For All White-Collar Workers

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CONCLUSION

Where Labor Lost, and Why

Over the past ten years, store managers have been experimenting with even less labor-intensive forms of retailing. Beginning in the 1990s, managers at several stores, including large downscale chain stores like Wal-Mart, K-Mart, and Home Depot, began installing automated checkout counters in addition to the more traditional staffed checkout counters. Customers at these stores can now take their goods to the automated counters, scan their goods, either swipe a credit card or feed bills into the machine, place their goods in a plastic bag, and leave the store. If all goes well, it is now possible to go shopping without having any contact at all with any store workers, except perhaps for the security guards at the door. Luckily for store workers, to date these experiments have been generally unsuccessful. Frequent breakdowns and customer inexperience make the machines so inefficient that managers at a few stores have given up automated checkout counters as a complete loss. So far, according to one source, store managers have been unable to use the automated checkout machines to replace any workers, since workers must be on hand to replace the machines at a moment’s notice. Despite that, the number of machines is increasing, going from present in 6 percent of all stores in 1999 to present in 19 percent by 2002.¹

The labor movement’s response has been relatively muted. In September of 2002, a reporter asked John Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO, about the emergence of automated checkout machines. Sweeney’s response was telling:

Sweeney . . . chuckled as he recounted the frantic phone message he received from a concerned neighbor. “Have you seen those self-checkout machines in our grocery store?” she asked the labor leader, whose federation represents 13 million union workers . . . . Sweeney’s eyes widened for effect as he quoted the caller: “What’s going to happen to all those workers?” Sweeney—who said he has not used the self-scan giz-
mos that popped up in his store last month—put his neighbor’s mind at ease. “The union is very much aware of this,” Sweeney said, and there is a general understanding “that no workers will be displaced as a result.”

In his confidence, Sweeney left out a few points, including the fact that many stores using the automated checkout machines are not unionized, making it difficult to imagine how he could guarantee that no workers would be displaced. He also forgot his history, not remembering that CIO leaders had made similar assurances when self-service emerged fifty years ago. With such a lack of attention and concern, it is difficult to imagine that the labor movement will reemerge in the retail sector in the near future.

The American labor movement, it should be noted, continues to be relatively strong in certain sectors, even some white-collar sectors such as government jobs (where many workers are forbidden to strike, making these unions rather ineffective). But for white-collar workers in the private sector, retailing included, the American labor movement is virtually nonexistent, with only a tiny fraction of these employees organized into unions. For a moment during the Great Depression, it looked as though the American labor movement could have been a far more powerful and representative movement, one that had unions that represented large numbers of retail workers. For blue-collar workers in the factories, the sit-down strikes led to permanent and relatively powerful unions. But in retailing, the parallel sit-down strikes led to no such result.

This study has examined both why retail workers’ unions succeeded initially and why these unions failed in the long run. Their successes were remarkable. New York City’s department store workers formed unions at the largest retail stores in the world; they won the eight-hour day, significant pay raises, and public acclaim; and they forced the CIO, dominated though it was by notions of male blue-collar workers storming the factories, to set up a retail workers’ union.

The successes of these unions were inherently related to communism. Communists recognized that department store workers were, after all, part of the working class, that these men and women deserved support in their efforts to form unions. The Communists who organized these unions also deserve credit for their recognition that labor struggles had to be carried on in imaginative and nontraditional ways. A strike had to be dynamic and inventive; it had to take advantage of the surrounding environment, to challenge managerial control wherever possible, inside the store as well as outside. The men and women who organized New York City’s department store unions took
full advantage of these tactics. Whether at Union Square or on 34th Street, the Communists were remarkably successful at taking advantage of struggles going on around the stores. Finally, the Communists were both willing and able to create broad-based coalitions, especially in their use of cultural activities to create the Popular Front. These were important achievements for which they deserve credit.

It is important to note that Communists were responsible for these achievements, not the Communist party. In many respects, in fact, the Communist party almost limited the unions' successes. Gussie Reed's letter to Michelson, for instance, and the narrow interpretation of Communist policy that it represented, could have had major effects on the unions' future had Michelson not chosen to ignore Reed's instructions. In addition, and perhaps even more important, at the height of the attacks on the union in the early 1950s, the Communist leaders of the unions decided to follow Party policy and engage workers in a debate about American foreign policy and the Korean War, rather than focusing on the rise of self-service retailing and the massive numbers of layoffs. It should be noted, however, that there is little evidence that they lost department store workers' support due to their following of Russian policy in the 1940s and early 1950s, as other historians have claimed happened with Communists in other sectors of the labor movement. In fact, the moment it seemed possible that union leaders would wholly lose workers' support by following such policies, Communist union leaders split with the CP and adopted an anti-Communist line.

