

# THE SEX OF CLASS

WOMEN TRANSFORMING AMERICAN LABOR

Edited by Dorothy Sue Cobble

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## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vii
List of Abbreviations	ix
Introduction	1
Dorothy Sue Cobble	
Part I. Women's Inequalities and Public Policy	13
1. Increasing Class Disparities among Women and the Politics of Gender Equity	
Leslie McCall	15
2. More than Raising the Floor: The Persistence of Gender Inequalities in the Low-Wage Labor Market	
Vcky Lovell, Heidi Hartmann, and Msha Werschkul	35
Part 11. Unions and Sexual Politics	59
3. Two Worlds of Unionism: Women and the New Labor Movement	
Push Milkman	63
4. The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Challenge to American Labor	
Gerald Hunt and Monica Blelski Bors	81

## Contents

5. Sex Discrimination as Collective Harm Manon Cram	99
Part III. Labor's Work and Family Agenda	117
6. Changing Work, Changing People: A Conversation with Union Organizers at Harvard University and the University of Massachusetts Memorial Medical Center Lydia Savage	119
7. Unions Fight for Work and Family Policies-Not for Women Only Netsy Firestein and Nicda Dones	140
Part IV. Organizing Women's Work	155
8. Working Women's Insurgent Consciousness Karen Nussbaum	159
9. "We Were the Invisible Workforce!": Unionizing Home Care Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein	177
10. Expanding Labor's Vision: The Challenges of Workfare and Welfare Organizing Vanessa Tat	194
11. Worker Centers and Immigrant Women Janice Fine	211
Part V. Local-Global Connections	231
12. Female Immigrant Workers and the Law: Limits and Opportunities Maria L. Onnveros	235
13. Women Crossing Borders to Organize Katie Ouan	253
14. Representing Informal Economy Workers: Emerging Global Strategies and Their Lessons for North American Unions Leah F Vosko	272
References	293
About the Contributors	313
Index	317

## **7. Changing Work, Changing People: A Conversation with Union Organizers at Harvard University and the University of Massachusetts Medical Center**

**Lydia Savage**

In March of 2005, I sat down with Kris Rondeau, Marie Manna, Jeanne Lafferty, Bill Jaeger, Elisabeth Szanto and Janet Wilder to discuss their approach to representing workers in the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW) and the State Healthcare and Research Employees (SHARE) unions. My conversation with the organizers focused on the ways in which they deal with a wide variety of work redesign and labor flexibility issues such as benefits for part-time workers, work redesign, worker education projects, and an innovative approach to layoffs.

HUCTW organized 3,700 clerical and technical workers at Harvard University in 1988 after a seventeen-year effort. HUCTW quickly moved on to organizing 2,100 clerical and technical workers at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center (UMass Medical) through a sister local named SHARE eventually winning this campaign by an overwhelming majority of the vote in 1997.<sup>1</sup> All told, HUCTW and SHARE have organized and now represent nearly 8,000 workers. The unions are affiliated with the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME).<sup>2</sup>

The 6 organizers I interviewed are part of the much larger staff at HUCTW and SHARE but in many ways, they reflect the variety of backgrounds of the union staff and the workers they represent. Kris Rondeau began working as a technician in the medical school in 1976 and remembers that she was initially a "hard-to-organize worker." She eventually joined in the effort only to see the first election loss in 1977. She became a paid organizer in 1979 and is currently the team leader.

Marie Manna graduated from the University of Rhode Island in 1975 and became a VISTA volunteer before eventually moving to New England to work as a community organizer. She wanted to bring those skills to the labor movement and began working at the Harvard School of Public Health in 1980. Within a few months, she became involved with the organizing effort and she joined the HUCTW staff in 1981.

Bill Jaeger graduated from Yale University and moved to Cambridge where he took a job at Harvard in 1984. He became involved as a union activist shortly thereafter and joined the paid organizing staff in 1985, but a week before he was to begin working on the union staff, the UAW and HUCTW split. Bill opted to join HUCTW and worked part-time without pay before eventually joining the paid staff full-time.

Jeanne Lafferty began working at the School of Public Health at Harvard in 1975. An anti-war activist, she quickly became involved with the organizing effort only to see the first election loss in 1977. She then left Harvard but returned in 1981 and experienced all 3 Harvard elections. She is currently an organizer primarily for SHARE at UMass Medical School.

Elisabeth Szantos is a SHARE organizer who joined HUCTW as a student activist while an undergraduate at Harvard. After graduating, she joined the union staff in 1987 and helped with the Harvard election. Once the first contract was settled at Harvard, Jeanne and Elisabeth started driving to Worcester from Cambridge to meet with workers at UMass Medical Center and they have been "driving to Worcester ever since."

Janet Wilder graduated from Oberlin College and moved to Cambridge to work as an educator for the Office Technology Education Project. She taught health and safety to office workers and worked with many unions. She decided she wanted to work for HUCTW because they were an innovative and joined the SHARE staff in 1991.

The following is an edited transcript of our conversation.

LS: Everyone in this group comes to this conversation with a variety of experiences and concerns but how would you describe the threads that link you together?

