

## Introduction: Union Voices

---

*Glenn Adler and Doris Suarez*

### **I. Introduction**

The American labor movement faces serious challenges in the decade ahead which threaten the standing of trade unions as a vital force among American workers. Unions are on the defensive in a rapidly changing political and economic environment. Since the 1960s, industrial manufacturing, the historic base of unionism, has been radically transformed under the pressure of a new international division of labor. New forms of global competition, corporate restructuring, and technological innovation have undermined the traditional position of blue collar workers while employment has expanded in the largely unorganized service sector. Coupled with the anti-labor policies and prejudices of the past two national administrations, these conditions have contributed to a rollback of union strength and influence, reflected in steeply declining membership, and the erosion of workers' rights and living standards. At the same time, however, these problems contain within them the potential for new strategies to revitalize the labor movement and move forward.

The contours of the crisis of labor and directions for the future have been vigorously debated within the labor movement and the academic community. The available literature, however, is dominated by contributions from universities and policy statements from top union officials. Published perspectives from within the ranks of labor are less common. Yet shopfloor workers and local and national staff are daily confronted by the challenges to labor and are the source of many creative responses within the movement.

The eight articles in this volume were written by labor activists reflecting on their direct experiences. They produce original research on topics of immediate interest to their own situations

which nonetheless engages the broader concerns of the labor movement. Overall, the authors analyze today's workplace and workers, and trade union responses in this new milieu. The starting point in these essays is the changing domestic and international economy, and the directions these changes take under the control of management. Some chapters focus on the workplace and examine union initiatives to respond to different production methods and demands. The other chapters identify and discuss major social and political problems facing workers and their unions as a consequence of this changing economic environment.

The papers cluster around three central and interlocking themes which confront all workers and unions. Part One examines changing technology and work organization, especially its effect on health and safety, and worker displacement. Part Two analyzes the impact of the changing economy on workforce composition and the problem of responding to the needs of new work constituencies, especially among women and new immigrant groups. And, in Part Three, the question of developing new union practices, especially to promote alliances between unions and other social movements, nationally and internationally, is explored. In addition, the papers are linked together by the authors' reflections on their unions' efforts, successful and otherwise, to address the serious problems facing them. Some were closely involved in creative programs meant to arrest union decline, and report—with great sadness—on defeats. Others draw on their experience to outline new and possibly better responses for their unions.

If labor is to remain a vital force among American workers, it will be due in part to the efforts and ideas of such individuals. They are the voices of a generation of unionists who will play an important role in deciding the direction of the labor movement into the next century.

## **II. Labor's Crisis: Toward a New Social Contract?**

Those looking for new developments in the American trade union movement can take little comfort from the statistics on union strength. Union membership has declined virtually every year since its peak in 1954 when 34% of the non-farm workforce was organized in trade unions. Today less than 17% of American workers are members of unions, and the absolute number of members continues to decline, from 17,717,000 in 1983 to 16,975,000 in

1986.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, union success rates in certification elections declined from 74.6% in 1947 to less than 50% in 1975, to 46.4% in 1984. Finally, decertification elections occur with far greater frequency, and during the 1980s unions lost more than 75% of these contests.<sup>2</sup>

It is a truism that union power has been declining for much of the post-war period; the only debate concerns when and why the slide started. Tomlins, for example, as well as Moody, trace the roots of the decline to the terms of the New Deal compromise which brought labor's formal incorporation in 1935 under the National Labor Relations Act. Goldfield, however, locates the decline in management's counteroffensive since the 1950s, launched in response to labor's early dramatic victories under the official system, as reflected in strike settlements and certification elections.<sup>3</sup>

All writers agree that the challenges facing trade unions stem from a longer-term transformation in the global economy which has dramatically affected all advanced industrial societies. The change is rooted in the development and application of new technologies in the core countries, which altered the labor process in traditional manufacturing sectors, while creating whole new information-based industries.<sup>4</sup> Blue collar employment in the main manufacturing industries dropped dramatically during the 1970s, with the most significant decline coming in steel, auto and rubber, and mining. At the same time, employment in non-manufacturing sectors has grown the fastest, especially employment in the service sector which "accounted for most of the dramatic U.S. job growth over the past 20 years and for virtually all net new job growth in the past 10 years."<sup>5</sup> For example, salespersons, waiters and waitresses, health-care workers, and clerical workers are currently among the fastest growing jobs and this expansion is projected into the 1990s; in fact, today three out of four people work for a service industry employer.

