

Women and American Labor

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WHEN THE REVOLUTION COMES it will be led by women in aprons, women with their rubber-gloved hands on their hips. Or so the cover of Dorothy Sue Cobble's new anthology, *The Sex of Class: Women Transforming American Labor* might suggest. The anthology includes a wide array of primarily women's voices, ranging from university professors to labor activists, all engaged in debate and discussion about the changing face of the labor movement. In her introduction, Cobble warns organized labor that it had better pay attention to the "defiant and female" worker on the cover. The book confronts the failure of academic discourse on labor to adequately address the intersection of sex and class. Few books, Cobble commented in a phone interview,* have noted the fact that the face of labor is changing, that women are now the majority in many facets of the labor movement. Despite a revived interest in labor activism and immigrant workers' activism in particular, Cobble says, labor researchers have failed to account for the fact that gender matters. *The Sex of Class* begins to fill this gap by discussing the separate histories of the labor and women's movements, the struggles that working women have faced, and the ways in which different groups have come together to organize. Cobble, a professor of labor studies, history, and women's and gender studies at Rutgers University, has published several books about labor, including the 1994 winner of the Philip Taft Book Prize for the best book in American labor history, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, 2004). *The Sex of Class* is both accessible and engaging, not only for those who study labor, but also for young people who have a lot of fire for social action, and just need a solid foundation upon which to dance. Cobble said it took some cajoling to convince the labor organizers in this anthology to contribute to an academic publication, something some of them were unused to. The cajoling was well worth the effort. The wide range of expertise in *The Sex of Class*, offered by seasoned activists as well as polished researchers, reveals both the complexities of the problems and the innovativeness of the solutions posed by the labor and women's movements. The anthology also offers perspectives from many different identity groups and workers' groups within the labor movement. Separate chapters address the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) movement for labor rights, the global activist efforts of informal economy workers and foreign factory workers, immigrant rights activism, and the struggles of welfare women, mothers, and home care providers. Cobble's introduction is an appeal to all of these groups to unite in opposition to a system that is aligned against all of them. Many of the contributors echo this call for a newer, more unified struggle. Karen Nussbaum, a longtime labor organizer who worked for the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, writes, in her illuminating chapter on the history of working women's "insurgent conscious," that in the 1970s one union leader told her: "You can't organize women because they think with their cunts, not their brains." (162) The essays in this collection show us that women are not only capable of using their brains, but able to do so with strength and brilliance. The stories about women's organizing efforts are by far the most compelling part of this book. Stories about factory workers organizing global campaigns, secretarial workers singing songs of action, and activists in Montana organizing paid wages for stay-at-home mothers seem to echo with potential. These stories show that there is a women's labor movement out there, or at least that there are vibrant pockets of ingenious and determined women's labor activism. The unification of these pockets, and of the still separate struggles of labor and feminism, is the underlying goal of Cobble's anthology. It is a call to unity and a call to action. Cobble begins the introduction to this book with a story about sexual harassment:

"A young female laundry worker is distraught," Cobble writes, "when her boss tells her that she too will have to service him sexually if she wants to keep her job. And what a job

it is: paltry wages, stifling heat, the dirty laundry relentlessly piling up around her, the huge unforgiving machines ready to scorch her hands along with the hot starched sheets."

In this story, the worker and several of her female co-workers fight back. They contact a local workers' organization. "They might have won, too," Cobble imagines, "had not some of their husbands and boyfriends interfered; the women were needed at home, the men insisted; and besides, such aggressive public displays were unfeminine." Cobble uses this example to demonstrate the multi-faceted oppression endured by working class, marginalized women. Her prototypical worker faces economic concerns, harsh working conditions, and perhaps also racial and ethnic discrimination. At home she is not acknowledged as an equal partner. At work she is not acknowledged as a worker. After this example, however, the issue of sexual harassment—and the intricately connected issues of sexual assault and domestic violence — are then abandoned for most of the book. The young female laundry worker's story is never resolved. MANY OF THE CONTRIBUTORS to the anthology bump up against the issues of sexual harassment and sexual assault in their discussion of other topics, but the issue deserves more scrutiny than it receives. Katie Quan's essay on women factory workers is one of the few that provides examples of sexual harassment. She writes about how workers in Sara Lee's maquiladoras were forced to take pregnancy tests every three months and sometimes "required to show soiled sanitary napkins to prove they were having menstrual cycles." (257) Those who were pregnant were either fired or compelled to work just as hard as they had before. Quan writes, "It was not uncommon to see blood in the restrooms—the result of an abortion." (257) Such stories both remind us that sexual harassment and other forms of sexual abuse are a tactic of control used by employers and also illustrate the depth of the damage such tactics cause. In her call to organized labor to put anti-sexual harassment action on their agenda, Marion Crain demonstrates that sexual harassment is a "collective harm" that hurts the men who witness it as well as the women who are often the recipients of such abuse by creating a "toxic work environment." Does the labor movement need to know that sexual harassment hurts anyone other than the victims in order to act on it? Perhaps so. Cobble believes that one of the strengths of the book is that it proves that so-called women's labor issues in fact impact everyone. This argument is echoed in Crain's article and many of the other essays in this book; male laborers need to pay attention, the book suggests, because it is in their best interest, as well as women's. The separation of women's issues and labor issues has dictated the agenda of the labor movement for too long, and the book invites the reader to see these issues as one and the same. This is a powerful concept. It might have been even more powerful if someone had added a footnote that said, "As it turns out, this stuff is important for everyone. But even if it weren't, it would still be worth addressing." The issue of race is peripherally mentioned in many chapters, and though the book addresses the fact that many welfare recipients and women who occupy the worst-paid positions are women of color, a chapter that offers a prescription for how to address the multiple layers of oppression brought on by race and class would have greatly enriched the text. Though the early women's movement was far more receptive than the mainstream labor movement to concerns raised by other marginalized groups, like the LGBTQ community, when it comes to race the women's movement has often failed to represent all women. More attention could have been granted to the ways that women of all races, as well as all classes, have worked together, or have failed to do so. One argument of this book is that there is a need to expand the definition of worker to include women wage workers, welfare recipients, and mothers. This definition must also expand to include workers of all races. The issue of race as well as the issue of gender cannot be seen as separate from the overall struggle for workers' rights, for the rights of all people to work in a safe environment and live in a safe home. *The Sex of Class* has something for just about everyone interested in labor and feminism. For the policy-makers, it offers new strategies for public policy that will benefit women workers. For union leaders, it is an appeal to pay attention to sexual

differences and to make the sex of class part of the agenda. For the working women's movement, it is both a resounding pat on the back and a call for new ideas and new alliances. And for the student beginning a study of feminism and labor activism, it blends together the two issues with elegance and clarity. It unites past with present, and then turns towards the future. Here is your legacy, it tells the young activist. Now get out there and exercise your "insurgent conscious," your heart, and your brain.