KR: We are very committed as a group of friends and colleagues to the idea that every one of our members matters and that the union should have a relationship with each member. That tradition of knowing every person is very hard, but we try hard and we know thousands and thousands of individual members.

Our overall goal is to create community and to change work, and that is a really hard thing to do because there are many obstacles to change. The greatest dilemma for our organizations is trying to make sure that we build leadership and skill in our members while we also engage with the employer.

There are four things that link us in all these activities. First, we try to create as many opportunities for real participation by workers as possible. We regularly find ourselves in odd situations where the union wants to cultivate a collaborative relationship and the employer responds in an oppositional or fearful way. Often it's the other way around—the employer puts participation on the table and unions react negatively. But that's not our experience. In our locals we seek as much participation as possible; that can be participation at work, work design, joint committees, joint learning—all kinds of activities around work and also in building community at work.

Secondly, we are all committed to learning and having workers have a consciousness of the importance of learning, so we promote this in every way we can.

Third, community-building. This is basically the idea that we—workers and unions—actually create the world we want to live in. We want to live by our values, and we want to create standards for the way people treat each other. How people talk to each other, civility, and these kinds of things are part of it, but we also include community and we always attach that to family as well. So it is not just building a community, but also making sure that the employer understands when we say, “this worker is doing community-building work when she is taking time to raise her family.” And that is important to everybody.

Fourth, we negotiate every day on standard-of-living issues: wages, re-classifications, benefits, health, time off—doing all the economic things that unions always do to build a middle class in the service sector. We do our part vigorously. So those are my threads.

LS: So how do you take those threads and weave them together in a structure that represents workers and recognizes that workers are looking for relationships, participation, and community in the workplace? How do you create union structures that

simultaneously represent workers around the economic pieces traditionally addressed by unions that also bring in the quality of relationships with co-workers and supervisors?

ES: There is a huge mental shift required—a change in the culture as it currently exists needs to be made in individual relationships as well as larger projects. To give you one example, we had a Patient Care Assistant (PCA) who was consistently late by fifteen minutes. Her manager kept writing her up. We wanted to find out why she was late all the time. The answer was she had to walk her kids across a busy street so that they could get to school safely. She had been paying a taxicab to drive them every day, but she couldn't do that any more. So she was getting them across the street, sending them on their way, and getting to work late every day.

We were lucky in having a good manager to work with and we ended up adjusting her schedule by fifteen minutes. We were looking for a simple answer to the simple question, “Why is she late?” In the end, the arrangement had time limits on it and eventually the kids got to be old enough that her shift could be changed back. That relatively simple shift-change presented different challenges than we'd anticipated, but after approaching the problem with a full sense of the story behind it, a solution presented itself.

Right now we are engaged in a large project of trying to improve the patient satisfaction levels in the hospital. This is an issue that our members care deeply about and the current leadership has made a top priority, but it has still been hard to get the project off the ground. For years there's been one way to do things: everyone comes in at 7:00 a.m. and leaves at 3:30—that's how it's done. There is a hierarchy in the hospital: higher-ups decide how to do things—that's how it's done.

But when you are trying to change the way patients experience their healthcare, you should ask the people who provide the care, and that is often the PCA. The nurses have to do more and more paperwork, and it's increasingly the people who get paid ten dollars an hour who actually provide the bedside care. If we're going to change the experience patients have, people who don't usually listen to people who make ten dollars an hour are going to have to listen to them and actually change how they do things. That's a huge mental shift.

Just a note about how this relates to economic progress. If the woman I was talking about before could afford to send her kids to school in a taxicab or owned a car, she wouldn't be late. We have members who get into trouble at work because they share one car for three adults in the family. If people had a basic standard of living where their neighborhoods were safe and they had public transportation or could afford private transportation, their lives would be a lot easier. And the workplace would be more stable. So, even in a story that is mostly about flexibility and respect, there is an important economic component.

BJ: I started working for the union when I was twenty-three years old and I was really surprised to learn that flexibility is not just one thing. Really, to make all the different parts of a life fit together, people need a lot of different things at different times. It would not be logistically or logically possible to negotiate an effective and specific flexibility

policy in a collective bargaining agreement. I mean, realizing that—recognizing life experience—that comes to be a silly idea, a ludicrous idea.

We have language in the Harvard-HUCTW agreement about flexibility and embracing the idea of alternative schedules. But I sometimes chuckle because when you meet a new Harvard manager, they will say, “Do you have flex-time?” Just the phrase always makes me chuckle. You can tell from the way it’s framed that somebody thinks of four ten-hour days. My wife works for a city government with a flex-time program; there is one regular schedule and one alternative schedule. It’s perversely silly given what people’s real lives are like. We really only have one choice, which is to help our members negotiate—or better yet, to teach them to negotiate—because we won’t always know what they are going to need. And they don’t always know what they are going to need. And what they need is going to change over time.

I didn’t understand when I was twenty-three and I would hear parents—mothers in particular—say, “My child is turning eleven or twelve and starting middle school this year so I am going to need so more time off.” That made no sense to me. But now I have my own kid in middle school, so I am seeing that people actually need to change their schedules and have more free time in the afternoon when their kids age-out of elementary school after-school programs. It would be bizarre to say that we should have a program, or a clause in our agreement that says, “People whose kids are getting out of elementary school are entitled to revise their schedules.”