The impact of these changes on skill levels and wage rates has been a subject for considerable debate. The most optimistic accounts forecast a rapid rise in skill levels as more highly trained, well-educated workers are needed to operate the new technologies. Several authors suggest that the logic of capitalist production does not inevitably lead to mass production, a division of labor and deskilling of workers' tasks. New technological developments (universal machines, i.e., flexible specialization), can generate small-scale craft-based forms of production: skills are enhanced, wage rates are increased, worker control and equality on the shopfloor is

strengthened, and the general trend of labor-management relations is cooperative. The argument suggests the basis for the decline of existing organizations representing labor and capital, and the possibility of a new, more vital "yeoman democracy," bringing improvement in the conditions of working life.<sup>6</sup>

More pessimistic interpretations, influenced largely by the work of Braverman, see a further deskilling of workers, with an increased consolidation within management of information and control over work. Such approaches emphasize the negative consequences of technological change and restructuring: regional affects of deindustrialization, the elimination of skills, job displacement, and the breakdown of the social contract between labor and management.<sup>7</sup> These authors also discuss the deterioration of conditions at work caused by the reorganization of production processes. Specifically, they see management's control over new technology as providing the capacity for new forms of speedup, and increased mental and physical stress on workers. In addition, technological advance has also created conditions for the return of work forms commonly associated with early industrial capitalism: the rise of part-time work, home work, and sweatshop labor in unregulated small establishments.<sup>8</sup>

Each of these views accepts that these outcomes are not a reflex of new technology per se, but reflect social relations of production, including management decisionmaking, organization of work, and the extent of worker participation and resistance. Indeed, comparative studies, across countries and industrial sectors, show great diversity in the extent of managerial unilateralism or cooperation. They also describe variation in worker participation, job security, and the enhancement of rights. Cornfield, for example, in a comparison of 14 sectoral case studies identifies the macroeconomic conditions facing each sector and extent of prior unionization as important variables influencing the attractiveness of unilateralism by management or the possibilities of workers to exert power over changing conditions in the workplace.<sup>9</sup>

And yet U.S. unions have fared particularly poorly in the face of such challenges, both in their ability to protect members at risk and to take advantage of opportunities to expand. The steep declines in membership among the AFL-CIO industrial giants are well known: the Steelworkers lost more than half their members between 1973 and 1983, while UAW membership fell by more than one-third between 1969 and 1983.<sup>10</sup> Certainly other unions, notably those organizing in the public sector, posted impressive member-

ship gains over the same period, yet overall the union movement lost ground. While the number of wage and salary workers in services increased from 18,400,000 to 21,036,000 between 1983 and 1986, the number of union members in this sector actually *fell* from 1,410,000 to 1,329,000! The wholesale and retail trade also suffered a decline in membership, despite an increase in employment of nearly 2 million workers. Whereas nearly one-quarter of manufacturing workers are union members, only 7.2% of wholesale and retail workers, and only 6.3% of service workers are union members.<sup>11</sup>

These statistics are even more sobering when seen in international comparison. From the late 1960s to the early 1980s "the proportion of union members in the labor force increased significantly in Canada, Denmark, Sweden, and Italy . . . and remained relatively stable in Switzerland and Germany."<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, European trade unions have had far greater success organizing in sectors which their American counterparts have found uncongenial. European bank workers, for example, are heavily unionized, whereas "the financial sector in the United States is distinguishable by its almost total lack of a union presence. In the U.S. banking sector, barely half a dozen banks are unionized, including only one large bank."<sup>13</sup> If the international tide has been running against labor, European unions have been better able to shore up, if not strengthen their membership, while protecting workers' rights. In the United States there has been no shortage of worker grievances, but unions have been unable to organize them effectively or even to defend previous gains among already organized workers.

In the post-war period, it is through labor unions and coalitions with social democratic parties that workers have secured economic and political gains, and influenced the condition of their lives. The social contract under Keynesian welfare statist structures rewarded both capital and labor, and however limited, gave workers historic real wage increases, social benefits, and a legal, institutional base for participation in government. Being a union member continues to reap benefits where it counts for many workers: average weekly earnings for unionized full-time workers in 1986 was \$444 as compared to \$325 for non-unionized full-time workers. Also, compare, for instance, median usual weekly earnings for most occupations between union members and those not represented by unions. In 1986 workers in service occupations earned \$356 per week compared to \$201 earned by their non-union counterparts, and manufacturing workers earned \$58 more per week

than non-unionized workers. Women and blacks also receive tangible rewards from union membership: non-union women earned \$274 per week as against \$368 for female trade unionists; and black unionists earned \$387, \$132 more per week than non-unionized black workers.<sup>14</sup>

