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Protecting Women's Jobs: Unions and Deindustrialization

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This paper explores the impact of union membership on a group of unskilled women workers at a public university in a midwestern city. Although the region has experienced high levels of unemployment in recent years, women subjects have been relatively insulated from job loss. Consistent with other research findings on the consequences of unionization, interviews with 18 women indicate that their job tenure is long, tendency to exit jobs low, and wages and benefits relatively good. African-American and white women have slightly different employment histories, however, reflecting patterns of discrimination and occupational segregation in the work place. Regional economic change has little apparent impact on current spouses' job holding. But their children have had difficulty finding secure jobs.

The "rustbelt" of the industrial Midwest has experienced economic decline in recent years related to the loss of manufacturing jobs and firms. The gender implications of these changes have been explored by Perrucci (1988), Kuhn and Bluestone (1987), Rosen (1987), Smith (1984), Sternlieb and Baker (1987) and others. All agree that in the last two decades, as men have lost jobs in the waning industrial sector, women have gained employment in the developing service economy and in other areas of low-wage, part-time and contingent employment.

While these findings are generally correct, they mask the experiences of occupational and age cohorts in deindustrializing regions that remain relatively untouched by the massive economic changes surrounding them. For example, unionized workers outside of manufacturing are generally safe from job losses, although wage gains may be harder to realize and the number of new jobs available few. Women and minorities in such jobs, particularly those with seniority, are advantaged

relative to many white male workers and their counterparts in non-unionized jobs.

This is a study of unionized women service workers at a public university. Using data from university records, interviews with union officials and formal interviews with 18 women, I explored women's job experiences and those of family members. I found that despite regional job losses in manufacturing, women subjects had long job tenure in positions that brought relatively good wages and benefits. Their spouses held stable jobs, mostly in the service sector, while many of their adult children could not find secure employment in manufacturing or service industries.

White and African-American women subjects had slightly different work histories, with the latter more likely to display a pattern of continuous employment and white women a history of exit from the work force with marriage and the birth of children and reentry in response to divorce. Moreover, a job queuing system seems to be in place, whereby jobs once held largely by minority women have increasingly drawn white women and, more recently, men.

While women subjects acknowledged the value of their unions in protecting wages, benefits and positions, they indicated some dissatisfaction with union practices and exhibited low levels of participation in union events. The dominance of men and skilled, higher status workers in local union leadership, as well as women's reported high levels of obligation to family, church, and community groups, may explain their lack of union involvement.

The Industrial Midwest: Economic Change and Job Security

Since the early 1980's, the industrial Midwest has experienced decline related to the loss of jobs in manufacturing. Firms have moved elsewhere in the United States or to other countries, or reduced the size of their work force in an effort to save money. The economic situation of workers in Toledo has been similar to that of their counterparts in many other cities in the eastern and midwestern United States. The Toledo SMSA suffered a 20% loss in manufacturing jobs from January 1976 to

January 1986 (Connin, 1987), largely in response to the decline in auto manufacturing in Toledo and elsewhere in the Michigan-Ohio region. On the other hand, jobs increased in both service and retail trade in the 1980's (Connin, 1987).

In 1991, unions represented only 18.2% of employed U.S. wage and salary workers, a drop from 23.3% in 1983 (Bureau of the Census, 1984: 422). Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that unions protect workers. Wages and benefits in unionized jobs keep up with those in similar, non-unionized ones and set the wage standards in some industries. Unionized workers have higher job tenure and less job loss than those in non-unionized jobs; older unionized workers benefit in particular from protection against layoffs. The impact of unionization on job tenure "has large effects among service workers, where nonunion employees are likely to be especially poorly treated" (Freeman and Medoff, 1984).

For years, from 1990 to 1994, I studied the work and family lives of women service workers at a Toledo area university. Nearly all are represented by the Communication Workers of America, the union of telephone workers that has in recent years organized in other industries (Schacht, 1985). The United Auto Workers represents the university's cafeteria workers, also having reached beyond its primary, manufacturing sector constituency to enroll service sector workers.

I interviewed local union officials, women workers in more skilled positions at the university, scholars and activists involved in issues of industrial restructuring in Toledo, and some male workers in custodial and repair services. I conducted a more formal set of interviews with 18 unskilled women workers. The interview schedule consisted of 69 questions, focusing on subject's work history, and family composition, and the earning and distribution of income within households.

