

A “Tiger by the Toenail”: The 1970s Origins of the New Working-Class Majority

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It is not surprising that the economist and working-class studies scholar Michael Zweig harkened back to the 1970s when he titled his popular 2000 book *The Working-Class Majority: America's Best-Kept Secret*.¹ In 1974 Andrew Levison had published an essay called “The Working-Class Majority” in the *New Yorker*, and I remember cheering out loud as I read his discovery (startling in many quarters) that, despite the decline of blue-collar manual jobs, the majority of Americans were still working class.² How could this be? Levison pulled the white-collar curtain aside to reveal rows upon rows of working-class women typing, filing, answering phones, and ringing up purchases in offices and shops across America. The touted rise of a postindustrial society, it turned out, was not just about the growth of a white-collar managerial class. It was also about a new army of pink-collar clericals, salesclerks, cashiers, and waitresses as well as the even more invisible behind-the-scenes maids, janitors, and home-care attendants.

These blue- and pink-collar women have been absent from much of the labor history of the 1970s as well. With the return of interest in public sector labor conflicts, as in Joe McCartin’s careful, nuanced tale, and the embrace by younger scholars like Dave Anderson of neighborhood protests over prices as an integral aspect of the struggle over distribution of wealth, we are on the path to pulling aside our own curtained worlds. Yet we have far to go. Many of the categories we still routinely rely on to gauge working-class militancy and political expression will need broadening or even discarding; the narratives currently in play may need to be recast as well.

After identifying some of the new angles on the 1970s raised by McCartin’s

1. Michael Zweig, *The Working-Class Majority: America's Best-Kept Secret* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

2. Andrew Levison, “The Working-Class Majority,” *New Yorker*, September 3, 1974.

and Anderson's richly suggestive articles,³ I draw on my own research into the history of labor feminism to offer a different entry point into the decade. How does focusing on this other working class reshape our assessment of the 1970s? How does it affect our understanding of the legacy of the 1970s and its relationship to the 1980s and the decades that follow? A different entry point into the decade propels one toward a different history of the 1980s and ultimately allows one to grasp a more promising political thread into the twenty-first century.

McCartin and Anderson reject earlier dismissive notions of the 1970s as a sandwich decade between the more crucial 1960s and 1980s. Rather, they side with an emerging group of scholars who judge the 1970s as pivotal or, in Jefferson Cowie's words, a "key turning point in the history of labor"—particularly in understanding the political realignments of the late twentieth century and the declining fortunes of the American working class.⁴ But in what way is the 1970s pivotal? And how did progressives, to paraphrase Thomas Frank, lose the heart of America?⁵ Or did they?

McCartin's marvelous account of public sector strikes from the late 1960s to the end of the 1970s reminds us once again that labor did not enter the 1960s a tamed and toothless movement. Not only does labor organize millions of public sector workers in the 1960s and 1970s by engaging in civil disobedience and mass protest, but these struggles are a principal vehicle for the continuance of a civil rights movement dedicated to economic and social rights for people of low income. Public worker strikes peak in 1978, McCartin tells us, their decline affected no doubt by the increasing tendency of political leaders to use hardball tactics in dealing with labor militancy.

McCartin's essay also puts Reagan's 1981 decision to fire the striking air traffic controllers in its proper context. We are forced to abandon the view—very popular among my labor studies students—of Reagan, larger than life, instigating and then presiding over labor's demise. If only he hadn't fired those air traffic controllers, they moan. In contrast, for McCartin, the "if only" counterfactual appears highly unlikely. The aggressive antiunionism of the 1980s was not the product of a bold new stroke from the White House: it was the culmination in part of the increasing acceptance over the course of the 1970s of the use of permanent replacements during labor disputes.