The current crisis of labor goes well beyond the application of new technologies and the reorganization of the workplace, but concerns the undermining of the accord and the construction of a new order determined more unilaterally by capital and conservative state coalitions.<sup>15</sup> One of the key aspects of the unravelling of the accord has been the dismantling of national systems of labor law, what amounts to “the deregulation of labor relations.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, labor movements have experienced, with important national exceptions, declining power in electoral coalitions, influence in legislative decisionmaking, and leverage within national bureaucracies.<sup>17</sup>

This is not the first time that the future viability of unions has come into question. David Montgomery’s first volume in his study of the American labor movement suggests its advance does not follow a straight trajectory, but that declines and revivals are normal features in the long development of workers’ movements. “Their movement has grown only sporadically and through fierce struggles,” Montgomery writes, “[and has] been interrupted time and again just when it seemed to reach flood tide, overwhelmed its foes only to see them revive in new and more formidable shapes, and been forced to reassess what it thought it had already accomplished and begin again.”<sup>18</sup>

The dismantling of the old labor-capital accord provides labor with important opportunities to define a new relationship, in the words of Jacobi et al., “a new structural, functional, institutional order.”<sup>19</sup> Seizing these opportunities demands structural transformations within labor itself as well as creative organizing strategies, and new alliances with progressive social groups.

There is no shortage of workers to organize, but the difficulties of organizing such workers demands strategies and tactics sensitive to the needs and characteristics of a wage labor force made up increasingly of women, people of color, and new immigrant groups. Similarly, the decline of factory-based manufacturing demands approaches to organizing in new environments: offices, educational institutions, sweatshops, and family homes. Many of these needs go beyond the traditional subject matter of collective bargaining to include issues such as health problems arising from the new technology, day care, maternal leave and flexible hours, sexual and



racial harassment and discrimination, and immigration status. These concerns suggest the possible lines of alliance between unions and women's, environmental, civil rights, and immigrant groups, and the infusion of new ideas, energy, and strength that could flow from closer cooperation. Such unity might also provide a base for broader political movements capable of wielding electoral weight and influencing local and national legislatures and bureaucracies.

These possibilities point to the need for changes in union organization and leadership structures essential to a renewed commitment to unionism as a force for economic and social justice, domestically and internationally. How do unions reconcile differences between groups in such a heterogeneous workforce? What structures of representation need to be developed to incorporate such constituencies within unions, to bring their leaders into top positions, and to ensure that once brought in, their interests are given expression? In short, how can they gain power and influence in unions? Internal democracy gains value not only as a moral argument, but as a strategy necessary for binding together the working class to respond to capital and the state.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the new social contract should include a recasting of international labor solidarity. To survive in a modern era characterized by the internationalization of production, markets, and labor, American unions need to emphasize cooperation with labor in other countries. The need for unions to forge links with their counterparts in other countries goes beyond a moral mandate, to form part of a practical strategy for preserving workers' positions at home. For labor to protect workers' rights and benefits in the United States, it must insist that the wages, benefits, and health of workers abroad are not undermined by the activities of multinational corporations.<sup>21</sup>

### III. Union Voices

Thus far in this review, the descriptions of labor's crisis and suggestions for paths forward have relied mostly on academic treatments, and no matter how substantial the contributions, they nonetheless remain the work of outsiders writing from the sidelines. But organizers, officials, and members who live with these conditions on a daily basis are in an ideal position to develop solutions. Yet, their perspectives rarely inform the debates on analysis of the crisis and strategies for labor.

Their voices can indeed be heard in a number of collections where writers rely on the extensive testimony of workers directly experiencing working life.<sup>22</sup> The essays in this collection, however, are not oral histories of workers, though some of the writers include stories from fellow workers and their own personal experiences. Rather these are analytical chapters, research papers, written by workers and union staff members reflecting on their own problems and practice.

