Working Detroit

Steve Babson, David Elsila, John Revitte, Ron Alpern

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Oh how I longed for a little money of my own! Just enough to meet a friend for lunch occasionally without having to appeal to Charley. But, alas, Charley was right. I had never earned a dollar in my life... "You're a mother [said Charley]. That's your job. You don't have to earn money, too." It was all so beautifully simple! "Yes, boss," I murmured obediently, frankly relieved.

"The Sandwich Maker," Ladies Home Journal, April, 1959

These were, supposedly, the "real," deep-down longings of every woman in the 1950s: to quit her job if she had one, renounce career plans if she had any, and devote her every waking moment to children, home, and husband. There was no other "natural" activity for a woman to pursue.

Gone were the Rosie the Riveter images of women factory workers that prevailed during World War II. Gone also were the strong-willed and venturesome women featured in the film and magazine fiction of the previous decades. In 1939, the majority of heroines who appeared in publications like Ladies Home Journal were career women; twenty years later, when writer Betty Friedan surveyed the fiction in these same magazines, she found only one heroine in 100 who even had a job.

The end of the war marked the turning point in this shifting image of American women. The preceding fifteen years of Depression and World War had put a tremendous strain on traditional family roles: perpetual uncertainty about the future discouraged early marriages and large families; mass unemployment hit men's occupations harder than women's; and wartime production drew women by the millions into previously all-male factory occupations.

For men who felt threatened by these multiple violations of traditional roles,
the post-war economic boom buoyed their conviction they should now be the sole breadwinner. For women anxious to start a family, this same economic boom was occasion for a post-war "baby boom." And for many working-class couples, "the wife at home" became a mark of distinction, a measure of progress towards middle-class standards of security and childrearing.

An unrelenting barrage of advertisements, movies, TV shows, and magazine stories celebrated the virtues of these traditional family roles. Politics was "Really a Man's World" as one 1949 story reminded women. "Have Babies While You're Young," advised another. Women could hope for nothing better than "Careers At Home." "Should I Stop Work When We Marry?" asked the anguished heroine in one story. Of course, said doctors, psychologists, and many husbands. Otherwise, the working wife not only "wasted" the job a male breadwinner might need, but also violated her femininity. "I Denied My Sex," one maverick heroine confessed in a 1954 True Romance story.

Despite the intensive campaign to shutter women inside their homes, a steadily growing proportion of women joined the paid labor force. In 1950, just five years after the post-war layoffs in the city's war industries, 29 percent of Detroit-area females 14 years or older worked for wages outside the home, slightly higher than the proportion of women wage earners in 1940. By the end of the 1950s, the proportion of women earning wages had climbed to 33 percent.

Many of these women worked in service-sector jobs and professions that paralleled their homemaker role as custodians to men and children. They were nurses, secretaries, hotel maids, housekeepers, waitresses, teachers, and laundry workers. They worked when they were young and single, when their children had grown up and left home, or when they were divorced, widowed, or separated from husbands.

During the childrearing years, however, work outside the home was supposed to stop. Only the "bad" mother, it was argued, would "abandon" her children to become a wage earner.

Some working women rejected the burden of guilt these middle-class norms imposed. "I didn't feel bad, I felt mad," recalled Wanita Allen, a young black woman who hired into Ford's River Rouge foundry during World War II. Like most women war workers, she was laid off in 1945. And like many women who worked to support themselves and their families, Allen—a divorcée with a young daughter—jumped at the chance to rehire into Ford when post-war production of cars began.

"I felt mad because I knew they were lying.... You'd hardly ever find anybody [who was working] that would just neglect their children." She had little choice but to work in any case. It was either find a job, go on welfare, or "throw" herself on the mercies of the first available man. Ford, moreover, paid high wages. "After a taste of a decent job," recalled Allen, a former domestic servant, "to go back to housework [was] just almost impossible."

Sometimes, working in an all-male factory environment could be nearly as difficult. After Lavina Beber, mother of five, hired into Dodge Main in 1951, management put her in the previously all-male radiator department, where she worked as an assembler. Initially, as she remembered it, "the fellahs wouldn't even as much as say hello to me." But Beber found that women could hold their own in the plant and win the respect of their male co-workers. "I learned to build that radiator from the frame on up, and I'd go over and I'd tell the fellahs, 'hey, go take a smoke break.' And then on their breaks, they would come over and help me... We worked together."