The first wave of structured interviews was conducted in 1990. Names were drawn from the telephone listing of approximately 2300 workers at the university, a subset of the 2661 working there full-time in 1990. I selected randomly women who worked in several full-time unskilled salaried job categories (custodian, clerk, cafeteria worker). This method of selection yielded only three workers of color. In 1992, with the help

of a housekeeping supervisor, I identified three more African-American women, all custodial workers who agreed to be interviewed. African-Americans may thus be overrepresented in the sample of custodial workers, although it is also the case that African-Americans are disproportionately represented among custodial workers at the university.

The Subjects and the Setting

By the standards of the surrounding community, with unemployment rates exceeding 10% through much of the 1980's, the university is an attractive work setting. The median wage level for both African-American and white women workers interviewed was about \$9.00 per hour, \$360 weekly, leaving them with an annual salary higher than the national average for women service workers of \$219 weekly in 1989 (Bureau of the Census, 1991: 415). Health benefits were considered good, with an HMO membership for workers and dependents paid for by the employer.

Most women interviewed had worked for at least ten years, with a surprisingly large share working for all or most of their adult lives. Racial differences were salient, with all of the African-American subjects having had continuous work force participation as adults, but only five of twelve white women indicating unbroken work histories. With a median age of 47, the group was older than the largest cohort of working women (aged 35–44). All but two members of the sample had at least a high school education, consistent with average levels of education for the female population as a whole (Bureau of the Census, 1991: 384).

Several women talked about how difficult it was to get a position at the university, particularly during the prior two or three years when the institution "downsized" and the staff declined in number through attrition. A young African-American woman reported waiting three years to get a custodial position. A white single mother waited two years, also for custodial work. Others spoke of how lucky they were to have a job at the university, with work that was relatively well rewarded and secure during a time of regional economic decline. It is also clear that access to jobs at the university was dependent on

advanced knowledge of openings. While a hot-line announced new jobs, the more certain way of learning of a position was through friends and relatives at the university who knew when a retirement or resignation was imminent. Family ties could be especially significant in identifying a position, as in Jeannette's (a pseudonym) case.

Jeanette is a 42 year old Euro-American woman. She is a custodian in the main university building. She is responsible for a segment of a large floor, including the university president's office. Jeanette has had her current job for four years. She waited for two years for it to open. Jeanette was content with this wait; she was busy raising young children. The delay was caused in part by the university's nepotism rule. Jeanette's mother worked in custodial services, and until she retired Jeanette could not take a position. Jeanette's good fortune in getting a job at the university is, of course, a result of her mother and friends alerting her to openings.

Jeanette had worked as a beautician. She is in fact a licensed cosmetologist. The wage at her last full-time cosmetology position (\$4.25/hour, plus commission) compared favorably to a custodian's earnings at the university (\$8.66/hour). But the better benefits at the university make it a more attractive work setting.

For many women in the sample, their salaries from the university constituted only part of their families' income. All married women had husbands who worked or had retired with pensions. Divorced women and the single widow whose children were grown depended on their salaries almost exclusively. The six single women with children relied principally on their own incomes, with supplements from parents, child support, or the state. Some, like Cheryl, took additional jobs to survive.

Cheryl is a 44 year old Euro-American woman. Her children range in age from 9 to 18. The youngest three live at home, with the oldest, a daughter, an occasional resident. Divorced for nearly a decade, Cheryl has had a rough time making ends meet and caring for her children.

Cheryl makes \$9.06 an hour in her job as a university custodian. At her second job, cleaning offices at night for a private company, she makes about \$35.00 an assignment, totalling nearly \$400.00 monthly. No child support or other sources of income are available to Cheryl and her family.

All household chores fall to Cheryl, as they did when she was married. Her children have had many problems at home and at school. Working two jobs, Cheryl is often away from them. With no help from family or friends, the children are frequently alone, a worry to Cheryl.

Married women's spouses' jobs varied, but many were also unskilled and in the service sector. Only two current husbands had post-secondary degrees. The sole professional, an architect, had recently been unemployed for a three year period. Other jobs of spouses and former spouses included custodian, retail sales clerk, laborer at a multinational food processing firm with an assembly factory in Toledo, tire store manager, and Toledo public utility unit manager.

Many women had spent some time as full-time homemakers. They reentered the work force almost universally because of divorce rather than the changes in household economies one might expect to find with regional economic transitions of the last decade. Indeed, changes in husbands' employment situations had been surprisingly few. In the two cases of spouses' unemployment during the preceding decade, layoffs were one and three years. In both cases, the woman was already working and the family was able to survive on her income.

However, a husband's job holding did not guarantee an adequate income or opportunities for economic advancement. Married women had economic worries and, in some cases, they too worked second or third jobs to increase their incomes. Rachel, profiled below, had a contract with the local Office of Human Resources to care for the children of welfare clients while they attend school or job training sessions.