Tom L. Robbins worked in the meatpacking industry where he contracted Carpal Tunnel Syndrome on the job, and Jonathan Rosen was the safety officer on the labor-management safety committee he writes about. His position enabled him to interview workers who recalled safety conditions at A. O. Smith Automotive Products Company in the early days: "When I first got hired in 1951, out in the streets you could tell the person who worked at Smith. He or she had one finger missing or two." Raymond Scannell visited the "workplaces of the future" at bakery and tobacco factories as a member of his union's Task Force on Technological Change. May Ying Chen, an Asian-American, has been a leader in addressing Asian labor issues for HERE and the ILGWU. Susan Strauss is a machinist at the General Electric Company and an active member of her local's Women's Committee, a driving force for women's issues in the union and company. Susan Eaton uses her experiences as a woman trade unionist to formulate a program for developing women leaders. She relates instances of an anti-feminist union culture in which male coworkers boasted of their weekly visits to airport strip joints and where sexual harassment was a problem. Kim Fellner has been a union staffer for over 15 years and was the speechwriter for Ed Asner, former president of the Screen Actors' Guild. She gives a firsthand account of the AFL-CIO reaction to Asner's opposition of its policies in Central America. Don Stillman was the UAW's 'point man' for the "Campaign for Justice for Moses Mayekiso." He was a central planner of the strategy of the international campaign and he traveled to South Africa to meet with Mayekiso and his lawyers.

These union activists represent the potential for the revival of the labor movement: they directly confront the conditions of crisis and are essential participants in experiments toward establishing the new social contract. Rank-and-file innovations have always played a crucial role in union advances through adversity. In Montgomery's words, workers' daily experience and the solidarity nurtured by that experience has been "the taproot of [labor's] re-



silience. . . . When working-class activists sought a path out of the depression of the 1930s, they . . . reopened controversy over what had been considered accomplished, and began to organize anew on the basis of the ways America's heterogeneous working people actually experienced industrial life."<sup>23</sup> That same taproot needs to be drawn on in the current period.

The perspectives these unionists bring to their research encompass a wide range of contemporary union activities. Part One focuses on technological change and the reorganization of the production process in manufacturing. The papers present contrasting union responses to problems generated by industrial restructuring, especially health and safety, and job displacement. **Tom L. Robbins** deals with union responses to health and safety in a situation where unions have no control over restructuring. He studies the spread of Carpal Tunnel Syndrome in the Iowa meatpacking industry, describes growing health problems among meatcutters whose unions were largely broken and are now subjected to management's unilateral introduction of speedup and deskilling, and he suggests a limited legal program for protecting such workers.<sup>24</sup> **Jonathan D. Rosen** analyzes his union's health and safety activities in a Wisconsin truck frame plant, as a case study of joint labor-management relations which allowed workers some participation. But the union's effectiveness was limited by its exclusion from fundamental decisionmaking on issues of plant relocation and downsizing which eventually undermined workers' job security. Finally, **Raymond F. Scannell** describes his union's efforts to develop a new strategy for influencing the introduction of new technologies in the bakery, confectionery and tobacco industries. On the one hand, he rejects total resistance to technological change, and on the other, cooperative labor-management programs, proposing instead a policy of "adversary participation" in which workers engage management with the goal of increasing their power over the workplace.

The papers in Part Two are also concerned with the impact of the changing economy: the current state of industry has contributed to the erosion of economic and affirmative action gains made by women and minorities in the 1970s and early 1980s, thereby undermining their progress. They focus, however, on the changes the new economy has wrought on the composition of the workforce, specifically, the employment of women and new immigrant groups in the industrial and service sectors. Each takes as its point of departure the problems the labor movement has organizing such

workers and promoting their interests within the unions. **May Ying Chen's** contribution examines strategies for organizing the unorganized, focusing on new Asian immigrant workers in the New York metropolitan area. This problem has been exacerbated in the 1980s because New York City's unionized manufacturers have gone out of business or contracted out work abroad at the same time as the introduction of non-union work into Chinatown's shops is on the rise. **Susan R. Strauss'** chapter examines the failure of affirmative action policies, developed by her union and management at the General Electric plant, to open up higher skilled jobs to women and minorities. Shrinking production levels at GE and the general retreat from affirmative action in national politics has decimated training programs and undermined job advancement for women workers. In response to the feminization of the workplace, Strauss argues, unions must develop more sophisticated programs to promote equality on the job. The point is further developed by **Susan C. Eaton** who analyzes why women are under-represented in leadership positions in unions and develops strategies to increase their representation. Eaton argues that greater involvement of women in labor's hierarchy will enhance the economic position of this growing sector of the workforce. "Women need unions and unions need women leaders for each to build a more just future."