So we only have one choice, and that is to teach people to negotiate for themselves. That is a really simple, powerful idea. It can be a complex challenge, especially in a large, complex environment. But it’s also a rewarding challenge; there’s a long, long list of wonderful success stories in what people have been able to do. It happens every day that somebody is negotiating a change in their schedule, or new flexibility, or new understanding with the people they work with.

MM: We’ve had this idea from the beginning that people have complicated lives; the workplace doesn’t want to let people have lives outside of work, or complicated lives. It’s a very old-fashioned idea. Basically the workplace isn’t taking into account all the things that happened in American society in the past thirty years. Managers still operate as if there is one person going to work, earning the money, and somebody else is taking care of everything else. But it’s just not true any more. When we first started organizing it wasn’t true, and it’s still not true.

To truly create a good modern workplace, employers must be more open to these kinds of changes. The ideal is to teach everyone to represent themselves in negotiation. But the overall culture has to support that. So we’ve got to work on both levels—the organization as well as the individual—to get these things going and to move them.

That is where these other structures come into play that we try to negotiate. Structures, not rules: that’s the way I think of it. We negotiate for joint committees. At the outset it can be difficult to be determine what a joint committee will be about. It might be concerned with anything under the sun, but you’ve got to have some premise so that people can be working together on whatever the issue is. It’s a very fluid kind of



thing, and I think that's how life is. That's how work is now. Neither unions nor employers have responded to this well, but especially employers.

KR: This antiquated idea of "fairness" meaning "sameness" hampers an institution's attempts to be more productive or to generate better quality.

JW: Developing flexibility for people's lives means changing the idea of what fairness is because "fairness" is often defined as doing the same thing for everybody. We often hear a manager say something like, "I can't do it for you because then someone else will want it, too." As a union we don't buy that definition of fairness. In our view, fairness is trying to do the most important things for each person.

I had a case where a worker had a new baby. Her partner was a police officer who worked some day-shifts and some night-shifts but on a regular schedule. She worked the evening shift, but she wanted to work some day shifts in order to share childcare with her partner. However, that manager's view was it just couldn't be done because you either worked days or evenings. "If I were to design an unusual schedule for you, I would have to do it for everybody." So she denied the worker's request.

So basically we said, "No, you don't have to do it for everybody. This is one person asking, so let's try to do it for her. If somebody else asks we will try to do it for them. If it doesn't work, then it doesn't work. There is no commitment in doing it for one person."

To solve this problem, our co-worker, Josh, talked to everyone and found somebody who wanted to switch a couple of days for a couple of evenings. Between the two workers each working some days and some evenings, they would cover both shifts. To make the manager more comfortable, we included an agreement that if one of them quit, the other woman knew that her schedule would go back to where it started. That way the manager wouldn't be locked into finding a new-hire who would accept a weird schedule.

It was such a lot of work to make the perfect schedule, to make it so that the manager could have no reason to say "no." If there hadn't been a union, the change would not have happened as it did; probably the new mom would have left to find better hours elsewhere.

This old idea of fairness as the-same-for-everyone allows a manager to avoid the hard work of figuring out how to make schedules work for people with complicated lives. In healthcare, managers are so stretched. It's very difficult to do this incredibly labor-intensive thing. Managers don't have the energy even when they want to and know people well enough to make things work out.

ES: The union often plays that role of coordinator because we have a problem that needs addressing. We will do the work because we know people and they want answers. We can put their stories together. Although I'm glad there is a union to come up with a happy solution, I sometimes wish we didn't have to spend so much of our time doing that.

MM: We are trying to go in the direction of self-directed teams in work reorganization. If each of the employees managed the department on some level, then the group could coordinate and resolve scheduling issues more efficiently—we are trying to get to the point that employees are going to have more control over what goes on at work.

ES: In some cases, workers actually have the capacity to solve the problem, but they don't have the right to solve it.

MM: They haven't been given the right or the responsibility—that's a real shift. Early on as we worked with employees this way, some members would say, "I don't get paid as a supervisor. I shouldn't have to do that. That is their worry." And we are trying to shift that and say that workers can gain from this but they are going to have to take on more responsibility in order to do it. That's the big change that has to happen.

JW: So much of changing relationships between workers and supervisors is respect. Once you get people in a room talking about things they both care about, respect appears because everybody recognizes that patient care is always common ground. If you can find an excuse to put people together then that's the beginning of respectful relationships where people can break down hierarchy. It's that moment of realizing "You know so much about this question, let's figure this out together." The union has taken on the role of being the one who gets them into the same room and sets the ground rules for respectful conversation between people, with the hope that this dynamic becomes a part of the culture eventually.

BJ: We are completely sold on a set of ideas about new work systems which improve the working environment and the group organizational performance, whether you are talking about which employees will cover a given set of work hours or our members' happiness in their working environment. It absolutely works. It is worth working intensively in union-management partnerships to reexamine and redesign the work systems, to increase investment in training for workers, to increase self-direction and flatten supervisory hierarchies. And we have had success demonstrating to our members that the new work systems are worth it.