Most men and women, however, did not work together in Detroit's auto plants. As in the pre-war years, the majority of the 44,000 Detroit-area women working in the auto industry in 1950 labored in segregated departments off the main assembly line—in "female ghettos" as Edie Van Horn described the electrical wiring room and the upholstery-sewing departments at Dodge Main. "We were paid less on comparable work than other jobs in the plant," remembered Van Horn, Chief...
Steward for 16 years after hiring into the wire room in 1946. “And we were on separate seniority lists. The whole struggle to wipe out separate seniority lists, we went through that in the wire room.”

It was a slow, piecemeal struggle. In the late 1940s, women on sex-segregated jobs had seniority rights only for their particular job classification, so when the company periodically cut back production, women threatened with layoff had no way of “bumping” into the jobs of less-senior men. But by the mid-1950s, Dodge Local 3 had successfully pressured the company to widen bumping rights, moving first to department-wide, then to plant-wide, and finally to division-wide seniority.

In 1958, when Chrysler closed the electrical-wiring room at Dodge and transferred production to non-union contractors, the 1,000 women in that department had the right to bump, according to seniority, into jobs anywhere in the plant. Even so, the company sought to prevent such wholesale transfers by encouraging the women to sign voluntary layoff slips and wait until “jobs they could do” opened up. “We knew that meant they’d never get back in,” remembered Van Horn. “So the union fought that and... more than half [of the wire-room women] were able to transfer into the pressed steel department, the motor line, and final assembly, where women had never worked in large numbers before.”

For most of these blue-collar women, the union was a welcome source of protection and support against the harsh conditions prevailing in Detroit’s factories. For women in white-collar clerical and service jobs, on the other hand, such pro-union sentiments were slow to develop.

At Michigan Bell, unions had little legitimacy before 1940. “The company had indoctrinated us,” union activist Helen Berthelot later said of herself and the thousands of other women working for the phone company. “'Nice girls' didn't belong to unions. We were afraid of them.”

Working conditions were characterized by low wages and harsh supervision—operators could not talk to their co-workers, slouch in their chairs, or use anything but stock phrases in responding to customers. Despite this, women

Below: Picketing in Detroit during the 1947 phone strike.

Inset: At the time of the walkout, there were some 8,000 Detroit-area women working for the phone company.
operators balked at joining either the AFL or the CIO in the 1930s. After the Wagner Act forced Ma Bell to discontinue its company-controlled union in 1937, Detroit’s phone workers wanted only to affiliate with the independent National Federation of Telephone Workers (NFTW).

Berthelot, a former officer in the company-sponsored union, later recollected a ten-year evolution from the passive lobbying of the NFTW to the active militancy of the union she helped build in Michigan. “Little by little, we began to realize that we were not getting the amount of money that we should be getting….and management wouldn’t listen to us. Other unions were having contract negotiations. They were getting increases and we weren’t.”

In 1947, the mettle of these budding trade unionists was tested in a massive, nation-wide strike of phone workers. Some clerical workers and operators crossed the NFTW’s picket lines in Michigan, but most women stuck with the union through 44 days of mass picketing, confrontations with the police, and company firings of 33 Michigan women—all eventually reinstated by union pressure.

“That is what built the union,” Berthelot remembered. “We didn’t get much of a wage increase, and we didn’t get half the things we asked for, but we proved that we could go on strike, we could stay out on strike, we could negotiate.” Within two years, the NFTW would merge with the CIO’s Telephone Workers’ Organizing Committee and rechristen itself the Communications Workers of America (CWA).

Not every strike ended in victory, and not every working woman joined a union. Among those who did, few became leaders. Some who held back were the “nice girls” Helen Berthelot had once been herself. Others, “by the time they became active in the union, they were married and had children,” she recalled. Since Michigan Bell did not provide maternity leave or childcare facilities, working mothers often dropped out of their jobs and the union simultaneously. Fran Smith, the most prominent exception to this rule, had time to serve as a local-union president in Detroit and a member of CWA’s national Executive Board in Washington primarily because her husband—also a CWA activist—took a large share of the responsibility for raising their two daughters.

Most wives could not count on such support from their husbands. When these women re-entered the paid labor force, they had to take jobs they could easily leave and take up again between babies. Restaurants, offices, stores, hospitals, and wealthy households all relied on this constant turnover of underpaid women, and unions found it difficult to organize the small-scale workplaces where many of these women worked.

In the winter of 1946–1947, a seven-week strike of 1,000 women and men in Detroit’s biggest restaurant chains did win pay raises and higher minimum-wage levels. But the non-union “drive-in” restaurants opening in Detroit’s outskirts paid their cooks and waitresses less than half the 60¢-an-hour the Hotel and Restaurant union had won in Detroit’s downtown eateries.