The problems described in the previous sections and the strategies advocated suggest the need for changes in the way unions work. Part Three focuses on the problems within unions' internal structure and politics, and points to the need for progressive agendas emphasizing solidarity with other social movements at home and abroad. In the current decade, the 1989 U.S. Canada Free Trade Agreement, the creation of a European common market in 1992, and the proposed U.S. Mexico Free Trade Agreement indicate a further advancement of the globalization and integration of the economy. These international agreements threaten to establish new patterns of trade and new competition between workers across borders, thereby weakening workers' rights and living standards. Unions must develop worldwide networks to work towards new international labor standards in defense of workers' interests. **Kim Fellner's** essay on the fate of sixties activists in the union movement stresses the stultifying effect of union bureaucracy and political culture on organizing. She contemplates the AFL-CIO's foreign policy and how it works against promoting international solidarity and workers' rights. And, she asserts the need for changes in union

practice to promote an internal union culture which can nurture creative responses to the problems outlined in the other contributions. Finally, **Don Stillman's** assessment of an international union solidarity campaign suggests a model for constructive global political links which assist unions abroad while simultaneously developing the political consciousness of workers at home. These bonds will help to establish rights and protections that are mutually beneficial for unions here and abroad.

## Notes

1. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1988*, 108th ed. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987), Table 667, Union Members by Selected Characteristics, 402.
2. Seymour Martin Lipset, "Preface," in Lipset, ed., *Unions in Transition: Entering the Second Century* (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies Press, 1986), xvi. Lipset notes that not only have unions been losing more elections, but elections are themselves occurring far less frequently, declining from around 9,000 in 1973 to close to 3,500 in 1983-84. The ratio of certification to decertification elections was 4:1 in 1984, compared to 30:1 in 1960.
3. Christopher L. Tomlins, *The State and the Unions: Labor Relations, Law, and the Organized Labor Movement in America, 1880-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (London: Verso, 1988). Michael Goldfield, *The Decline of Organized Labor in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
4. Michael J. Piore and Charles Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperity* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 248-250.
5. Karen Nussbaum and John Sweeney, *Solutions for the New Work Force: Policies for a New Social Contract* (Washington, D.C.: Seven Locks Press, 1989), 194, see also 19 and 187-198. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1988*, Table 631, Employment By Selected Industry, 380. See also U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Monthly Labor Review," vol. 112, no. 12 (December 1989), Table 20, Annual Data: Employment Levels by Industry, 83.
6. Michael J. Piore and Charles F. Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide*; Harry C. Katz and Charles Sabel, "Industrial Relations and Industrial Adjustment in the Car Industry," *Industrial Relations*, vol. 24 (1985): 295-315.
7. Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press,

1974); Harley Shaiken, *Work Transformed: Automation and Labor in the Computer Age* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1985); and Shaiken et al., "The Work Process Under More Flexible Production," *Industrial Relations*, vol. 25 (1986): 167–183; Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closing, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1982); Richard Hyman, "Flexible Specialization: Miracle or Myth?" in Richard Hyman and Wolfgang Streeck, eds., *New Technology and Industrial Relations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988). From the same collection see Peter Armstrong, "Labour and Monopoly Capital," for a review of criticisms of Braverman and a defense of his deskilling argument.

8. Eli Ginzberg, Thierry Noyelle, and Thomas Stanback, Jr., "Work Force Trends," in *Technology and Employment* (London: Westview Press, 1986). See also Nussbaum and Sweeney, 56–61.

9. Daniel B. Cornfield, ed., *Workers, Managers, and Technological Change: Emerging Patterns of Labor Relations* (New York: Plenum, 1987).

10. Leo Troy, "The Rise and Fall of American Trade Unions: The Labor Movement From FDR to RR," in Seymour Martin Lipset, ed., *Unions in Transition*, 92.

11. *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1988*, Table 667, 402.

12. Seymour Martin Lipset, "Comparing Canadian and American Unions," *Society* (January–February 1987): 61–2. Also see Goldfield, *The Decline of Organized Labor*, Table 3, 16.

13. Over 90% of the bank and insurance employees in Sweden are unionized, while in Germany unionization rates in financial firms oscillate between 15 and 25%. Olivier Bertrand and Thierry Noyelle, *Human Resources and Corporate Strategy: Technological Change in Banks and Insurance Companies* (Paris: OECD, 1988), 52–54. For a comparison of union membership in the leading Western industrial countries see Goldfield, 1987, Table 3, 16.

14. *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1988*, Table 667, 402. See also Richard B. Freeman and James L. Medoff, *What Do Unions Do?* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

15. Otto Jacobi, et al., "Between Erosion and Transformation: Industrial Relations Systems Under the Impact of Technological Change," in Otto Jacobi, Bob Jessop, Hans Kastendiek, and Marino Regini, *Technological Change, Rationalisation and Industrial Relations* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 11–12.