It's not always easy to convince our members—sometimes they've been invited in the past by management into participatory roles that proved to be empty. But the opportunity is available to management to make a significant improvement in the way the organization performs. The price for managers is the shift away from an old command-and-control way of thinking. For managers, that is a very hard choice. They really struggle with it.

Since we have been able to reorganize parts of Harvard and provide more opportunities for self-direction, more skills and strategies for planning coordinating roles, so far—without fail—our members have been interested in redesigning the scheduling. Unilateral workplace design doesn't work; there needs to be more flexibility to figure out the work schedule in a creative way. Our members are always interested in learning more, increasing skills and improving organizational group performance. A supervisor in

her office with her door closed can't figure out by herself how to make this schedule more flexible in a way that is going to respond to the needs and responsibilities that the workers have outside the workplace. But oftentimes the workers and their union can figure it out.

JW: I can't tell you the number of times that I've reached a point in a problem where I could see no way to bring the different viewpoints together, even after talking to every person involved. So I finally say, let's get everyone in the same room and have it out. It is remarkable to me how many times a problem solves itself as soon as you have everybody in the room. People stop demonizing each other. They stop stating their position so extremely. There's somebody in the room who makes sure everybody's on their good behavior and shapes the conversation around finding common ground. You walk out with an answer. At times I think, "How was that possible? I talked to everybody and I couldn't find an answer." But when they are all together they found one. That's one of the keys to the problem-solving model. The union doesn't hold keys to solutions, but we do coach and support members in the search to find those keys.

We don't have a traditional grievance procedure; we have a problem-solving process with mediation and arbitration as the final step. Problem-solving takes the adversarial nature out of the process and emphasizes union and management working together to solve the problem. The problem-solving process is not limited to issues spelled out in the contract. We coach the worker in everyday negotiation skills. It's remarkable what can get solved.

It actually changes the nature of work for the person who is involved in a very substantial way. Perhaps most importantly, by not taking the problem out of the worker's hands to be decided by others, as in a traditional grievance procedure, we can change the nature of work for the people involved. The next time, the worker may not need the union rep or HR, or may call the union rep just to strategize about it, and then go solve the problem with their manager on their own. When people learn to represent themselves, the balance of power shifts.

ES: A huge number of problems are resolved at the first step in our problem-solving process. In the hospital union we've had four arbitrations in seven years. To be frank, we had to do some to set a standard because some managers seemed to think that our more polite approach made us easier to push around. So we set some standards about what we wouldn't put up with. And the result is that now we do a joint investigation before any termination that we consider controversial. We don't have to go to mediation or arbitration very often; it's cheaper and we save a lot of time that way.

We fix things at the first step much more often and a wider variety of problems. Very rarely is the problem-solving case something involving the contract; those mostly either don't happen or get quickly fixed. Usually it's a conflict between an employee and a supervisor. We resolve at least five or six hundred of those every year—sometimes through direct intervention, but often by coaching the employee to represent him or herself.

BJ: When a problem-solving process goes well, the other thing that happens is we educate and we provide the manager with a different way of resolving conflict. We were talking earlier about wanting to train all of our members to negotiate. Sometimes our members remind us that it only does so much good to have all these skills and strategies and all this enthusiasm if the managers are left out of the learning. We have to be working on the whole culture. The problem-solving process—if we are really dedicated and working really hard at it and invest in it—gives us the opportunity to build trust.

JW: It is an amazing union experience for the union reps to learn and do problem-solving. Yet we constantly struggle—is it worth the time it takes to train someone new? It's relatively easy to give reps classes in problem-solving, to provide ideas for what to expect and how to get through a tough meeting, and to talk about the role of organizing. But to really learn problem-solving, we believe that organizers have to work one-on-one with each activist. We do problem-solving in pairs for a while, then consult with everyone until they get really comfortable, and consult again as they take on tougher cases.

So much of problem-solving is about relationships and trust, and you can't teach that in a class. We put a huge amount of work into the process, but the payoff is worth it. Repeatedly we are reminded how worthwhile it is to invest time into an activist. Each person who can solve increasingly complex problems and who can become a leader adds strength to the union and to the workplace.

LS: How are the unions approaching job redesign and learning?

BJ: In contract negotiations at Harvard we have pressed repeatedly to increase the opportunities in terms of learning, in terms of formal education and training. We're just trying to remove barriers. We are trying to get cheaper or free on-site training opportunities, and increased tuition assistance for formal education paths. We have good, negotiated policy language about using paid work-time for training, education, or professional development. Although time off is one of those things that the contract language treats well, we have to encourage our members to take advantage of it.

As an organization, we have to give more support and encouragement to our members to learn and be optimistic about learning. We need to interpret the contemporary American workplace for workers so they understand how important learning is. Much more often now I find myself saying to a member, "Do you know you have to do this? You have to take part in training programs." Or: "You should finish that bachelor's degree. It might be a question of professional success or failure." We've seen that it's more urgent than it used to be and the stakes are higher.