The Communist party was hardly the most important factor limiting the successes of Communists. There were other issues that the unions never successfully confronted, most important among them race and gender. The alliances the unions formed had extremely surprising racial limits. Had the unions been willing to ally with the “Don't Buy Where You Can't Work” campaigns, for instance, they might have found themselves part of an even more powerful movement, one that challenged understandings not only of class, but of the racial divide that continues to plague the labor movement in many industries. Instead, they ignored these movements, for the most part adopting a relatively conservative understanding of the importance of a labor union, which held that the union was designed to protect workers already employed, not to worry about who was being employed. As a result, racial segregation—whether in the city or in the stores—faced only a few fleeting challenges from the department store unions.

An equally serious limit of Communist leadership was the Communists’ fleeting commitment to women’s equality within the unions. While certainly
the leaders of the department store unions gave lip service to women’s rights and recognized that women workers could and should form unions, the fact remains that little effort was made to encourage women workers to take leadership roles in these unions, and women’s response to the cheesecake photographs in the union paper in the late 1940s indicates that they felt their roles within the union were limited in the extreme.

The ultimate failure of retail workers’ unions in America, however, was the result not of these limits of the unions’ leadership, important though those limits are, but rather of three interlocking historical developments. The first was the rise of anti-communism. Anti-communism led to the destruction of the coalitions that had served the unions so well in their early struggles. Just as important, it meant the destruction of the CIO’s retail workers’ union, the RWDSU. Anti-communism also gave employers a valuable weapon during strikes. It would severely weaken the unions, leaving them isolated and vulnerable. Closely linked to anti-communism, the rise of the middle class meant that the white-collar workers who had once played so important a role in the unions’ struggles had now disappeared into the suburbs or into developments like Parkchester and Stuyvesant Town, ceasing to accept that they had anything to do with unions or, indeed, with workers. The third of these developments was the transformation of American consumption, particularly the rise of self-service retailing. Once self-service retailing was introduced, stores could function with casual and easily replaceable labor, a difficult group of workers to organize. With stores that relied on this sort of labor, the collapse of the national union, and the disappearance of their allies, further union organizing in retail stores was nearly impossible.

It was the combination of these factors during the Hearn’s strike that meant the final blow against New York City’s department store unions. The government stepped in and declared that managers had a right to make profits through instituting self-service, and that unions had no right to interfere in that process through picket lines. This decision was momentous not only in its content, but also in its context. Certainly it was not unique; judges had issued similar injunctions during the unions’ very first strikes at Klein’s and Ohrbach’s. But with union leaders and members clinging to the hope that the coalition formed around liberal anti-communism would adequately replace the coalitions once formed around communism, the injunction during the Hearn’s strike took on a different meaning entirely. To violate the government’s order would have meant adopting a radical, not a liberal, response. And to do so while attempting to fend off accusations that their liberal anti-communism was a sham was nearly impossible. To the leaders of the union as well as to
Conclusion

their allies, anti-communism meant respect for the government’s rulings, even when those rulings were against workers’ interests. The strike ended in defeat, and with that defeat ended any chance of preventing the transformation of retail work.

The history of these retail workers’ unions must be integrated into our larger understandings of the history of the labor movement during the CIO era. Historians who use male blue-collar workers to represent the history of the CIO allow the roles of communism and anti-communism in American history to remain underanalyzed. Male blue-collar workers were critical both to the CIO’s success and to its representation throughout the union’s history, but historians have all too frequently allowed them to stand in for the entire CIO workforce, including the CIO’s advances in retailing only as a minor and peripheral anecdote. But the peripheral nature of unions in the retail field was itself a result of specific historical events. Without understanding these events, we fall far too easily into thinking that retail workers are fundamentally more difficult to organize than are workers in manufacturing or construction, or—even more tragically—we forget about the existence of retail workers’ unions altogether. To do so represents a dangerous historical fallacy. Retail workers could and did form powerful and lasting unions given the correct historical circumstances. For a moment in the 1930s those circumstances existed: workers found leaders with diverse political and tactical approaches, and with strong connections to other social movements. Managerial restructuring and the concurrent rise of anti-communism in the late 1940s and early 1950s brought this historical moment to an end, crippling the American labor movement in the process.

Now, at the turn of the twenty-first century, there are few hopeful signs for the future of the American labor movement in the retail industry. Certainly John Sweeney’s reported chuckle was not really warranted under the circumstances. In their 2003–4 strikes, the United Food and Commercial Workers took on the grocery industry in Southern California, and lost, as store managers used the threat of Wal-Mart openings and store closings to justify cutting benefits to a hesitant public. The UFCW’s defeat in the Southern California strike, the largest retail workers’ strike in American history, does not bode well for the future of the American labor movement. Until and unless union organizers figure out a way to recapture some of the dynamic radicalism and solidarity that characterized the 1930s labor movement, unions in American retailing—and indeed, in America as a whole—will remain ineffective, little more than fading shadows of the mass organizations they once were.