion and the rhetoric surrounding it clearly reveal the gulf between the new, less demeaning norms advocated by many household employees and the older paternalistic practices of white employers.

Bolden organized the event with the aim of recognizing “those who toil in the home without recognition” and honoring “outstanding women in the field of domestic labor for their professional skills, great common knowledge,” and their ability to “mastermind two households.”<sup>83</sup> Despite Bolden’s intentions, however, the annual affair became for many whites an occasion to reinforce their own

expectations of loyalty, sacrifice, and self-abnegation from their maids. Atlanta’s mayor established July 15, 1970, as “Maid’s Day” and called on city dwellers to honor their maids because of their “admirable record of devotion and loyalty,” their “significant and notable contribution to family life,” and their assistance in giving “mothers and other women more opportunity to add their creativity and energy to Atlanta’s growth.”<sup>84</sup> Presumably it was white mothers who had been freed from the home and white family life that had been sustained.

The thousands of letters sent to Bolden between 1970 and 1977 from employers nominating maids for the award reveal the family-like bonds between maid and mistress in all their excruciating contradictions. Letter writers describe their maids as “a very dear part of us,” “a devoted family friend,” a “second mother,” and “a loving and sincere person who always puts ‘her people’ [referring to the family of the employer] ahead of herself.” Other letters praise maids for their spirituality and self-sacrifice, their emotional nurturing, and their loving care. One explained simply: “She’s remarkable . . . I love her. I’m so proud to call her mine!”<sup>85</sup>

Bolden herself and many of the other domestic workers who participated in this ritual also claimed for themselves the role of stand-in mother, spiritual advisor, and caretaker.<sup>86</sup> Yet at the same time, they rejected the possessive and demeaning overtones in many of the employer accolades, and they used these well-worn maternal roles to challenge the status quo rather than reinforce it. As Patricia Collins argues, mothering is a source of power and self-esteem in the African-American community.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, the point for Bolden was to honor the domestic work of these women in their own community as well as in the white family, a nuance almost completely lost on the white community.

Womanhood itself could also be a source of pride and a resource in resistance. As Bolden explained, “I was born poor, grew up poor, and I am still poor, but I am not going to bow down. I am still a woman.”<sup>88</sup> As was also true for the Memphis sanitation men who carried signs simply saying, “I Am a Man,” for household workers, traditional gender ideology could be deployed to undercut racial and class domination.

But not everyone in the household-workers movement embraced Bolden’s maternalist rhetoric. Neither did they see an emphasis on “self-sacrifice” and “love” as the best tactic for improving the lot of household workers. Indeed, for many, it was precisely the “‘personal’ aspect of the existing relationship” that had to be eliminated. Real change could only come through unionization, Edith Sloan of the NCHE asserted, or by imposing a third party—a contractor—between the employer and employee. Otherwise, she promised to loud cheers at the first national conference of domestic workers in 1971, “‘Madam’ is going to have to clean her own house and cook and serve her own meals because everyone is going to quit.”<sup>89</sup>

By the end of the 1970s, the NCHE and most of its affiliates were in decline, but the movement could claim some crucial victories. The lobbying of grassroots domestic workers combined with pressure from female legislators such as Shirley Chisholm, Yvonne Burke, and Patsy Mink forced the inclusion of do-

mestic workers under the Fair Labor Standards Act provisions for the first time in 1974. A few states also added domestic workers to their minimum wage, unemployment insurance, and workers' compensation coverage.<sup>90</sup> In addition, although wages for household employees remained unconscionably low, significant economic gains were made in some key regional labor markets.<sup>91</sup> And, as Geraldine Roberts, longtime civil-rights and later household-worker activist explained in 1977, "We thought that we needed them to make a living, but we learned that they needed us, that we were important."<sup>92</sup>

Although changing the ideology surrounding the work and redefining its psychology at the "point of personal contact" proved formidable indeed, the nature of the employee-employer relationship continued to transform. While many private domestic jobs still involve the oppressive one-on-one personalism and deference of the past, household cleaning is increasingly done by teams of workers from agencies or by individual workers who contract on a fee-for-service basis.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, many of the domestic functions once performed by individual women in the home have shifted into the commercial realm. African-American women in particular moved into these newly commercialized "domestic" jobs of hotel maid, home health care aide, janitor, day care and kitchen worker.<sup>94</sup> And, during the late 1970s and 1980s, they and their coworkers built strong unions in many of these "public household" occupations. Indeed, some of the most important union breakthroughs in the 1980s occurred precisely in these sectors.<sup>95</sup>