I am working on a problem right now where a department-head is giving up on retraining a couple of worker. The department changed its technology so we are having an argument whether the department should invest and train these two women, or lay them off and hire replacements. I went to a meeting with management about this and they were talking about the worker's low skill levels. I thought part of this might be age bias; I had this vague feeling I look up their ages and discover they were in their fifties. They

weren't; one worker is thirty-nine and the other is forty-one. So it's not only about age, it's about skills. I hope we are going to win but it's one of those stories that makes it clear that besides changing policies to lower barriers, we also have to encourage our members to jump higher, to climb higher.

KR: When workers connect with the union, each one can figure out how to become a learner. There are three levels of learning. One is internal learning through union programs; there's a wide array of these. The next level is job-related and career development-related. The third is what we will call "What about Shakespeare?" That is, learning for its own sake that may not be about the employee's career or directly connected to her capacity to be a union leader. However, we recognize that continuous adult learning is good for your pocketbook and your soul, too.

JL: UMass Medical School has been notoriously—in the past—legal-minded. Problems were solved often by doing the minimum that would fly legally. There was no understanding of creative or cooperative problem-solving. I think there are openings for us to work together now that we didn't have in the past. You can make small changes and fine things can happen that wouldn't have happened two years ago. Slowly this place has come to feel different to people, and that's a powerful thing. It is perceptible.

A key reason for that shift is that our union has always valued the idea of not becoming adversarial no matter how rough the going gets. A bad substitute for this would be to say, "Alright, I guess we just can't do this." We try, rather, to look at another way of achieving a thing. It's a marvelous thing to work with good people at problem-solving, to negotiate a more creative contract, or put more learning into that contract.

MM: In a way, the workers at UMass Medical School are trying to create a workplace culture. That's not always easy to do; it's really been a collaborative effort to come up with a workplace-personality and a culture that would hold people together.

We've always had this very basic idea that people should be able to represent themselves. That's what it's all about—people learning more about themselves and how to do things. The idea is that the more people can do for themselves, the more things are going to change. It might take longer that way, but it's actually going to change the institution.

We have taken the three most important things to our locals and created training opportunities for our members. "Organizing, Connections, and Building Relationships" is one of the workshops. The second one talks about everyday negotiation; what are the kinds of skills you need? How does the negotiator prepare? How do you think about negotiating with a supervisor?

The third is problem-solving. These workshops have two purposes: showing people that this union has a very different approach to things, and conveying the specific skills that we use. I feel like we need to put as much energy into that as we do into directly working with management. It will change the dynamic eventually.

BJ: As we build and reinforce the architecture of this idea, we want to add workshops on meeting skills and customer service skills. This is interesting because, to some extent, it is in those areas where we are challenging orthodoxy because those are areas where there is a traditional, management-driven way of teaching people about how to do customer service and how to participate in meetings. Our workshops are going to say something different about that.

LS: And by customer, you mean the people your union members are interacting with?

KR: Yes: students, faculty, visitors, and, of course, co-workers. Library workers have patrons and faculty assistants have students, and so on.

JW: “Customer” is not our word. It’s a word that employers now call the people you deal with.

LS: It’s interesting that HUCTW is working with employees on customer service and SHARE is working on patient satisfaction, when it seems like management should be focused on doing that work.

KR: That’s exactly right. I began doing this work thinking that the places where we would have conflict with management would be how big the raises were.

JL: In fact, it is often more difficult to achieve change in the dynamics of employer/employee interactions than to negotiate for money.

JW: There are real things to be fixed that would make patients happier, that would make workers happier, that would make the place run better, that would make the hospital more productive, that would probably get the hospital more money.

Unlike manufacturing, hospitals have not been profit-oriented organizations for very long; now they have to make money and they aren’t set up for that. They are always scared about money and unable to figure out how to move forward because they are holding the roof together.

At a workshop recently, the facilitator told us the key to improvement is, “First stabilize, and then innovate.” That’s the problem in the hospital, the stabilizing part. You can’t get to innovate because there is so much going on in healthcare that you can’t stabilize.

Our members say over and over, “I love my job; I hate the stuff around it.” If we could remove the barriers that make our members’ work needlessly difficult and give them the ability to do the work that they want to do, that would be best thing that we could do as a union.

We had a project in the CAT Scan department a while back. We put a huge amount of effort into it and involved everybody in the redesign of jobs: the prioritization of the patients, the standardizing of the protocol, and the reorganization of the workflow. We had it all figured out, but management wouldn’t take the risk to endorse it and spend

the little bit of money to start. No manager at the time was willing to take the risk if success couldn't be guaranteed.

Worker participation in work design is at the top of our priority list. We train members on organizing and problem-solving. And we are doing a bunch of other things that don't need to come from the union, but we see a need to fill in gaps. We run pension workshops, for example. So we have got some worker-experts in those fields because we trained them. But it's not the kind of work we really want to be doing which is figuring out how to redesign patient care to make it work better for the patients and employees.

MM: We are very persistent. There just isn't anything else to do. We are persistent about the quality of work as well as quality of life. We can't just give up on that and go for the economic incentive. We figured out quickly, it's easier to get money than it is to get almost anything else. That's just such a soulless thing.

Maybe that's what work has always been. Maybe it's not a question of the way things are becoming. But is that what we want it to be? Is that how people want to spend their lives?

