

“What Waitresses Teach Us”

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(In English and Swedish)

“What? Powerful waitress unions? You must be kidding!” I still get this reaction when I tell people about my first book, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (1991).¹ The story of how waitresses in the United States created all-female unions a century ago, raised the wages and living standards for millions in their craft, and challenged patriarchal power in the union and society is not well known. But today’s conversations about waitress unionism usually take a different turn than they did some twenty-five years ago. The curious ask how waitresses achieved their enviable power, and a few are eager to follow in the footsteps of their waitress foremothers and organize their workplaces. Some wonder too about what the study of waitress unionism might offer a new generation of scholars attentive to service and precarious work, sexuality, and the rich diversity of social movements.

In what follows I share some of what waitresses teach us. I draw on their wisdoms to offer lessons about organizing in today’s “gig” economy and I argue that the unionism they practiced is newly relevant for reimagining workplace institutions and social movements. I also explore some of the scholarly possibilities that open up when service jobs and the women who do them are taken as the paradigmatic rather than the atypical, as the norm rather than the exception. Theories of “class formation,” workplace

“alienation,” and “collective mobilization” still rest on studies of male, blue-collar labor and are ill suited as generalizable theoretical frameworks. The experiences of women, the majority of the working class, and the movements they led must be fully integrated into our conceptual apparatus.

What Waitresses Achieved

The rise of hospitality unionism in the United States raised the quality of life for all. Waitresses are part of the vast army of interactive service workers who serve, feed, and care for our bodies, minds, and psyches. They do “people work,” to use Daniel Bell’s phrase from his 1973 classic *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*: they interact with customers, clients, students, patients, and diners as a component of their job.² All of us are dependent on people workers, and making life better for those who toil in restaurants, hospitals, schools, or offices matters to everyone. It’s a virtuous circle where fair treatment for servers means better service for everyone, or as the Australian nurses’ union slogan puts it: “Quality jobs=quality care.”³

Waitresses were one of the few female-majority groups to unionize in the early twentieth century United States, and even more remarkably, they sustained their unions for much of the century. Beginning in 1900 with the founding of the Seattle, Washington waitresses’ local, waitresses formed all-female unions in communities across the United States; they also joined mixed culinary locals of waiters, cooks and bartenders. Affiliated almost exclusively with the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union [HERE],⁴ these food service locals experienced unprecedented growth in the 1930s and 1940s. At

their peak in the 1950s, union waitresses represented nearly one-fourth of the trade nationally. In such union strongholds as New York, Detroit, and San Francisco, a majority of female servers worked under union contract. In the 1960s, however, a slow decline began in the unionized hospitality sector that has yet to be reversed. In *Dishing It Out* and subsequent articles I analyzed more fully what waitress unionism achieved, the reasons for its remarkable ascent, and why its decline.⁵ Here I offer a small slice of that history.

The desire of waitresses for economic independence, dignity, and more say over working conditions was as evident at the turn of the century as a hundred years later. Valentine Webster, Butte Montana waitress leader from the 1930s, claimed waitresses wanted living wages, control over when and where they worked, and the right to speak their mind as they saw fit. She and others believed unionizing would make waitressing a job “any girl might be proud” to do, and in many communities across the United States waitresses achieved that goal. Union servers were “self-respecting and respected by all” and higher wages meant the many single, divorced, and separated waitresses could provide for themselves and their dependents without compromising their dignity in search of tipped income. Waitresses declared themselves “skilled craftswomen” who deserved respect and living wages because of their “social abilities” as well as their “technical” know-how. They objected to “family wages” being paid only to men. In their view, any wage earner who supported dependents, male or female, deserved a “family wage.”⁶

Thirty years later, Detroit HERE organizer Myra Wolfgang had similar concerns when she negotiated with Playboy Club CEO Hugh Hefner on behalf of the “Playboy

bunnies,” the name given Playboy Club waitresses across the United States. “Bunnies” demanded and won living wages (previously “bunnies” had worked for tips only), more control over hours and scheduling, and greater respect from customers and bosses. The “bunny” negotiating team proposed “rules for customer behavior” banning “touching” and other unwanted harassment, and they insisted on redesigned “bunny” uniforms covering more of their bodies. Playboy waitresses were no longer the docile pets Hefner had envisioned. “Bunnies” were “biting back,” Wolfgang announced.⁷