Rachel is a 30 year old African-American woman. She has been a custodial worker in the university's library for three years. The mother of three children under 11, Rachel has been married for one and one-half years. Rachel's is the principal family income, supplemented by wages earned from babysitting in her home at night and income from a rental property. Rachel and her husband are also trying to buy a second rental property to further augment their income.

Rachel has worked for 14 of her 30 years. Her previous position was in custodial work at a nursing home. Her husband,

a laborer, was unemployed for a year before finding his current job at a major area food processing plant. Neither Rachel nor her spouse has completed high school. Rachel would like to return to school but is equally interested in starting a retail business. The net income of Rachel and her husband is close to \$4,000 a month. They save about \$100 monthly. Although their lives are reasonably comfortable, they would be considerably less so without Rachel's night babysitting job.

Job Tenure, Job Queues and Occupational Mobility

Previous research indicates that union membership increases job tenure, especially for women workers, workers without post-secondary education, and workers in service and manufacturing jobs. In 1979 unionism increased job tenure by 21% among women workers, 21% among workers aged 30 to 50, 19% among high school graduates and 36% among workers in the service sector (Freeman and Medoff, 1984: 99).

This tendency is illustrated in the case of the women interviewed. Nine women in the sample had worked at the university for five years or more, five for more than 15 years. Nine had worked there for five years or less, but no one had worked at the university for fewer than two years.

There are no notable differences in the job tenure at the university of Euro-American and African-American interview subjects. But the historical placement of white and African-American women and men in unskilled positions suggests a queuing process whereby workers with particular ascriptive characteristics are drawn to particular jobs and differentially preferred by employers (Reskin and Roos, 1990). Longstanding university employees told me that minority women were once recruited in unskilled job categories, particularly as custodians. But with the ratification of the first CWA contract twenty years ago, wages improved, increasing the interest of whites in these positions and the tendency for the university to hire them.

A similar transition in employee availability and employer selection took place in the late 1980's. The university initiated a building campaign and hired a group of new, part-time custodial workers. Men predominated among these employees, reflecting the desirability of such part-time positions in an

economy characterized by high levels of unemployment and the tendency for the university to select a historically privileged segment of the work force when given the opportunity. In 1990, there were 63 male custodial workers listed on the employment roster, 62 female custodial workers, 2 women housekeeping managers and 4 men housekeeping managers. In 1992, the university employed 61 women custodial workers and 80 men, along with 4 women housekeeping managers and 5 men housekeeping managers.

Interview subjects reported little job mobility. For the custodial staff, movement to a "better" building offered the only widely available means to better working conditions or greater autonomy. Workers lined up for the chance to work in preferred buildings, with seniority and work ratings the principal bases for transfer to preferred work sites. Other women workers complained of blocked mobility, noting in particular a lack of formal skills preventing them from moving to clerical positions. Two clerks spoke of their recent requests for job audits, hoping for job reclassification that would result in small increments in hourly wages. Knowing that opportunities for mobility were few, subjects expressed more concern about a lack of overtime opportunities than the failure of the work place to offer individuals ways to increase the base wage or to attain greater occupational status.

Occasionally custodial workers achieved job mobility by promotion to the position of housekeeping manager. The difference in pay was not great (approximately \$1.00 per hour), but the change in work requirements was considerable. While custodians clean one or more buildings, managers supervise several custodial workers from an office where they develop the housekeeping schedule, make assignments and handle other kinds of paperwork. They also move out of the bargaining unit into management.

In the past, the university hired housekeeping managers from other job sites and benefitted from their relevant experience. Inside promotion of housekeeping managers is now the norm; it both contributes to a desired shrinkage in the full-time classified work force and is easier for the university personnel office which has also been pressed by reductions in office staff

and budgets. One interview subject benefitted from this change in hiring practices. She had been a custodian at the university for 21 years, eight cleaning the president's home. Promoted recently to the position of housekeeping manager, she reported that her responsibilities had grown along with her dissatisfaction as she has raised the job expectations of custodians in her crew.

Workers also had the opportunity to take tuition-free classes at the university as a means to job advancement. Although this option was widely exercised by clerical and other skilled workers, few unskilled workers took advantage of it. Indeed, few of the interview subjects aspired to another kind of work. They worked because they had to, currently or in the past, and did not perceive alternative occupational roles open to them. Those, like Pam, who managed child care and other obstacles to acquiring more training, encountered problems in the lack of local opportunities for semi-skilled workers.