### *Conclusion*

How then are these movements to be characterized, and how do they expand our understandings of the history of work and collective action? Arguably, one could gather these stories under the broad rubric of a belated modernization. After all, like industrial workers of the 1930s and 1940s, they too wanted to do away with the feudal, paternalistic trappings of their work and to depersonalize employment relations. These stories from the female-dominated service sector also suggest, however, that women workers themselves were divided over how best to reform the personal encounters so central to their work lives and that employers may be more reluctant to depersonalize women's jobs than men's.

One might also put these movements in a class framework. For in many ways, women service workers in the 1970s sought to realize the familiar demands of organized workers. All three movements desired a more equitable return on their labor and more control over their working conditions. Many also argued that dignity, respect, and enhanced status would follow once these changes were wrested from employers.

But neither of these frameworks captures the soul of these movements, the spirit that animated these women and sparked their rebellion. For fundamentally, these movements were about degendering women's jobs, about dismantling the gendered structures and norms around which these occupations had been created. In short, flight attendants, clericals, and household workers sought



escape from the gender constraints of their work. They wanted to be treated as human beings and as “real workers,” not as sex objects, office wives, or “mam-mies.” Women service workers subjected these age-old scripts to public scrutiny and brought them into the arena of labor–management negotiation.

Race and class norms infuse women’s jobs as well and intersect with gender expectations in complicated ways. Flight attendants, often young, white single women, faced heightened sexualization at work, but it was tempered by competing notions of flight attendants as respectable and potential marriage partners. Similarly, the elite of the clerical work force, secretaries and administrative assistants, also benefited from being white and having some college education. In contrast, household workers, mainly poor women of color, had no such shields. Dismantling the “mammy” stereotype with its expectations of self-sacrifice and deference required an assault against multiple ideologies of domination.

Of course, men’s jobs bear the mark of gender. But for most men, gendered labor has meant higher wages, status, and more autonomy. Thus, dismantling gender constructs has not been a prime concern of collective action among men. Indeed, typically men have relied upon the dominant gender ideology as an aid to their advancement.

In the unions of the future just as in the scholarship of the present, the differences between men’s and women’s jobs and the differences in their reform ideologies and practices must be confronted. The old industrial vision of one big union based on class identity and class solidarity must give way to a new ideal, one in which psychological and cultural as well as economic issues are paramount, one in which control over one’s emotional terrain is as central as control over one’s mind and body. And, ultimately, this new ideal must recognize the multiple constructs of domination and the variety of collective movements that will arise in response.

## NOTES

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4. Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, 1991).

5. *Ibid.*; Stephen Norwood, *Labor’s Flaming Youth: Telephone Operators and Worker Militancy, 1878–1923* (Urbana, 1990); Marjorie Murphy, *Blackboard Unions: The AFT and the NEA, 1900–1980* (Ithaca, 1990); Tera W. Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom’: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, 1997).

6. Philip S. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From World War I to the Present* (New York, 1980), 560–62; David Plotke, “Women Clerical Workers and Trade Unionism: Interview with Karen Nussbaum,” *Socialist Review* 49 (1980):151–59.

7. Women’s Bureau of the US Department of Labor, *1975 Handbook on Women Workers*, Bulletin 297 (Washington, DC, 1975), 96–98, 276; Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Perspectives on*

*Working Women: A Databook*, Bulletin 2080 (Washington, DC, 1980), 10–11; Barbara Gutek, “Women in Clerical Work,” in *Women Working: Theories and Facts in Perspective*, ed. Ann Stromberg and Shirley Harkness (Mountain View, CA, 1988), 225–28. Women also accounted for between seventy-five and eighty percent of all “clerical and kindred workers”—a broad occupational category including postal clerks, computer operators, bookkeepers, bank tellers, and others.

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10. Women’s Bureau of the US Department of Labor, “Women Private Household Workers Fact Sheet,” (Washington, DC, 1970); Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 560–63.

11. For an overview, see William Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York, 1991), 146–246.

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15. Nancy Maclean, “The Hidden History of Affirmative Action: Working Women’s Struggles in the 1970s and the Gender of Class,” *Feminist Studies* 25 (1999):43–78.

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17. Paula Kane, *Sex Objects in the Sky: A Personal Account* (Chicago, 1974).