But how dramatic a shift in public attitudes toward the use of permanent replacements did occur over a single decade? The public does appear less sympathetic to strikers by the 1980s. But that may have had as much to do with other factors—the declining moral urgency of the civil rights movement, ideological challenges to the

3. I find the strict decade frame constraining. The "long 1970s," stretching from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, is a more accurate time span for the phenomena I am discussing. Nevertheless, for ease in writing and reading, I'll refer to this "long 1970s" as the 1970s.

4. Jefferson Cowie, "'Vigorously Left, Right, and Center': The Crosscurrents of Working-Class America in the 1970s," in *America in the Seventies*, ed. Beth Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 102.

5. Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

very idea of unionism as a social good in a “post-Keynesian world,”⁶ and changes in the larger economic environment, for example—than it did with a shift in conviction about the legitimacy of replacing strikers. In other words, perhaps public opinion was more fluid and pragmatic than McCartin suggests, especially given the relatively short time frame within which he is operating.

McCartin mentions galloping inflation as an important context for shifting public sentiments in the 1980s. I would underscore and extend this. As Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone note in *The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America*, after rising for decades, real wages begin their half-century decline in 1973.⁷ Some unionized workers were able to stay ahead of inflation and continue to wrest gains from employers, but increasingly, the vast unorganized sector was falling behind. The gap fueled the antitax urge. It also undercut public support for unionized workers. The pervasive 1980s mantra of economists and others who blamed America’s lack of global competitiveness on artificially high labor costs because of monopoly unions had an effect as well. In that clever formulation, the right of a few workers to keep their jobs during labor disputes was put in tension with the right of the majority to the jobs supposedly produced by a prospering economy. The conservative Right had in effect captured the “right to a job” rhetoric.

How much importance did the growing use of striker replacements in the public sector have in prompting the actions of private sector employers such as Phelps Dodge and Hormel in the 1980s? The success of public officials with the permanent replacement tactic in the 1970s may have emboldened large corporate employers. But accounts of the great showdowns of the 1980s suggest that corporate employers unleashed a war on labor largely because they calculated, quite correctly it turned out, that they could win. They had more and more public sympathy. But they also had, for the first time in nearly a half century, conservative politicians, court injunctions, and changing technology on their side.⁸

The blue-collar suburbanites of Levittown described by Dave Anderson must have felt the pinch of the decade’s falling wages. Instead of agitating to raise their pay or lower their taxes, however, they turned to a tactic relied on by generations of working-class housewives: lowering prices. The Levittown rioters gathered in their neighborhood, not at their workplaces, and they targeted the high price of necessities, which in the 1970s United States included gas as well as meat and bread. And, as Anderson points out, their anger was directed as much at government as at business.

I’m not sure this single two-day riot in Levittown can bear the interpretative

6. Quoted in Nelson Lichtenstein, *The State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 238.

7. Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone, *The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

8. Jonathan Rosenblum, *Copper Crucible: How the Great Arizona Miners’ Strike of 1983 Recast Labor-Management Relations in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Barbara Kingsolver, *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996). See also Barbara Kopple’s Academy Award-winning film on the Hormel strike, *American Dream*.

weight Anderson places on it, nor am I convinced of his claim that the energy crisis is “the most important social, cultural, political event” of the 1970s. Nevertheless, his imaginative article helps us think more deeply about the crosscurrents of working-class sentiment in the 1970s. He is right, I think, to contemplate both the “possibilities and limits” of the impulses expressed by the Levittowners. While their anger may have been righteous, aspects of their politics resonate all too well with the protectionist jingoism of one segment of today’s U.S. working class. And what are we to make of their strange mix of cynicism and dependence toward the state? Are the sons and daughters of those who made the New Deal now seeking to unmake it?

The 1970s events captured by Anderson and McCartin reveal the strains in the New Deal social contract. In both, antigovernment sentiments are palpable, and the organized are divided from the unorganized. In both, the majority of workers are largely without economic or political institutions to protect them. Neither the labor movement nor the Democratic Party have a larger social, economic, or political vision that can offer a way forward, that can reconcile intraclass and interclass conflict, capture the moral high ground, and convince the majority that the general welfare is being advanced. These are movements and institutions in crisis and decline.