16. See Robert H. Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions, 1920–1985* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 195–196.

17. "In the late 1970s and early 1980s . . . the collapse of labor's legislative power facilitated the adoption of a set of economic policies highly

beneficial to the corporate sector and to the affluent. . . . Without a strong labor movement, there is no broad-based institution in American society equipped to represent the interests of those in the working and lower-middle classes in the formulation of economic policy." Thomas Byrne Edsall, *The New Politics of Inequality* (New York: Norton, 1984), 176–177. H. Brand, "The Decline of Workers' Incomes, the Weakening of Labor's Position," *Dissent*, vol. 32, no. 3 (1985): 286–298, discusses the impact of the U.S. political environment, especially the government's economic policies, as a key factor in the retreat of the labor movement. See also Goldfield, who examines political explanations for labor's decline, including "new legal policies and laws which make it more difficult for unions to organize," "Labor in American Politics—Its Current Weaknesses," *Journal of Politics*, vol. 48, no. 1 (February 1986): 3–29.

18. David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: the Work-place, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 7–8.

19. Jacobi, et al.

20. Otto Jacobi, "New Technological Paradigms, Long Waves and Trade Unions," in Hyman and Streeck, eds., *New Technology and Industrial Relations*, 199–200. Failure to make such changes "would mean the end of a trade union movement which is capable of intervention and social participation . . . a merely particularistic interest representation means the loss of the status which had been achieved in the post-war era."

21. Roger Southall, "At Issue: Third World Trade Unions in the Changing International Division of Labor," in Southall, ed., *Trade Unions and the New Industrialisation in the Third World* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988), 24–26; also, in the same volume, Nigel Haworth and Harvie Ramsey, "Workers of the World Untied: International Capital and Some Dilemmas in Industrial Democracy," 306–331.

22. See Richard Feldman and Michael Betzold, *End of the Line: Auto-workers and the American Dream* (New York: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1988); and the classic collections by Alice Lynd and Staughton Lynd, *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988), and Studs Terkel, *Working* (New York: Pantheon 1974).

23. Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor*, 8.

24. Davis provides graphic evidence of midwestern packers' tactics of corporate reorganization to break unions and slash wages. "Morell, a branch of United Brands, extorted large concessions from its workers and then subcontracted slaughtering to Greyhound, which owned Armour, who sold it to Con Agra, which promptly deunionized it. Meanwhile, Wilson took direct advantage of the bankruptcy laws by invoking 'Chapter

Eleven, closing down, and reopening the next day with wages cut by forty percent and restrictive workrules eliminated. The union's appeals to the Reaganized NLRB fell on deaf ears." Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the U.S. Working Class* (London: Verso, 1986), 144.



## Part One

### Economic Change, New Technology, and Union Responses

Economic restructuring and the changes it brings in the labor process are the starting point of Tom L. Robbins' and Jonathan Rosen's examinations of safety and health in the workplace, as well as Raymond Scannell's description of the ongoing effort by his union to protect its workers facing work reorganization. Robbins' paper focuses on Carpal Tunnel Syndrome [CTS] and other repetitive motion disorders, a growing health problem, not only in assembly line industries, but also in the new computerized office settings. Robbins' research provides graphic evidence of the impact of CTS on Iowa meatcutters, and he traces its increased incidence to changes in the labor process, including speed-up and deskilling.

In Robbins' account, the Amalgamated Meatcutters and Butcher Workmen of North America and the United Packing Workers of America had by the 1940s successfully organized the majority of meatcutters in the midwest. They enjoyed high wages, better working conditions, and health and other benefits as a result of uniform standards arrived at through pattern bargaining throughout the industry. By the 1970s the system was breaking down. Some union shops closed down, while other employers sought to circumvent the union "master rate" package, by hiving off new state-of-the-art, non-union independent plants. Among numerous examples, Iowa Beef Packers purchased a former unionized plant, and after remodeling, reopened it as a non-union facility. Efforts to organize these new plants have been sidetracked under the anti-union political stance and labor regulations of the past two Republican administrations. The meatcutters have found it very difficult to sustain national wage, health, and fringe benefit standards in the climate of deregulation and the breakdown in pattern bargaining.

In addition to cutting wage and benefit costs, these employers also undertook a massive reorganization of the labor process. Whereas a single meatcutter previously dissected an entire ham on a stationary table, the new plants featured assembly line techniques. Under the new "pace-boning" system, the meat now passes by on conveyor belts. Meatcutters stand in a single place, working on a

moving product, and “now make only a few identical cuts to several thousand hams daily, rather than the varied cuts necessary in the whole ham process.”