We just keep chipping away and trying to figure out what needs to get into these different structures for participation. Even if an attempt doesn't work, everyone involved learns from the experience.

BJ: The hopeful note is, as a result of that persistence that Marie is describing, we're carrying out experimental projects in the Harvard setting—and we are documenting them. These projects focus on our union members being involved in the redesign of their work systems. There are encouraging results so far.

We have had real success in changing the way managers in those groups think. And those are some of the university's star managers at this point; people whose units are growing and who are being given more responsibility. There are instances that we can point to at Harvard that show us it's possible to realize some of these ideas and we've had success in convincing Harvard to commit resources to support further experimentation.

Unions face the challenge of the lack of everyday democracy in the American workplace. There's a real opportunity to be thinking in terms of both structural approaches and also the fun, community-building approaches to workplace issues. I think it's an exciting and powerful democratizing effect when a union gives away chocolate in the lobby of a building, and especially when union members participate in redesigning their work system. The combination of those approaches is fun to think about.

ES: One of the things that I get out of a conversation like this is the reminder of the importance of persistence—basically we have to live our lives in a healthy way when our management partner is not ready to work with us, and always be ready to accept them and to work in partnership with them when they are ready. If you are going to build something that almost no one else is building, you have to be patient. It's easier when we can work with the same managers over a few years, but there is a huge turnover in management, especially HR. We are constantly meeting new managers and going through a process that begins with them thinking, "Gee, they're really nice but I won't

have to deal with them too much.” And then pretty soon it’s “Wait a minute—they’re back.”

There was one meeting Janet and I had with a new HR employee; he said, “I don’t understand why we are talking about this. Haven’t we answered this question before?” And his manager, who’d been there longer than him, just started laughing and said, “Yep. That’s what SHARE does. They just keep asking the question until somebody gives them the answer they’re looking for.” It was a funny moment. It was good for the new guy, and it was good for my soul because we’d been working for a long time with the woman who said this. It made me happy that she noticed we persist.

One of the things SHARE wanted to talk about is equity for part-time employees. And that’s a good example of persistence. HUCTW had a hard-fought battle over health insurance rates for part-time employees at Harvard. It was won many, many times. It certainly required bulldog persistence. It’s important that we hold on to that. We have to keep thinking, “We may not get it this time, so we have to get it next time.” We still have a lot of things we want to change about these workplaces, but if we had taken a short-term view of what’s possible to change, we’d never have gotten as far as we have.

LS: Could you talk a little bit about the need for part-time equity? What it is and how did you get it?

BJ: Our experience is that voluntary, benefited, part-time work is incredibly important societal glue. For those reasons, and for the flexibility we were talking about before, people have to be able to work part-time for a period in their lives, or for most or all of their lives. The Harvard workforce is full of artists and writers and students, actors and moms and gardeners, ne’er-do-wells and scoundrels of various types. There are a lot of people—something like fifteen percent—of HUCTW members who work less than full-time. Those people are doing great things, great community-building, community-serving things.

The big thing about equity for part-time workers is healthcare. When we talk with artists and musicians about why they work at Harvard, that’s what they say. Part-time plus healthcare is the ticket for moms and dads, too. It’s incredibly valuable and is way too rare. Tragically, I think many Americans are making decisions about things they love and care about based on the threat of losing healthcare.

ES: In the hospital, the percentage of our members who work less than full-time is enormous. It’s partly because the hospital functions by having part-time employees who are eager for overtime or for extra straight-time hours and partly because every single person can be put into a weekend rotation.

A few years ago, when the hospitals merged, the resulting conglomeration tried to bring the benefits down to the lower level of whichever system had less. The old Memorial health insurance was structured so that you paid a much larger percentage if you were part-time and had family coverage. We altered that, based on the Harvard example.



JW: Another thing that we have done, based on the fact that people come in and out of the workplace, is we have worked hard to restore their time. For instance, if you left the hospital and came back, you got your previous time back for the purpose of calculating seniority lists and lay-offs and your vacation. Those things are based on total number of years you've worked there, not how long you've worked there recently.

It's interesting that some managers have the idea that the time an employee has been at a given workplace in one stretch is a measure of their loyalty. These managers believe that the decision is about an employee going to work for a competitor and then coming back because they've decided their first employer was really better. They believe the employee should have been loyal enough in the first place to never leave.

ES: Management sometimes also views an employee's children as competitors. If you are really loyal, you will figure out a way to stay at work and take care of your family. We have that a lot. For many of the incidents children have which call their parents away from work, the employer's response usually is something like, "Couldn't you get someone else to do that?" In response his mother's saying, "He doesn't have a father." Or "Yes, but you wrote his father up for doing it last week." Or "Yeah, I could ask my mother, but she's working on another floor."

MM: In these cases, there's no recognition of the whole person. It sometimes seems as if all the other aspects of that employee vanish when she comes to work.

KR: On the other hand, I think that managers are suffering as much. In general, managers earn more and can outsource more of their domestic responsibility. But the modern paradigm has labor and management in pain. If there is any hope for the future, it might come out of this mutual misery.