But there is a different way in which the 1970s is pivotal. An older working class may be in decline, but a new working class is being born. Part of the problem for both the labor movement and the Democratic Party is that their class politics, to the extent it existed, was stuck in the 1930s world of the old working class. They were formulating policy and strategy with a declining segment of the working class in mind, a working class that was rapidly becoming the minority. The new working-class majority was not yet fully formed. It had not yet constructed new forms of economic power at the workplace nor invented a new politics to reflect its class interests. Indeed, both are still under construction. Nevertheless, the origins of a new labor movement and a new class politics are to be found in the 1970s.

Let me focus then on the new working-class majority emerging in the 1970s. I concentrate primarily on the changing situation of working-class women from different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds to explore the transformation of the working class as a whole.

Women’s collective organizing, unlike men’s, was on the rise throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. As Deborah Bell points out, the first wave of public sector organizing primarily involved minority and blue-collar men and reached its peak in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The next upsurge, though, erupted largely among white- and pink-collar women and continued into the 1980s. It affected teachers as well as clericals, librarians, and other state and municipal employees.⁹ By the early

9. Deborah Bell, “Unionized Women in State and Local Government,” in *Women, Work, and Protest: A Century of U.S. Women’s Labor History*, ed. Ruth Milkman (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 280–99. See also Paul Johnston, *Success While Others Fail: Social Movement Unionism and the Public Workplace* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994) and Linda Blum, *Between Feminism and Labor: The Significance of the Comparable Worth Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

1980s, union representation peaked at close to two-fifths of the public sector workforce, a proportion that has held fairly steady ever since.¹⁰ Labor's new public sector millions were a mixed group racially and ethnically. The majority of teachers and clericals were white (using the census definition of the term). However, by the mid-1970s, clerical work had also replaced household employment as the largest occupational category for African American and other nonwhite women.¹¹ By 1985 women constituted a majority (or close to it) of the largest employee associations and unions that had emerged in the public sector, including the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the National Education Association, and the American Federation of Teachers.¹²

Indeed, in the 1970s, spurred in part by the new feminism, women joined unions in both the public and private sectors at a rapid rate. Close to 2 million new women members signed up during the decade, with the number of women represented by unions rising steadily to over 7 million by 1983.¹³ As a result, the percentage of union members who were female jumped as well, from 23 percent in 1970 to 33 percent in 1983. These patterns have persisted into the present: the majority of new union members continue to be female, with women of color the fastest-growing group.¹⁴ By 2004 women comprised 42 percent of union members, and one-fourth of all union members self-identified as black, Asian, or Hispanic/Latino.¹⁵ The trend inspired the *New Labor Forum* to ask in a 2001 symposium, "The End of Whiteness? Reflections on a Demographic Landmark" (a title, I might add, that reflected only

10. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "News: Union Members in 2004" (Washington, DC: GPO, January 27, 2005), table 3.

11. U.S. Department of Labor, Employment Standards Administration, Women's Bureau, *Minority Women Workers: A Statistical Overview* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1977), table 8.

12. Dorothy Sue Cobble, "Remaking Unions for the New Majority," in *Women and Unions: Forging a Partnership*, ed. Dorothy Sue Cobble (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), table 1, p. 11.

13. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Women in the Labor Force: A Databook*, Report 973 (Washington, DC: GPO, February 2004), table 34. See also the January issues of various years of the U.S. Department of Labor's *Employment and Earnings*. The number of women union members jumped in the late 1960s when the department began including "employee associations" in their calculations. See Richard B. Freeman, "Spurts in Union Growth: Defining Moments and Social Processes," in *The Defining Moment: The Great Depression and the American Economy in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Michael D. Bordo, Claudia Goldin, and Eugene N. White (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 265–95, for the reliability of union membership figures and the variation depending on which data set is being used.

14. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Women in the Labor Force*, table 34, and Kate Bronfenbrenner, "Organizing Women: The Nature and Process of Union Organizing Efforts among U.S. Women Workers since the Mid-1990s" (paper presented at the Cornell ILR Conference on Women and Unions, Ithaca, NY, November 22, 2003). Her figures show that union win rates were higher among women than men in the 1980s and 1990s, and highest in occupations disproportionately filled by women of color.

15. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "News: Union Members in 2004," author calculations from table 1.

part of the demographic shift), what does it mean that “for the first time in U.S. history, organized labor is no longer majority white and male?”¹⁶

Much of the collective organizing among women in the 1970s also does not show up in union membership data or in the official strike statistics. Many of the new working women’s organizations relied on “below the radar” pressure tactics such as informal work actions, lawsuits, public shaming, and community-based protest. Few sought or secured collective bargaining contracts with employers (the current defining measure of a union), and fewer still desired affiliation with the AFL-CIO. As Robin Kelley warns us about African American protest, we need to broaden our definition of the labor movement and of concerted activity if we want to measure working-class activism.¹⁷

For example, local organizations of household employees—inspired by the civil rights and poor people’s movements—began forming in the late 1960s. In 1971 some six hundred mostly black and middle-aged women gathered for the first national conference of household employees, sponsored by the National Committee for Household Employees. Under the banner of “pay, protection, and professionalism,” they applauded enthusiastically as Brooklyn congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, former labor lobbyist and U.S. Women’s Bureau director Esther Peterson, and Michigan congressman John Conyers spoke of a new day for domestics. Although that “new day” did not dawn as brightly as many hoped, by the end of the 1970s the movement claimed a number of victories. In 1974 domestic workers were finally added to the Fair Labor Standards Act, and during the decade a majority of states amended their statutes to include household employees in minimum wage, unemployment insurance, and workers’ compensation coverage. Locally, domestic worker unions, such as those led by Dorothy Bolden in Atlanta and Mary Upshaw McClendon in Detroit, had helped raise wages and transform the demeaning rituals of maid-mistress interaction by instigating training programs and worker-run employment agencies, and by sponsoring such high-profile events as Atlanta’s “Maid’s Honor Day,” a well-attended annual affair honoring, in Bolden’s words, “those who toil in the home without recognition . . . for their professional skills, great common knowledge,” and their ability to “mastermind two households.”¹⁸

16. David Roediger, with Susan Porter Benson, Fernando E. Gapsin, Ajamu Dillahunt, and Katie Quan, “The End of Whiteness? Reflections on a Demographic Landmark,” *New Labor Forum* 8 (spring–summer 2001): 49–63.

17. Robin Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *Journal of American History* 80 (1993): 75–112.

18. Quotes from “History,” n.d., Box 1628, Folder 97 and “National Domestic Workers of America,” pamphlet, n.d. (c. 1975), 9, Box 1628, Folder 102, both in National Domestic Workers Union Records, 1965–1979, Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta. For more detail on the domestic worker movement of the 1970s, see Dorothy Sue Cobble, “A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm: Workplace Feminism and the Transformation of Women’s Service Jobs in the 1970s,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 56 (1999): 23–44; and Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 195–200.

As domestic functions once performed by individual women in the home shifted into the commercial realm, African American, Hispanic, and other ethnic minority women moved into these new “public household” jobs as hotel maids, nurses aides, janitors, day care, and kitchen workers.¹⁹ In the 1980s and 1990s they and their coworkers built strong unions in these “domestic” occupations. Indeed, some of the most important union breakthroughs in the last quarter century occurred precisely among these groups. In the 1980s, unionism plummeted in construction, transportation, and manufacturing. But by the end of the decade, unionization among the hospitality workforce in Las Vegas and other cities moved upward with leadership for the first time coming from maids and other “back-of-the-house” occupations.²⁰ Home-care workers were on the march as well. By the end of the 1990s, some 100,000 home-care workers, predominantly black and Latina women, had signed up in California alone; flourishing union locals also existed in Chicago, New York, New Orleans, and other cities.²¹