Yet waitresses wanted more than changes at work: they sought women’s rights in the union and in society. Waitress locals backed political movements for universal suffrage, worker rights, social welfare, and civil rights. They helped change U.S. laws and public opinion, with notable breakthroughs in these areas occurring from the 1910s to the 1960s. Within the union, they won leadership slots for women on the union’s national executive board; they also demanded equal access to higher-paying jobs in the industry and vehemently objected when their International union sought legislative and contract provisions restricting liquor service to men only. “We seek an equal voice with men in saying what industrial conditions will prevail,” one waitress constitution proclaimed.⁸

Waitresses articulated and acted upon a feminist vision of social reform I later termed “labor feminism.”⁹ Equal legal treatment with disadvantaged men would not bring substantive or real equality to the majority of women. Nor would a single focus on sex equality address the multiple injustices women faced due to class, race, and other discriminations. Justice for women required broad social reform and a fundamental rethinking of capitalist economies.

The Tactics Waitresses Used

Waitresses invented a host of creative approaches to union organizing. Patron support proved crucial in pressuring employers to recognize the union and improve wages, hours, and working conditions. In strong union towns and neighborhoods, more than one restaurant owner bowed to consumer preference for unionized service and proudly displayed a “union house, union bar” card in the window.

Culinary unionists also relied on innovative strike tactics. Traditional strikes rarely had much impact on small eating establishments where employees could be easily replaced. In response, locals picketed without pulling the crew inside. Workers stayed on the job, earning income, as their friends picketed outside until the dispute was settled. When pickets persuaded customers to bypass the struck restaurant or drivers to halt deliveries, the employer often relented. In San Francisco during the 1930s, locals organized “sip-ins” or “customer strikes” where union sympathizers occupied tables all day, slowly sipping a single cup of coffee. Costumed picket lines proved popular too. The variations were endless: Halloween pickets, women on skates, a “Kiddie Day” picket line. During a 1941 strike in San Francisco, the union offered a prize for the best costume. A young lunch counter striker won with a dress covered entirely with spoons; on her back the sign read: “Local 1100 can dish it out but can the Emporium take it?”¹⁰

Waitresses practiced a particular form of unionism, which I called “occupational unionism.” Unlike industrial workers who organized vertical unions representing all workers in a single plant or company, waitresses created a horizontal union that stretched across many worksites. They took in all the workers in their craft, regardless of where

they worked or who employed them. This form of unionism was especially suited to sectors with multiple small employers and a mobile workforce. In some ways it was a classic form of “craft unionism,” which today is associated with the building trades and other skilled white male workers. I renamed it “occupational unionism” to emphasize its appeal to women and men in many occupations, including those in hospitality, transportation, the performing arts, and other sectors.

Occupational unionism had a number of distinguishing characteristics. First, union benefits were portable, and waitresses “working the circuit” or moving from job to job took their pensions, health care, and other benefits with them. Workers had the power of “exit” as well as “voice” – to use Albert Hirschman’s terms.¹¹ Second, the union took in small employers as well as employees, though union constitutions often reserved voting for “workers” only. Many restaurant owners had risen from the ranks and might return there; they wanted to remain in the union, in part to keep their union benefits. Some owners were also staunch unionists who believed unions prevented cutthroat competition in the industry and made it possible for employers to offer decent wages and benefits.

Third, occupational unionists practiced “peer management” – meaning workers themselves took over matters later considered management tasks such as recruiting and training workers, setting minimum labor standards, and taking responsibility for evaluating worker performance. Locals offered job training and other professional services to their members. They might provide housing assistance or help with childcare or advice on employers to avoid. Some set up hiring halls or worker-run employment agencies. Such agencies increased the number of good union jobs since employers

needing help had to abide by union rules and pay scales. Hiring halls also ensured more equitable distribution of jobs and greater control by workers over when and where they worked.