Unions have been unable to influence job classifications, production levels, line speed, or the design of work stations. The result, according to Robbins, is a dramatically increased rate of repetitive trauma disorders, “in direct proportion to the productivity increases.” Indeed, in some plants the injury rate is greater than 100%. The experience of deskilling and health risk in these new plants represents another side of economic restructuring.

The absence of labor representation in the industry leaves workers with little influence over health and safety. One consequence is company-designed health programs, where physicians are in the employ of management. Under these circumstances, Robbins asserts, physicians pursue treatments which deal with immediate relief to keep the worker on the job, while the actual health of the worker is given secondary consideration. In repetitive trauma disorders, especially CTS, workers will be treated with drugs to dull the pain, or surgery, which merely allow the worker to continue doing the job which caused the problem in the first place. Workers are often forced to seek such treatment, through threats of demotion and firing, or as a result of disciplinary action because they are performing at reduced capacity. Sometimes pressure comes from other workers who are forced to pick up the slack to meet production goals. “Surgery may seem welcome to the most reluctant patient,” when faced with these conditions. The conditions in the modern plants of the midwestern meatpacking industry are thus part of the dark side of flexible specialization and deregulation.

According to Robbins, the scientific literature on repetitive trauma disorders suggests that the most effective treatment is stopping the activity that caused the problem. In the workplace, such a prescription entails wide-reaching reorganization of the labor process, including reskilling, job redesign, and slowdown. In his conclusion, Robbins presents a strategy designed to provide relief to injured workers on the job. Above all, his proposal calls for increased use of OSHA powers to enforce existing federal health and safety laws, use of the courts to protect worker rights, and the need for in-plant education and monitoring procedures. Without worker control, not just in health and safety, but in the conditions of their own employment, workers have little guarantee against pain, disfigurement, and permanent disability.

Robbins writes about deteriorating health and safety in an in-

dustry where unions are forced to seek remedies outside the workplace because of their declining influence within these redesigned factories. Jonathan Rosen examines a single company where the union has been able, through economic restructuring, to enhance its influence—for a time. Rosen's paper analyzes the joint labor-management safety committees at the giant Milwaukee-based A. O. Smith Automotive Products Company.

In the early 1980s, A. O. Smith faced rapidly deteriorating market conditions as Japanese producers gained a large share of the domestic automobile and truck market. To survive in such a climate, A. O. Smith, following the lead of other automobile and components companies, decided to adopt new production strategies, "converting from a management driven system of shopfloor organization to one of team production." Management recognized that it could take advantage of the ability and knowledge of workers on the shopfloor to identify problems in the production process, while realizing cost savings by eliminating middle management and supervisory positions.

Health and safety was an area where these new developments had some impact. The union saw that management's new attitude created space to make progress on an issue of great concern to workers. Management saw a way to save money by reducing worker compensation costs—running to an estimated \$11 million in 1986 alone—and improving productivity by cutting time lost to injuries and illness.

For workers, health and safety was literally a life and death issue. A. O. Smith experienced high accident rates—typical of the industry—including amputations, broken bones, and strains and sprains. Company responses to the problem were inadequate: quality circles, begun in 1982, were launched unilaterally without union participation. In 1985, however, the company and the unions began a program that involved real employee participation in which workers were given training to identify problems and a joint labor-management structure to formulate and introduce solutions.

Despite changes in work rules, elimination of large numbers of foremen, training, and establishment of joint weekly meetings, workers found that day-to-day problems were still dealt with in the traditional manner by management. In response, the union leadership began to press for shopfloor teams. At the same time, joint plant safety committees were formed, in which union members could have full-time participation as comanagers of health and safety.

The committees introduced technical education for workers,

stewards, and safety observers, including seminars on OSHA rights, began aggressive investigations of instances of CTS, and suggested treatment and job redesign, wrote a union safety observer's manual, and developed a Hazard Communications Update. But the efforts of the committee were ultimately disrupted by the very economic crisis which had stimulated management to search for new solutions in the first place. The committees were undermined by massive layoffs and reorganizations, and thus were never realized in the manner envisioned when they were proposed in late 1987. By the end of 1988, two of the nine committees had folded. Safety inspections were infrequent, or nonexistent, and safety training had not fully begun.