I'd like to throw out two things that we might want to address. One is that we negotiate with employers for joint money so that we can go through processes of learning and discovery together or do projects together. And the other is work security.

There's a particularly amazing story that comes out of the SHARE local when the infamous Hunter Group came in to make drastic cuts there. We don't have bumping because we don't believe in it.<sup>3</sup> But we do have work-security, which basically says that the institution and the union make a joint commitment to find somebody a job and there's money for training. We have all kinds of rules if somebody has to be laid off. Then we say your emphasis shouldn't be on who gets laid-off it; it should be on finding that person a job. There's expansive work security, which means that the employer agrees to help find a job even if it's outside the bargaining unit so that union and non-union jobs are up for grabs if there are vacancies.

We have had situations where management said they were going to lay-off an employee and the workers got together to talk about it. One might have said, "I've been trying to cut my hours." Or another, "I would be happy to have Friday morning off." And together they figured out how to cut the hours rather than losing one person.

But the most successful piece [of the union's response to Hunter] was the volunteer system. If someone is under the threat of being laid off, we put out the alert to

everyone in a similar job title: “If you would like to be laid off, please raise your hands and we will find out if it’s a compatible swap.” And then the person who was going to be laid off takes the other person’s job and the person who wants to be laid off gets the lay-off benefits, including the training money.

JW: Many employees jumped at that combination of severance and money for schooling. Some workers said, “It was exactly what I was hoping for right now.” One member wanted to retire in six months; with unemployment and severance money, she could move to Florida early and start building her house. She was ecstatic. Sometimes these arrangements allow a member to go and take care of somebody in their family.

I know one woman who has taken more of the training money than any one else. She swapped with somebody who was going to be laid off who had worked there twenty years. Now she’s getting her bachelor’s in psychology. She said, “I’ve never had this opportunity. I never had time to not earn a living and go to school. And I decided in the beginning that even though I initially didn’t know what I wanted to do, I knew I would never be given this opportunity again.” It’s so exciting that she is going off finding a new life for herself.

The other guy whose life would have been drastically complicated by a lay-off is okay. He has a new position within the same hospital. His wife works there. They both have worked there forever. They commute together. Their whole lives are set up around working there. And he’s really happy to learn a new thing in a different community with different people.

ES: What I loved about it, first of all, was that you had to have a relationship to make that job-swapping idea fly. Secondly, in a lot of these swaps there was an act of generosity, one member protecting another who couldn’t afford a lay-off. People said, “She’s a single mom. I’ll find another job.” I think it’s another case in which the contract language is fairly exceptional. And then there was making it work on the ground, which is also exceptional. We trained dozens of employee reps to be with a person while they were hearing the news of their lay-off and to follow up with that person afterwards.

JL: SHARE arranged for workers to be brought to a room after they heard the news of the lay-off. There they got more help in figuring out what some possible next-steps were. Then members had an individual rep assigned to them so that when they went home and fully realized what had happened to them, they had a phone number to call.

JW: Their rep called them every day until they were okay. Then they called them again every few days until they were placed. So every single SHARE member who was laid off had someone to hold their hand from the moment they were laid off, from the moment of the horrible experience of hearing it. Afterwards the rep was there to find out what resources were available. And the rep provided notes on paper for that member to take away with them, since it’s hard to remember information when the words “lay-off” are going off in their heads.

Every single person either decided to move on or found a job in the place. There were many people who did not want to work there again, but there was nobody who wanted to work at UMass Memorial who couldn't.

ES: And that's when we figured out what we were doing was really special. A manager who was laying-off a non-union person and who then laid off a SHARE person said to us, "I'm so glad you were here. I'm so glad that my person has you here with her because I feel so bad for these people." Of course we were here.

LS: What else do you have joint money with management for?

ES: We cared enough to foster a relationship to make sure there was joint money there to spend on facilitators and mediators and other things for direct projects. We have to really make them happen because otherwise you get to the point where management says, "Let's try this." And then there's the moment of realization: "Oh. Wait. Shoot. It's going to cost start-up money." So if we can remove that hurdle before we begin the conversation, it puts us that much closer to being able to do what we said.

KR: It may be some kind of heresy even among ourselves to say this, but I'm not sure that we believe in some broad culture change, or that it's possible to decide to change an organization. Everything that we have ever done—let's say it's about accommodating schedules, more education or career development, or taking care of your mom or your children—every single one of those has been individually negotiated. As Janet said, it's a new definition of fairness, but it's also an idea that the problems that exist in the workplace are intractable and they require individual solutions. You can't do it cleanly in one fell swoop. So what you need to do—for work-security, for problem-solving, for flexibility, for learning and career development—is to grow deep roots in a community. It requires hundreds of people being involved figuring it out even in a single workplace. And you have to build deep skill in that community. If labor can do that, then labor has done something fabulous because it gives people the opportunity to figure out how to change work, which is a continuous challenge.

BJ: Skills make people powerful and it's really cool to see our members figure this out, to see that the skills you have matter more than which box someone puts you in on an organizational chart. The people who are painted in the "low boxes" can have a huge amount of influence and can sometimes negotiate and maneuver in circles around the people who are in the higher boxes on the chart. I think that's really good for workers, unions, and for the organizations employing our members.