Other labor organizations emerged in the 1970s in occupations dominated by nonminority women. In 1972 female flight attendants took matters into their own hands, forming independent unions and the first all-female national organization of flight attendants, Stewardesses for Women’s Rights. In partnership with middle-class feminists, including some women in airline supervisory positions, flight attendants, like the household employees, relied as much on lobbying, publicity, lawsuits, and other pressure tactics as on strikes and collective bargaining to achieve their goals of higher pay, promotions, and ending “sexploitation.”²²

Clerical workers, one-third of all working women in the 1970s, created 9to5, another working women’s association that had considerable impact without ever signing a collective bargaining agreement. Launched in 1973, 9to5 grew quickly from its origins as a luncheon gripe session for Harvard secretaries to a national organization with thousands of members and local chapters across the country. Office-worker groups used lawsuits, petitions, “informational conga lines,” “worst boss contests,” and other creative stunts to draw attention to the plight of secretaries. Their office-worker “Bill of Rights,” and their campaign for “Raises Not Roses” (later changed to “Raises and Roses”), instigated a public debate over the working conditions of clericals and the

19. Stuart H. Garfinkle, “Occupations of Women and Black Workers, 1962–1974,” *Monthly Labor Review* 98 (1975): 27, 31; Mary Romero, “Household Workers,” in *The Reader’s Companion to U.S. Women’s History*, ed. Wilma Mankiller, Gwendolyn Mink, Marysa Navarro, Barbara Smith, and Gloria Steinem (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 260–63.

20. Dorothy Sue Cobble and Michael Merrill, “Collective Bargaining in the Hospitality Sector,” in *Contemporary Collective Bargaining in the Private Sector*, ed. Paula Voos (Madison, WI: IRRRA, 1994), 285–302; Sara Mosle, “How the Maids Fought Back,” *New Yorker*, February 26, March 4, 1996.

21. Dorothy Sue Cobble, “The Prospects for Unionism in a Service Society,” in *Working in a Service Society*, ed. Cameron McDonald and Carmen Sirianni (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 333–58; Linda Delp and Katie Quan, “Homecare Worker Organizing in California: An Analysis of a Successful Strategy,” *Labor Studies Journal* 27 (2002): 1–23.

22. For more on the organizing among flight attendants, see Cobble, *Other Women’s Movement*, chaps. 3 and 8, esp. 207–11.

gendered norms governing boss-secretary interactions. 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 (with Dolly Parton, Jane Fonda, and Lily Tomlin), and TV show. As *Business Week* noted in 1980, 9to5 also had changed public “notions of fairness,” of “what a boss may fairly ask an office worker to do.”²³

In *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (2004), I traced the movement into the 1980s, recounting how the pay equity concerns of 9to5 gathered momentum among public and university clericals. I also laid out the more downbeat tale of what happened when 9to5 decided to “go union.” In 1975, 9to5 in Boston had formed a sister organization, Local 925, which morphed into SEIU District 925, an autonomous national division of the International. Its first executive director, Jackie Ruff, a Radcliffe grad who in 1972 had organized her Chicago newspaper production coworkers, called the new division a “partnership between the women’s movement and the trade union movement.” In 1981 District 925 inaugurated a national campaign to organize clericals in insurance and banking. But employers fought back with every available weapon. “We never knew what hit us,” 9to5 founder Karen Nussbaum remembered some fifteen years later. “We got smashed over and over. These businesses had not traditionally been unionized, and they were damned if they were going to be the first ones in the new wave.” The banking industry changed some of its most egregious discriminatory pay and promotion policies during the decade, but union density in that sector actually fell. The insurance industry was equally invincible. After a hard-fought organizing and contract victory for District 925 at the Syracuse offices of Equitable Life, a “tiger by the toenail” situation according to one organizer, the company quickly closed its Syracuse branch, leaving its unionized workers in the lurch. District 925 and the other unions organizing clericals in the 1980s had more success outside insurance and banking, among college and university support staff, head-start employees, and municipal clerks. By the end of the 1980s, office-worker unionization reached 16 percent, comparable to the workforce as a whole (17 percent), but insurance and banking remained resolutely union-free.²⁴

In February 2004, I listened as 9to5/925 veterans told their stories at an incredible gathering organized in part to videotape their personal reminiscences for the

23. *Ibid.*, 211–15. For quote, see “Rebellion behind the Typewriter,” *Business Week*, April 28, 1980, 86–90.