18. On the history of flight attendants, see Georgia Panter Nielsen, *From Sky Girl to Flight Attendant: Women and the Making of a Union* (Ithaca, 1982); Frieda Rozen, “Turbulence in the Air: The Autonomy Movement in the Flight Attendant Unions,” (Ph.D. diss., Pennsylvania State University, 1988); Kathleen Barry, “‘Coffee, Tea—But Not Me!’: Stewardesses for Women’s Rights: Flight Attendant’s Construction of a Feminist Professional Identity in the 1970s” (manuscript, New York University History Department, 1996); Lindsay Van Gelder, “Coffee, Tea, or Me,” *Ms.* (1973):86–91, 105; Kathy Lukas, “The Evolution of the Flight Attendant in the United States,” n.d. [c. 1980], Box 2, Folder 52, Stewardesses for Women’s Rights Records, 1963–1987, Tamiment Library, Wagner Archives, New York University, New York [hereafter cited as SFWR Records]; Independent Union of Flight Attendants Collection (Pan Am), Tamiment Library, Wagner Archives, New York University [hereafter IUIFA Collection].

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20. Sandra Jarrell, “Keynote Address at First SFWR Conference,” *Newsletter*, vol. 1, no. 2 (May 1973), Box 2, Folder 51, SFWR Records.

21. See note 18; quotes from Kathleen Heenan, “Fighting the Fly-Me Airlines,” *The Civil Liberties Review* (1976–1977):48–53; Anne Sweeney, “The Turn of the Screw,” *Newsletter*, vol. 2, no. 5 (May 1974), 6–7, Box 2, Folder 52, SFWR Records; Frank J. Prial, “The Great Girl Shortage in the Sky,” *New York World Telegram*, August 25, 1965 (part 1), 25, and August 26, 1965 (part 2), 17.

22. Betty Liddick, “Tail Slogan Hits Bottom, Say Stews,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 25, 1994, in Box 2, Folder 64, SFWR Records.

23. Neilsen, *From Sky Girl to Flight Attendant*, 117–36; Rozen, “Turbulence in the Air.”

24. *Newsletter*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1973), Box 2, Folder 51, SFWR Records.
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74. Sragow, “Taking the Mammy Out of Housework,” 34–38.

75. “Farewell to Dinah,” *Newsweek*, August 2, 1971, 67; Geraldine Roberts Interview, Twentieth Century Trade Union Woman Oral History Project, University of Michigan, 1977; “Dorothy Bolden Interview by Chris Lutz,” n.p.; National Domestic Workers of America, Inc., “Proposal to Implement a Training Program for Household Management Technicians in Metro Atlanta” (June 26, 1974), Box 1625, Folder 52, NDWU Records.

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78. Sragow, “Taking the Mammy Out of Housework,” 38; “National Domestic Workers,” pamphlet (n.d. [c. 1975]), 9, Box 1628, Folder 102, NDWU Records; Jeannette Smyth, “Union Maid: A Two-Way Street,” *Washington Post*, July 17, 1971.

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80. “Domestics Uniting,” 1, 43.

81. With the help of the Grosse Point Junior League, the HWO achieved some success in persuading employers to honor a model contract by disseminating a pamphlet to employers entitled “You and Your Household Help,” which discussed “good employment practices.” See Box 1, Folders 23 and 29 and Box 2, Folder 5, McClendon Collection.

82. Minutes, 1968–1978, Box 1633, Folder 173, NDWU Records; “Dorothy Bolden Portrait,” 161; “Proposal to Implement a Training Program for Household Management Technicians in Metro-Atlanta”; News Release (December 12, 1973), Box 1633, Folder 183 and Box

1626, Folders 66–69, NDWU Records; “Bolden Interview by Chris Lutz”; “Dorothy Bolden interview with Gerda Lerner,” 237–38.

83. “History” (n.d.), Box 1628, Folder 97; “National Domestic Workers of America,” pamphlet (n.d. [c. 1975]), 9, Box 1628, Folder 102; and Box 1627, Folder 77, all in NDWU Records.

84. Proclamations from Atlanta Mayor Sam Massell (July 15, 1970) (reissued 1971, 1972), Box 1633, Folders 184–5, NDWU Records.

85. Entry Blanks for Maids’ Honor Day, 1970–76, Box 1627, Folders 79–90, NDWU Records.

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