Organizing the drive-ins proved to be more than the union movement could handle. When “carhops” and kitchen workers at Richard’s Drive In, Greenfield and 8 Mile (site 70), struck for wage increases and union recognition in the summer of 1951, management had little trouble finding strikebreakers to replace them. When waitress-union leader Myra (Komaroff) Wolfgang surrounded the drive-in with upwards of 50 picketers, Richard’s opened its windows to young “hot-rodders” and toughs it had previously turned away. When fights broke out on the picket line, the company won a court order limiting the number of pickets to 15.

The strike ended after five months when a Circuit Judge declared all picketing at the site illegal and jailed four union organizers for contempt of court. Among those sentenced to jail terms of 15 to 30 days were organizer Max Gazen, a former strike-kitchen chef during the UAW’s 1937 sitdowns, and Pearl Craig, a carhop, mother of a four-year-old child, and picket-line captain for the fast-food workers. After the Richard’s strike collapsed, all but a handful of the fast-food restaurants in Detroit remained non-union.

The more than 20,000 women working in Detroit-area schools in the 1950s also had no union contract. School Boards could hold teacher salaries well below blue-collar wages, could distribute promotions to favored friends, and could cram upwards of 50 students into each classroom. Effective opposition to these practices came only from the American Federation of Teachers. The Detroit Federation was not yet strong enough to win formal recognition or collective-bargaining rights, but it could mobilize a growing number of teachers to apply pressure on the city’s School Board. Their first major success came in 1947, when a majority of the school system’s 7,000 teachers voted their intention to strike over salaries. Stunned by the appearance of this budding trade unionism among white-collar professionals, the Board promptly granted long-awaited raises.

That same year in suburban East Detroit, teachers actually carried through on their strike threat when the School Board refused to bargain. After a three-week walkout, the city capit-ulated and agreed to raise salaries by $400 a year. To cap their victory in this first public-school strike in Michigan's history, the triumphant teachers suc-cessfully campaigned in the next election to replace two anti-union school-board members with union-endorsed candi-dates. Community support at the polls and on the picket lines didn't surprise union President Kathryn Rothenberger. "Most of [the town's] parents work in factories in Detroit. They know we've got to have money to live. The Board is just trying to protect the industries out here from higher taxes."

But what East Detroit's teachers won on the picket lines, they eventually lost in the state capitol. Following the suc-cessful strike, Michigan's legislature passed the Hutchinson Act, outlawing future public-employee strikes and re-quiring the immediate firing of any union supporter who honored a picket line. There were no provisions in the Act requiring public employers to negotiate with unions—or to even acknowledge their existence.

By law, by custom, and occasionally by force, women who worked for wages were expected to shun and avoid the labor movement. Working outside the home was either supposed to be a brief sojourn for single girls, or a way of temporarily supplementing the hus-band's earnings. Many male trade unionists also accepted these confining stereotypes, and concluded that women workers were "impossible" to organize. For all these reasons, only 9 percent of the Detroit-area women surveyed by the University of Michigan in 1959 belonged to a union. Among men, 47 percent identified themselves as union members.

The numbers would have been still more lopsided if it had not been for the crusading zeal of a few women trade unionists. For this activist minority, unions were a calling. "I was not a cog or a robot," remembered UAW Chief Steward Pat Sexton, who worked at Dodge Main for 3½ years on the uphol-stery trim line. "On the contrary, I had a purpose, a very human one at that."

Mary Ellen Riordan, President of the Detroit Federation of Teachers at a time when the union had little legal backing, remembered finding that same sense of purpose in the Papal Encyclicals she studied at Marygrove College. "Rerum Novarum in particular talked about the dignity of people, the rights of human beings to the fruits of their own labor.... That impressed me just tremendously."

For Phoebe Nowaczewski, a mother of two and the first woman gear cutter trained at Chrysler, union activism sprang from down-to-earth considera-tions. "I got active because I figured, well, I have to work for a living, and I better start finding out what my rights are. So I started attending the union meetings.... I just sat in the back with my little ones." In Detroit's union halls, she was one of the few working mothers sitting anywhere. It did not take long for her to move to the front of the hall. In 1952, the 3800 men at Chrysler's gear and axle factory voted Nowaczewski—one of only 33 women working in the plant—onto UAW Local 961's Executive Board.

A local-union officer in one plant, a Chief Steward in another, a strike leader in a suburban school district, a union organizer in the phone company. Small beginnings. Yet these union women, as UAW activist Olga Madar observed years later, "were the first women's libbers in [post-war] Michigan."