24. Ruff quoted in “A Union for the Nation’s 20 Million Clericals,” *9 to 5 News* 40, no. 9 (1981); Nussbaum quoted in Dorothy Sue Cobble and Alice Kessler-Harris, “Interview with Karen Nussbaum,” in *Talking Leadership: Conversations with Powerful Women*, ed. Mary S. Hartman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 145. For the “Tiger” quote, see Cheryl Schaffer, “My Entry into 925 History,” in *Our Entries into 925 (9to5) History*, February 6, 2004, n.p. For further details, see Cobble, *Other Women’s Movement*, 216, 221–22; and SEIU District 925 Collection Records, 1973–2004, Walter Reuther Archives, Wayne State University, Detroit.

Walter Reuther Library's new SEIU District 925 Collection, and I realized I had not fully understood the meaning of 925 nor adequately assessed its legacy. The 925 story did not end in the 1980s with its failed foray against the citadels of capitalism. I had underestimated how profoundly the movement had changed the lives of its participants and how they, in turn, remained part of organized labor in the 1980s, infusing their distinctive feminist values and their participatory "leadership-development model" of organizing into its culture and practices.²⁵ They had not brought Bank of America to its knees as planned nor had they inspired a new upsurge of clerical unionism comparable to the factory unionism of the 1930s. But they, like those who agitated for industrial unionism long before it became a reality, were laying the groundwork for the eventual emergence of a new more inclusive and transformed unionism, capable of organizing the service and white-collar workforce.²⁶

SEIU in particular benefited from this migration of clerical movement refugees. Already an organization in motion, churning in the wake of public sector unionizing, the new feminist influx sustained and deepened the union's momentum. In the 1980s and 1990s, led by a new group of veteran organizers, SEIU continued to reach out to state and local government workers. It also achieved surprising success in organizing health care and other service occupations. In 1981, SEIU had approximately 700,000 members. Today, with 1.8 million members, it is the federation's largest, and still its fastest-growing, union. Although the top leadership, still majority male, has sometimes downplayed the importance of diversity and the existence of multiple axes of inequality in the name of "unity," the SEIU does consistently trumpet pay equity, work-family reform, gay rights, and an end to all forms of workplace discrimination as priorities. Not surprisingly, given its organizing culture, it is also the principal force seeking structural reforms within the AFL-CIO, even to the point of threatening to disaffiliate from the AFL-CIO unless the federation takes bolder steps to organize the retail and service sectors as it once organized mass production.²⁷

25. The two-day conference, billed as the 925 Legacy Weekend, was held February 6–7, 2004, at the George Meany Center for Labor Studies, Silver Spring, Maryland. Videotapes from the conference are being added to the SEIU District 925 Collection. For a Web exhibit from the new collection, see www.reuther.wayne.edu/925/Raises.html.

26. As Nussbaum commented on her Legacy Weekend conference form, "We were right about women—more women than men have organized every year for the last 25 years, but we were off on the jurisdiction—private sector clericals are still inert" (Karen Nussbaum, "My Entry into 925 History," in *Our Entries into 925 (925) History*, n.p.).

