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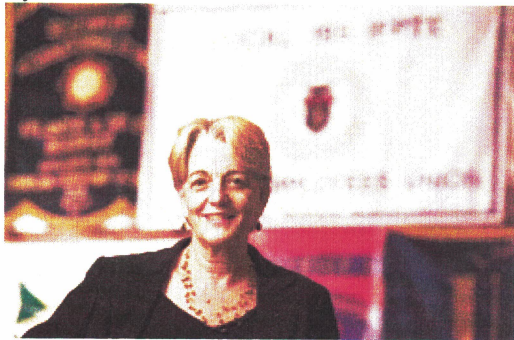
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Research

Acclaimed Rutgers Labor Scholar Draws from the Prism of the Past

Dorothy Sue Cobble's authentic writings on the workplace most recently won her the Hillman Foundation's Sol Stetin Award

By Fredda Sacharow



Credit: Nick Romanenko

Dorothy Sue Cobble examines the changing relation of men and women in the workforce.

Dorothy Sue Cobble's profound connection to the labor movement stems from wellsprings at once deep and wide.

You could say the Rutgers history professor has paid her dues, both literally and figuratively.

A child of the South with roots in the civil rights movement, daughter of a lobbyist for the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers in Atlanta, Cobble scrubbed large, double-barreled tanks on ships at the San Francisco docks during the week, and hauled coffee and bananas as a union longshoreman on weekends during the mid-1970s.

As a newly minted college graduate, she also worked briefly as an editorial assistant at *TV Guide*, in what would later become known as the "pink-collar ghetto." Cobble was disheartened to learn she was bringing home in a week what male friends in other fields were making in a day – friends, Cobble recalls, who had not graduated from college.

Cobble has been telling the dramatic story of labor and social movements since she rode a bus to music classes in Atlanta, watching as white riders sat in one section of the bus, colored riders in another.

Ultimately sickened by the corrosive cleaning solvents then commonly used for ship scaling, and disillusioned about gender-based disparities in pay, Cobble would come away from those early life experiences determined to forge a career writing about the workplace. In essence, she hoped to explore the future of unionism and work through the prism of the past.

Three decades later, she's accomplished her goal so successfully that she lays claim to a series of prestigious awards, most recently the 2010 Sol Stetin Award for Labor History, given by the Sidney Hillman Foundation and named in honor of a longtime union organizer and Rutgers professor whose tenure at the university overlapped Cobble's by several years until

his death in 2005.

As head of the Textile Workers Union of America, Stetin led the drive to organize the J.P. Stevens Company, eventually bringing 3,500 employees in 12 mills under the union's wing. In 1982, he was named the first labor leader in residence at Rutgers.

The Stetin Award recognizes a body of scholarship that features most prominently two of Cobble's books, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* and *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in America*.

The Other Women's Movement, which Cobble describes as a political and intellectual history of women's contributions to reforming the workplace, also won the 2005 Philip Taft Book Prize from Cornell University

for the best book in American labor history.

In one form or another, the professor at Rutgers' School of Management and Labor Relations has been telling the dramatic story of labor and social movements since she rode a bus to music classes in Atlanta in the hot summers of the 1950s and 1960s, watching as white riders sat in one section of the bus, "colored" riders in another.

"Growing up in a city where civil and human rights were being hotly debated really sparked my interest in issues of justice and social inequality," says Cobble, who credits her passion as well to sermons she heard in church, and to her father's pioneering work on minimum-wage legislation in Georgia, and on preserving passenger train service in the South.

As her books' titles suggest, Cobble has examined the changing relation of men and women in the workforce as the United States transitioned from an industrial to a service economy. At the turn of the 20th Century, for example, conventional wisdom still held that the food services industry – particularly any place where liquor was served – was not a proper place for women.

"That notion had a surprisingly long life," Cobble says: Not until 1972 did California overturn the last state law restricting bartending to men. *Dishing It Out* ends in part with a discussion of how the job quickly "feminized," with men fleeing what soon became perceived as women's work – a pattern not uncommon in other industries, she adds.

In a December op-ed column published by *The Washington Post*, Cobble notes that, thanks in part to the current recession, women now hold close to half the jobs in the economy, mothers are the main or co-breadwinners in two-thirds of American families, and the majority of unemployed workers are men. But despite these facts on the ground, the Rutgers academic writes, decent wages and economic security for women too often remain out of reach.

In the piece, Cobble urges activists to look to what she terms "New Deal feminists," those who led the women's movement between the 1930s and the 1960s and who strove not only for more jobs, but also for better jobs, who lobbied not just for equal pay but also for an overall revaluing of women's work, both paid and unpaid, and for decent wages and working conditions for men and women.

One such activist is at the center of Cobble's latest project: a biography of Esther Peterson, director of the nation's first Consumer Protection Agency and the highest-ranking woman in the Kennedy Administration.

"Her name is not a household word, but I would argue that Peterson is one of the most important political figures of the 20th century," Cobble says. An early labor organizer in the garment industry, Peterson is widely credited as a prime mover behind the Kennedy Commission on the Status of Women, which helped launch a new wave of feminism in the 1960s, and as a force behind the Equal Pay Act of 1963.

Cobble crossed paths with Peterson several years ago, when both women served on a panel about equal pay.