Pam is a 37 year old Euro-American single mother who lives with her parents. She is the principal support for herself and her 14 year old daughter. She also contributes to her parents' household income by paying rent and for food. Pam has never married. She went home to her parents when six months pregnant, having "made a mistake."

Pam has a high school education. She has worked all of her adult life, with only a month off following the birth of her daughter. She started at the university as a custodian 12 years ago, moving a year later into her current position as a stores clerk at the women's gym. She earns \$9.36 per hour, roughly the wage of most custodians, but does less heavy work.

Pam's parents are retired from non-union, service-sector jobs that have yielded little or no retirement income. Pam has received no child support since her daughter was 3. In addition to her salary, she earns no more than \$40 monthly babysitting. With few options to improve her own or her family's income, Pam has requested a job audit. She is also taking free "computer courses" through the university's continuing education program. It is unclear what kind of job Pam can get at the university with the software training she is pursuing. She might be more successful in finding a data entry position outside the university, but without the good health and retirement programs university employment offers.

Personal Lives and Work Histories: Racial/Ethnic Differences

The women interviewed were from what has been described as "settled" working class backgrounds (Rubin, 1976: 29-31). With long work histories and the economic support of a working or retired spouse in about half the cases, these women lived relatively well. The majority of Euro-American and of African-American women owned or were buying their homes, and a single mother in each group lived with parents who owned a house. All subjects own many durable consumer goods, with automobiles, televisions, VCR's, washers and dryers universal.

About half of subjects were married, more among African-Americans than whites. White women subjects seem to have had more troubled personal histories than African-American women. Of white women, nearly half were divorced and one never-married woman gave birth to a child while in her early 20's. Among the six currently married white women, only four were still in first marriages. As noted above, divorce was a major reason among white women for job reentry, with three currently divorced women mentioning marital break-up as the reason they had sought work and another currently married white woman noting that an earlier divorce had brought her into the work force. Edna is typical of white women interviewed whose work experience was conditioned by changes in her personal life.

Edna's 58 years have been marked by many transitions and upheavals. Married three times, once widowed and once divorced, Edna has raised six children of her own and six others brought into her life through marriage.

Edna met her current husband nearly 20 years ago, when she began working at the university as a custodian. He was the housekeeping manager of her division. They married twelve years ago, after eight years of cohabitation. At 70 he is retired from his position at the university but holds a part-time job to supplement his pension.

Edna went to work after returning to the United States from Ecuador, where she had moved with a former husband. A newly divorced mother, she looked for work to support herself and her children. Edna reports that she is satisfied with her work, given that she lacks a high school diploma. But she rises at 4:00 a.m. to

arrive at the university by 6:00 a.m., and each floor she covers "is the equivalent of an acre of ground."

In contrast, half of African-American women interviewed were married to their original spouses. In fact, there was only one divorce among the six African-American subjects. Given that the national divorce rate is higher among African-Americans than whites, these findings are anomalous. They suggest that African-American women workers at the university are drawn from a different labor pool than white women; historical discrimination against minority women may mean that even when available and preferred for a position, they were hired only if they exhibited particular behaviors. It is also true that changes in marital status were a factor in the job reentry of many white women interviewed, but not a factor in job entry for African-American women, who, like Jane below, worked for all of their adult lives.

Jane is a 50 year old African-American woman. She works as a cashier at the university cafeteria. Married for 30 years, Jane has raised four daughters. All except the youngest are adults and out of the home.

Jane's husband, 51 years old, is a supervisor at the city's utility company. He rose through the ranks from laborer to manager. He earns \$60,000 a year. Jane has worked at the university for 30 years. She started as a counter helper and eventually moved up to the position of cashier. With Jane's earnings of \$6.48 per hour and her husband's much larger salary, the family lives comfortably. She reports no periods of unemployment for herself or her spouse.

Jane sees work as a continuing and important dimension of her life. She considers her income essential to her family's well being and to their future security. She regrets the few weeks during the summer when the cafeteria shuts down and she is regularly laid off.

As African-American and white interview subjects displayed different family and work histories, they also had different expectations for their children. It is notable, first, that none of the grown children of women sampled had completed college, despite the fact that tuition was free for children of all workers at the university. Still, the children of African-American mothers

had slightly more education than those of whites. The three African-American women with grown children claimed that the 11 adult children among them had all attended some post-secondary school, although none had completed a degree program. For the seven Euro-American women with adult children, one reported that two of her children failed to complete high school, while two others graduated from high school but had no post-secondary education. Five adult children of six other subjects had completed high school only, while eight others had attended some college or another form of post-secondary education.