Having the union in charge of disciplining and discharging workers could be tricky. But waitresses believed they were better arbiters of what the standards of the trade should be and who had met those standards than anyone else. Why let bosses determine when and who to discipline and fire? The waitress who threw the plate of spaghetti at the customer had to explain her reasons to a committee of her peers, not to the boss. She did not prevail and the union sent another waitress to take her place. But once her customer skills improved and she learned more effective approaches to managing obnoxious diners, the union dispatched her to a different restaurant.

Reimagining Unionism With the Help of Waitresses

The unionism practiced by waitresses has much to offer today's workers, and new worker groups are adopting and updating these practices.¹² Those in highly mobile, contingent jobs are unlikely to be bound together solely by animus against a single employer or the promise of job security at a single worksite. An organization providing portable benefits, training, and other forms of mutual aid appeals to those moving from job to job. In addition, worker-run placement agencies are welcome alternatives to the exploitative private "temp" agency. Worker-run agencies cut out the "middle man," allowing more money to go directly to workers. By giving workers more say over

scheduling and the right to refuse work, they also reduce overwork and involuntary overtime.

But any attempt to refashion contemporary unionism drawing on labor's historical traditions must do so in a selective manner. We need to recapture salutary aspects of past approaches while remaining alert to the limitations of those same practices. After all, waitress unionism declined after the 1960s and has yet to rebound. Most of the blame for union decline in the United States rests squarely on the capital class, a singularly powerful elite that has expended tremendous effort weakening worker organizations. They succeeded in recapturing the state, passing legislation hostile to workers, and unleashing a torrent of negative half-truths and lies about the labor movement. Yet not all the blame lies on forces external to the labor movement. Waitress unions too could be shortsighted and selfish. Some refused membership to African American women; others rejected "Asian" workers and noncitizens. These discriminatory practices declined markedly after World War II but their legacies remained.

In the 1980s and 1990s, HERE started to challenge the deeply embedded race and sex discrimination in the industry more aggressively. Two young women heading large heterogeneous hospitality locals -- Sherri Chiesa in San Francisco and Maria Elena Durazo in Los Angeles -- led the way by negotiating contracts raising pay in the "back of the house" jobs held largely by people of color and setting up training programs aimed at women and minority workers. Powerful casino locals in Las Vegas and Atlantic City followed suit. In the early 1990s, the Atlantic City union threatened employers with a "pantyhose arbitration" over the sheerness of the pantyhose cocktail waitresses were

required to wear. The women servers preferred thicker, less sheer pantyhose because they experienced less harassment and heavier “support” hose helped tired legs.¹³

More recently, UNITE HERE’s Durazo spearheaded a national campaign for the rights of undocumented immigrants modeled on the earlier civil rights “freedom marches” of the 1960s. UNITE HERE also continued the pioneering work of Myra Wolfgang and other waitress leaders in attacking the rampant sexual harassment in the industry. Working with IUF, the global labor federation of hotel, food, and farm unions, UNITE HERE helped launch an international campaign among housekeepers with a focus on ending sexual harassment. In the U.S., former waitress Karen Kent, president of Chicago UNITE HERE Local 1, led her members in a successful “Hands Off, Pants On” campaign to end the lewd and abusive behavior of male guests. The local won a municipal ordinance requiring hotels to provide “panic buttons” to housekeepers and other staff who need protection.¹⁴

New “alt-labor” organizations like the Restaurant Opportunities Center United (ROC) have upped pressure on employers too. Since the 1990s, as collective bargaining contracts became increasingly difficult to win given the opposition of powerful U.S. employers and conservative courts, hundreds of “alt-labor” groups emerged. These groups use strategies other than collective bargaining to win concessions from employers.¹⁵ Co-founded in 2001, ROC has relied on lawsuits, media campaigns, political advocacy, and non-discriminatory job training and placement services to tackle race and sex discrimination in the industry. Today, ROC has some thirty thousand members in multiple chapters across the United States.¹⁶ Cooperative ventures between “alt-labor” groups like ROC and older, more established unions like UNITE HERE have

great potential for transforming service work and reducing economic and social inequalities.¹⁷