27. On SEIU's organizing culture and its record on issues affecting minorities and women, see Marion Crain, "Gender and Union Organizing," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 47 (1994): 227–48; Dorothy Sue Cobble and Monica Bielski Michal, "On the Edge of Equality? Working Women and the U.S. Labour Movement," in *Gender, Diversity, and Trade Unions: International Perspectives*, ed. Fiona Colgan and Sue Ledwith (London: Routledge, 2002), 232–56. For a careful account of the debate within the AFL-CIO over institutional reform, see Richard Hurd, "The Failure of Organizing, the New Unity Partnership, and the Future of the Labor Movement," *Working USA* 8 (September 2004), 5–25. For more on the SEIU currently, see Matt Bai, "The New Boss," *New York Times Magazine*, January 30, 2005, sec. 6. Recent developments can be followed at www.unitetowin.org and at www.changetowin.org.

But the feminization of labor and of the working class is not the only demographic revolution with its roots in the 1970s. After the passage of the 1965 Hart-Celler Immigration Act, immigration, both legal and illegal, increased markedly in the 1970s, and for the first time, non-European groups, primarily from Latin America and Asia, predominated.²⁸ Immigrants had made their way into the United Farm Workers and a handful of other unions in the 1960s and 1970s, but in the 1970s their influence remained minimal. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, as their numbers rose sharply, approaching the scale of the great pre-World War I migrations, they too began to transform organized labor, particularly in areas where they were concentrated. By the mid-1980s, UFW-influenced organizers in SEIU, for example, launched the Justice for Janitors campaign, the most visible and successful of the national efforts to rebuild in sectors where immigrants work.²⁹ And in California, the state with the highest proportion of immigrants, union membership figures actually turned upward in the 1990s, bucking the national downward trend, led in part by gains among immigrants from Mexico and Central America in drywall, hotel and restaurant, and janitorial services.³⁰ In Los Angeles, where a third of the population is Latino/a, the rebuilding of unions has translated into enhanced political power for the working class and moved municipal government to the left.³¹

Although some within SEIU and other unions have been resistant, the efforts to recognize the distinctive representational needs of this new immigrant constituency appear to be gaining ground. Taking a page from the “new” social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, some are forging a new more inclusive multi-identity class politics that links labor rights and civil rights. In February 2000, SEIU and HERE (now UNITE HERE, the newly merged garment-hospitality union) helped reverse labor’s stance on immigration policy, putting the AFL-CIO on record in favor of amnesty for undocumented immigrants. The 2003 Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride, chaired nationally by Maria Elena Durazo, then the executive officer of the twelve-thousand-member HERE Local 11 in Los Angeles, consciously drew on older civil rights tra-

28. Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 258–71, esp. 263; U.S. Congress, Congressional Budget Office, *A Description of the Immigrant Population* (Washington, DC: GPO, November 2004), 2–7.

29. Paul Johnston, “Organize for What?” in *Rekindling the Movement: Labor’s Quest for Relevance in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Lowell Turner, Harry Katz, and Richard Hurd (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 49.

30. U.S. Congress, *Description of the Immigrant Population*, table 7; Ruth Milkman and Daisy Rooks, “California Union Membership: A Turn-of-the-Century Portrait,” *State of California Labor* 1 (November 2003), 3–37; Ruth Milkman and Kent Wong, “Organizing Immigrant Workers: Case Studies from Southern California,” in Turner, Katz, and Hurd, *Rekindling the Movement*, 99–128.

31. Harold Meyerson, “California’s Progressive Mosaic,” *American Prospect*, June 18, 2002, 17–23, and Harold Meyerson, “Immigrant Nation: How Immigrants Are Changing California—and American—Politics,” *American Prospect On-line*, October 3, 2003, www.prospect.org (accessed January 20, 2005).

ditions to build bridges between African American and immigrant workers and to inaugurate a new labor-backed movement for immigrant citizenship rights.³²

Just as significantly, a labor movement outside the bounds of the collective bargaining paradigm continues to expand. Focused on issues ranging from wage and hour enforcement to reuniting cross-border families, over a hundred immigrant worker centers and membership-based associations now exist. Relying on litigation, negative publicity, and direct action organizing, some have chalked up impressive political and economic gains. Members of the Long Island Workplace Project, for example, including many undocumented immigrants, lobbied the Unpaid Wages Prohibition Act past a Republican-dominated legislature and New York's Republican governor.³³