Not everybody believes this. We have a lot to do to convince some of our members of that. I guess I'm saying skills not only trump position on the organizational chart, but they trump contract language as well. Every day we see that happening. It's a big job we have to do helping all our members understand that. Some are deeply skeptical, but others really love the idea.

ES: We spent so many years agreeing to management's nervous requests that we sign something stipulating that a particular agreement would not be precedent-setting that they figured out we will agree that almost anything is non-precedent setting. Because we are quite confident that we could get that deal again if we need to.

But at the same time they're learning something about us, I'm learning something about the prevailing culture, which is that management believes that most unions wouldn't agree to change one lady's schedule by fifteen minutes so she can walk her kids across the busy street without demanding that everyone should have that right.

KR: People have a number of archaic beliefs. One of these archaic beliefs is what a union is. Another one is that the rule-of-law is democracy—but it isn't, they are two separate things. A third is that a lot of people believe that a simple identity is better than a complex one. I don't think that's true. We have these archaic definitions and they're holding us back from figuring out how to change work and fix some things that are really bad for us. I think for a supervisor it is much better to have a complex worker with a complex identity, even if she has to pick up her kids at four o'clock.

MM: That's what some managers can't get. They can't get that they're really gaining something by having that complex, intelligent, thoughtful person. Some people can't deal with that; they want the world to be very ordered.

BJ: What confounds me still about the everyday American workplace is the Grand Canyon-size gap between theory and practice in this regard. A lot of what we are talking about is the idea that American unions need to be re-invented. And it is clear that American management needs to be re-invented.

But you know what? Management doesn't need to. The reinvention has already been written. For thirty years, everything that has come out of the business school has said the same thing. It's been re-invented; it's just that the redesign of American business has not been implemented. I think the barriers are psychological and they are about class and self-image. The reinvention of American management sometimes seems so much closer—so much more accessible—than the reinvention of American labor because it's been analyzed and scripted meticulously. It just hasn't been done yet.

ES: Recently one of our members, who is her department's union rep, called me to ask for her job description as a union rep. I said, "Sure, but why?" She said, "My supervisor is writing my performance evaluation, and she wants to say that I have learned new things and new skills and bring them to the department." I joyfully gave her the job description of a union rep.

Before our union election, this employee was anti-union, so I am especially happy that she is a rep. What's more, this supervisor had once physically escorted us out of the building from one of our informational meetings. The idea that these two people—the one that nervously walked us out of the building, and the one who was always polite but thought the union was going to make the workplace too rigid—are sitting down and talking about how great it is that one of them has learned new problem-solving skills and

brings those to her department, and the other one is giving her a better performance evaluation because of that—seems to me to be symbolic of the possibility of change.

### Notes

I would like to thank Dorothy Sue Cobble for putting together this volume and for inviting me to be a part of it and Kirk Davis who helped with the editing. I am especially grateful to all the organizers and members of SHARE and HUCTW who have spent time with me and shared their lives with me over the years for their energy, commitment to change, and good humor.

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<sup>1</sup> A 1998 merger between Memorial Hospital and UMass Medical resulted in the creation of a private-sector institution named UMass Memorial Medical Center and kept UMass Medical School a separate and public-sector entity; in effect this created 2 SHARE locals with one representing hospitals workers and the other representing school workers. SHARE has since organized workers from Memorial Hospital in the newly created UMass Memorial.

Both HUCTW and SHARE are characterized by a predominantly female membership across a broad range of occupational categories with numerous geographical locations and individual worksites. HUCTW has about 4,800 members, all employed by Harvard University or one of its affiliated pieces in one of 130 jobs classification. SHARE represents about 2400 workers (about 85% women) at UMass Memorial Medical Center in a private-sector healthcare system with about half of their members in clerical or billing roles and the other half in patient care (e.g. nursing assistants) and technical positions (e.g. respiratory therapists). SHARE also represent workers at UMass Medical School, a public institution with 450 members (about 75% women) such as research technicians along with library and clerical staff in a variety of settings including public mental health units, adolescent units, and even an animal medicine department, which includes animal technicians. HUCTW also represents about 120 social workers at Cambridge Health Alliance and a small unit of family liaison workers in Cambridge Public Schools and has an organizing campaign underway at Tufts University for about a thousand people on its three campuses.

<sup>2</sup> HUCTW, and to a lesser extent SHARE, has received much attention for the innovative one-on-one organizing strategy. In particular, John Hoerr's excellent book, [We Can't Eat Prestige: The Women Who Organized Harvard](#), is a comprehensive history of HUCTW's beginnings. Other observers have written about the ways in which HUCTW and SHARE are addressing the need for reinventing unions to better

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represent workers in service workplaces (Clawson 2003; Cobble 1996; Eaton 1996; Hurd 1993; Oppenheim 1991; Putnam et al. 2003; Savage 1996, 1998, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Bumping occurs a worker with the lower seniority is displaced in order that a worker with more seniority can take retain a position. Typically, union contracts outline the parameters that bumping can take place within (e.g., unit, department, workplace) and the skill requirements if any required so that seniority is not the sole determining factor in lay-offs.