On the eve of “Labor Day” in the United States, which falls annually on the first Monday in September, I often get requests for interviews about labor’s past and future. This year my favorite call came from a disgruntled young woman bartender and writer who wanted to organize her comrade food and drink servers. She might just do it too, given how articulate she was about the exploitation servers experience – harassment, overwork, low pay, lack of respect – and how willing she was to experiment with new and creative ways of forging solidarity, self-respect, and power. She was learning everything she could about the forgotten practices of the past. She knew too that every generation has to invent anew. The strongest twenty-first century unionism will be an alloy, a judicious blend of past and present, of reclaimed ways and ways that have yet to be conceived.

¹ Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century*, Princeton, NJ, 1991.

² Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, New York, 1973.

³ Dorothy Sue Cobble, "Worker mutualism in an age of entrepreneurial capitalism," *Labour and Industry* 26, 3 (2016), 179-189.

⁴ Founded in 1891, HERE was initially a male-dominated union of bartenders, cooks, and waiters. It gradually diversified, admitting women and people of color, and opened up to kitchen, housekeeping, and other hospitality occupations. In 2004, it merged with the garment workers' union, UNITE, to form UNITE HERE. Currently, it is affiliated with the AFL-CIO. The best historical study remains Matthew Josephson, *Union House, Union Bar: A History of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders International Union, AFL-CIO*, New York, 1956.

⁵ For example: Cobble, "Organizing the Postindustrial Work Force: Lessons From the History of Waitress Unionism," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 44, 3 (April 1991), 419-436; Cobble, "Making Postindustrial Unionism Possible," in Sheldon Friedman, et al, eds., *Restoring the Promise of American Labor Law*, Ithaca, NY, 1994, 285-302; and Dorothy Sue Cobble and Michael Merrill, "Collective Bargaining in the Hospitality Industry," in Paula Voos, ed., *Contemporary Collective Bargaining in the Private Sector*, Ithaca, NY, 1994, 285-302.

⁶ Cobble, *Dishing It Out*, esp. introduction and chapter 5, for quotes, 5, 34, 120.

⁷ Cobble, *Dishing It Out*, 61, 120, 128-29.

⁸ Cobble, *Dishing It Out*, chapters 7 and 8; for quote, 116. For more on the fight over women serving and mixing drinks, Dorothy Sue Cobble, "'Drawing the Line': The Construction of a Gendered Workforce in the Food Service Industry," in Ava Baron, ed., *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor*, Ithaca, NY, 1991, 216-242.

⁹ Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America*, Princeton, NJ, 2004, introduction.

¹⁰ Cobble, *Dishing It Out*, 92-94, 98-99.

¹¹ Albert Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, Loyalty*, Cambridge, MA, 1970.

¹² Dorothy Sue Cobble, "More Intimate Unions," in Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, eds., *Intimate Labors*, Stanford, California, 2010, 280-295.

¹³ Cobble, *Dishing It Out*, 201-203; Cobble and Merrill, "Collective Bargaining in the Hospitality Industry."

¹⁴ "Freedom riders' rally for immigrant rights," *Chicago Tribune*, 5 October 2003; E-mail from Barbro Budin, Equality and Project Officer, IUF, September 13, 2018; "Hospitality Workers and Sexual Harassment," www.npr.org/templates/transcripts, accessed September 16, 2018.

¹⁵ For a set of thoughtful alt-labor case studies, see Ruth Milkman and Ed Ott, eds. *New Labor in New York: Precarious Workers and the Future of the Labor Movement*, Ithaca, NY, 2014.

¹⁶ www.rocunited.org, accessed August 31, 2018. See also Saru Jayaraman, *Forked: A New Standard for American Dining*, New York, 2016.

¹⁷ For elaboration, Cobble, "More Intimate Unions" and Dorothy Sue Cobble and

Michael Merrill, "The Promise of Service Worker Unionism" in Marek Korczynski and Cameron Macdonald, eds., *Service Work: Critical Perspectives*. London, 2008, 151-174.