But will labor's new demographic majority become the basis for a new progressive political majority? Certainly, if only union members or the low-income voted, the political landscape would be starkly different.³⁴ In the twenty-first century, however, as in the past, political majorities will have to be cross-class as well as mixed gender and race. Much still depends then on crafting a politics that can join the old and the new working classes, that can acknowledge the realities of the "forgotten [white] man," "the Reagan Democrats" of the future, without losing sight of the distinctive problems of the other segments of the working class.³⁵ Of equal importance, if a new progressive coalition is to be constituted, the working class is not the only group that will need to listen as well as lead.³⁶ As Lillian Rubin recently pointed out in a review

32. Julie R. Watts, *Immigration Policy and the Challenge of Globalization: Unions and Employers in Unlikely Alliance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 145–68; Sergio Bustos, "Demonstrators Roll on Immigrant Freedom Ride," *USA Today*, September 23, 2003. On Durazo, see www.labourcouncil.ca/MEDbiocurrent.pdf (accessed January 20, 2005).

33. For the national overview, see Janice Fine, "The National Immigrant Worker Center Study," talk given at the Rutgers University Labor Center, February 24, 2004; on the Long Island Workplace Project, see "Organizing Low-Wage Immigrants: The Workplace Project: An Interview with Jennifer Gordon," *Working USA* 5 (June 2001): 87–102; and Jennifer Gordon, *Suburban Sweatshops: The Fight for Immigrant Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

34. For a breakdown of voting in the 2004 election by sex, race, and ethnicity, see Marjorie Connelly, "Election 2004: How Americans Voted: A Political Portrait," *New York Times*, November 7, 2004. On the continuing union advantage for the Democrats, see Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers, *America's Forgotten Majority: Why the White Working Class Still Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 32.

35. As Teixeira and Rogers show in *America's Forgotten Majority*, the white working class as a whole moved away from the Democrats after 1964, but the political realignment among men was considerably greater than among women. Clinton recaptured much of the white working-class female vote in 1992, widening the gender gap in the working class to 8.4 percentage points (table 2.2, p. 32).

36. In 1974 Andrew Levison insisted the working-class majority was not conservative. Rather, it had distinct working-class values and a distinct set of economic needs that were misunderstood and at times belittled. From the workers' perspective, the New Deal had abandoned them; they had not left it. Levison and others believe the same is true today, with the Left blaming those who disagree with its analysis rather than asking what might be missing. See, for example, Andrew Levison, "Who Lost the Working Class?" *Nation*, May 14, 2001; and Andrew Levison, "Class and Warfare: Democrats and the Rhetoric of Patriotism," *American Prospect*, September 1, 2003.

of *What's the Matter with Kansas?*: “There’s a kind of contempt underlying the passion of Frank’s words.” “Why Don’t They Listen to Us?” could be rephrased: “Why Don’t We Listen to Them?”³⁷ Understanding the dramatic social and cultural transformations of the “long 1970s” should position us to better decipher what all workers are saying and how we might go about creating a new politics that captures their allegiance. ■

37. Lillian Rubin, “Why Don’t They Listen to Us? Speaking to the Working Class,” *Dissent Magazine* 52 (2005): 79.

I appreciate the agonies of the working class, and why white blue-collar Democrats defected to the Republican Party, better than before. National union leaders' complacency, the government's focus on fighting inflation instead of unemployment under Ford and Carter, and unease about racial, gender, and social change drove white workers to support populists like George Wallace and genteel conservatives like Ronald Reagan. I wish Cowie had included more material on Afri Strong history of the 1970s.Â He makes a strong argument that the 1970s were a period of transition between the New Deal and the current one â€œ New Gilded Age? â€œ with a lot of emphasis on culture, presidential politics (and organized labor's role), and white blue-collar workers (union and not).