The most important obstacle to the development of an effective health and safety program has been the investment strategy of the company itself. A. O. Smith has been rapidly shedding workers: in the past fifteen years employment declined by more than 50%, and as Rosen was writing in 1989, over 1,000 workers were on layoff. At the same time A. O. Smith was "downsizing" the Milwaukee plant, it was opening smaller, state-of-the-art satellite factories in Indiana, Illinois, and Maryland.

In part, the strategy was shaped by the shifting demands of the big automobile producers for component suppliers to site themselves closer to assembly plants, themselves located in areas where unions are traditionally weak. Despite its interests in joint labor-management health initiatives, A. O. Smith's larger strategy for survival resembles that of the Iowa meatpackers: phasing out its main unionized production facility while developing non-union satellite plants with lower pay rates and fewer benefits. Significantly, the unions were never able to achieve the same labor-management participation on job security issues. Despite their attraction to new forms of workplace relations, management refused to provide employment guarantees which could build dedication in the workforce and stabilize manpower. Instead, it preferred to treat job security as its own prerogative.

Rosen's conclusions are extremely bleak. Job insecurity is causing morale problems which in turn "perpetuate the inefficiencies, quality problems, and incidents of injuries." Workers are thinking about life after A. O. Smith, and "among many, a bitterness has begun to set in." It may be that A. O. Smith was simply lagging behind the type of restructuring perfected in the Iowa meatpacking industry in the 1970s. If so, Robbins' chapter suggests what may lie in store for A. O. Smith workers, especially those in the new non-union plants.

Robbins' and Rosen's accounts of the labor wasteland left by union-busting firms in Iowa and the joint labor-management schemes at A. O. Smith underscore the limits to worker control over health and safety policy, deskilling, wage cuts, and job loss where workers have minimal influence over investment and production decisions. Raymond Scannell's work goes one step further showing how his union, the Bakery, Confectionery, and Tobacco Workers' International Union (BC&T), has crafted an approach to the changing character of manufacturing which attempts to wrest real decisionmaking power over the new automated workplace. He maintains that the revitalization and even survival of the union movement depends on its ability to develop policies to influence the design, introduction, and operation of new technologies.

The pressures facing the industry are similar to those which have reshaped meatpacking and auto. The number of companies and manufacturing plants has declined and ownership has been reorganized through mergers. Many companies have relocated in response to new competitive pressures brought on by changes in the national economy, and new locales have been selected to promote deunionization goals. In many sections of the industry new technology and work practices have been introduced, sometimes piecemeal within existing factories, sometimes wholesale in non-unionized greenfield plants. In many workplaces, practices differ from the job control and employment security rules codified in contract language negotiated industry-wide. But without concerted union responses, management has a freer hand to attack past practices, demand union concessions, and restructure work on its own terms.

Scannell argues that the culprit is not the technology itself, but the way in which it is designed and introduced, and unions should endeavor to make these into bargaining issues. He reviews the intellectual debate among academics on the nature of the restructured factory and how restructuring alters the traditional character of labor-management relations. He examines the relevance of this debate for the real work experiences of BC&T workers and other industrial workers. According to Scannell, cooperative strategies have failed. For example, "jointness" in the auto industry has not prevented job loss and decline in the auto unions. Unions can neither ignore the changes in technology nor can they enter into quality circles or labor-management schemes, which often replace a more visible bureaucratic control with a difficult-to-resist "intimate authoritarianism," extending managerial control, dividing workers, speeding up work, and busting unions.

Scannell borrows insights from European experiences, where he claims unions demand the opportunity to participate in decisionmaking without abandoning their traditional adversarial position in defense of their members' interests. He also recalls the historical situation of craft workers who were highly skilled and had control over the work process. He thus advocates "adversary participation," where unions refuse to be "partners' cooperating in the ratification of management decisions," but instead view "the decision process as a new arena in which to struggle for worker rights and an alternative vision of the workplace and production process."

The position Scannell describes is the result of a long-term policy review within his union, which is attempting to develop a coherent strategy for coping with the changes in the industry. New technologies and the globalization of the economy have undermined the social contract between labor and management which worked best during the fifties and sixties to stabilize the workplace and provide workers with economic benefits. According to Scannell, adversary participation redefines labor's role to include fighting for workplace control. The strategy recognizes that there is a clash of interests between management and workers, and proposes that unions use the collective bargaining system to achieve some authority over the production process. The BC&T embraced the approach in 1990, and has begun pursuing the strategy in its negotiations where it has fought for contract language to establish a right to participate and bargain on issues of technological design and introduction. The goal is to set up pattern bargaining on these issues and, eventually, a model for the establishment of national and international standards.