There was little indication of upward intergenerational occupational mobility between subjects and their children. No adult children were professionals. Nor did they work in the manufacturing sector. Most older adult children worked in service sector positions or, in the case of daughters, as clerical workers. The most clearly successful cases were of a son who was assistant manager of a county social service unit, a daughter who worked as a legal secretary, a daughter who worked "in computers." Many younger adults were neither in school nor in permanent jobs, but still deciding what to do. When asked how they hoped their lives might be different in the next five years, several women subjects said that they hoped that their adult children would be "more settled." The employment picture in the area made it difficult for young people, particularly those with little or no post-secondary education, to find work. In this sense, the respondents' adult children were typical of others in the region.

Labor-Management Relations

Sixteen subjects belonged to the local chapter of the CWA or UAW; a recently promoted housekeeping manager belonged to the CWA for most of her 21 years at the university. None participated in union activities beyond attending occasional meetings and, in the case of one woman, belonging to a union committee. All recognized that, whatever the costs of union membership, their reasonably good wages and benefit packages and those of other university staff members reflected union influence. Like union members elsewhere, many complained that their union

was not sufficiently forceful and had not done enough to improve wages or work conditions. A second frequent concern, again repeated in national surveys of union members, was that in the case of employee complaints against individual workers, the union failed to "stick up" for the employee (Freeman and Medoff, 1984).

Women subjects' attitudes towards their unions reflected an ambivalence displayed in other areas of work. Much as these women lacked interest or opportunities for occupational advancement, they also lacked interest or perceived opportunities for participation in the union. A few respondents, interviewed in the midst of university reorganization, expressed concern that the work atmosphere was changing. People were said to be distrustful and frightened as workloads became unmanageable and expectations that work could be completed or done well fell. Yet none of the subjects perceived herself as having any control over the setting, whether indicated by participation in the union or in their more general sense of being active participants in the institution.

As in other work settings, male leadership of the CWA local and, to a lesser extent, the UAW local, may discourage women's participation in union activity. Meetings were held in the evenings, at times when women with children often have other obligations, particularly child care. This factor has hindered women's union participation elsewhere (Gray, 1993; Roby and Uttal, 1993). However, the majority of women interviewed had neither young children nor other dependents at home. Women subjects' lack of participation seems to be linked to the dominance of men and higher status workers in union hierarchies and women's own high levels of involvement in family, church and other community-based activities (Morrissey and Coventry, under review). Both barriers to entry and other sources of social involvement and emotional satisfaction seem then to separate women from political action in the work place.

Conclusions

Research on gender and deindustrialization has generally focused on male job loss and the relatively low wages and benefits associated with both men's and women's new jobs. This

broadly accurate picture obscures pockets of occupational safety and wage/benefit security. Union membership has protected existing positions in some economic sectors and kept wages and job benefits stable, although new positions may be scarce and workloads expanding.

This study of women workers at a public university suggests that union membership has had an important impact on their job security, wage and benefit packages. Differences are revealed among African-American and white women, however, with the latter having generally longer job histories and increased competition from white women and men for categories of work they once dominated.

The research also shows that while respondents' current spouses had experienced little recent job loss, their children had trouble finding stable employment. "Downsizing" led to fewer new positions and increased demands on the existing work force.

Positions at the university are highly desirable and personal networks activated to recruit friends and relatives. While grateful for the union's protection of jobs and wages, women interviewed were not active and perceived the union as ineffective in some areas. Women's participation in union activities appeared to be blocked both by the influence of men and higher status workers in union locals and women's high levels of involvement in family and community life.

The women's movement for job and wage equity has historically supported trade unionism. But in recent years, as union power and influence have declined, the women's movement has found government a more effective influence on employers than the threat of unionization. Governmental monitoring of affirmative action and pay equity initiatives has been particularly important to women's employment gains. This strategy meets structural obstacles, however, when jobs disappear and new ones are scarce.

Unions also work from a point of disadvantage in creating new jobs. But they can be a crucial force in protecting existing ones, particularly in service and other non-manufacturing areas where women and minorities predominate. This research

suggests that unions' capacity to provide continuing work opportunities for these groups is also influenced by employer preferences for other cohorts, e.g., men, where they are available and willing to accept existing conditions of employment.

Women's greater participation in union activities may serve as an effective counter to gender and other forms of discrimination evidenced in job queuing. But drawing women into greater union involvement can be difficult and may depend on union recruitment and support of women candidates for leadership positions and a broadening of union interests to encompass women's family and community concerns.

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