This is Your Daughter's Labor Movement

Posted on July 2, 2018 by Lane Windham

If there is going to be a revival of the U.S. labor movement, it's likely that women are going to lead it. Women activists, especially young women of color, are doing much more than resuscitating traditional unions; they're pushing boundaries that have long constrained labor, and are re-envisioning what workers' organizations can be and do. We used to say "this not your father's labor movement." Increasingly, this IS your daughter's labor movement, or even your granddaughter's.

Already this year, a tsunami of red-shirted, striking teachers – – mostly female – – swelled the main thoroughfares of some of America's reddest states, walking out despite the fact that public sector strikes are illegal in many of their states. Then 29,000 nurses in the University of California (UC) hospitals created the largest mass labor stoppage in years in their sympathy strike with 25,000 striking UC workers. Meanwhile, hotel housekeepers, waitresses and female farmworkers continue to boldly claim their place in the #metoo movement, ensuring that working-class women are front and center one of in the most potent workplace-based social movements in recent memory.

Teachers protesting in Kentucky, photo from CNN

Women are on track to be the majority of union members in 2025. That's a big shift, but it's only part of the story of why women are poised to lead labor. In fact, women now hold the kinds of jobs that are at the epicenter of the nation's economy. In the mid-twentieth century, one in three jobs was in male-dominated manufacturing and agriculture; today these sectors account for only one in eight. Meanwhile, a full half of our nation's jobs are in the woman-dominated service sector.

Women are also key to the "gig economy," a term that falsely conjures up images of men driving Ubers. A recent Harvard study found that women are now the majority of workers in "alternative work arrangements" which includes temps, freelancers, and independent contractors. Some experts argue that a new government report undercounts contingent workers, but even that survey shows that a third of gig workers are employed in education and health services, both of which are female-centric — think adjunct professors, half of whom are women.

Yet women are doing more than holding a large share of the future jobs; they are expanding the range of the workers' movement's demands and raising expectations about our nation's basic social compact. Current times demand it, because the old social compact is quickly shredding. In the mid-20th century, government-backed collective bargaining not only leavened individual workers' paychecks – – it undergirded the entire country's employer-centered social welfare state. Following World War II, the U.S. chose not to provide universal health care and robust pensions, but instead turned to employers. But it never required employers to provide these social goods. Instead, unions negotiated for much of citizens' social welfare, through legally backed collective bargaining, and many companies without unions followed the lead of unionized industrial giants. Unions and collective

bargaining thus came to play a key role in citizens' basic social safety net.

Yet this system was never inclusive. Before the 1964 Civil Rights Act, women and people of color didn't have full access to this employer-based system because they were excluded from the kinds of jobs that were most likely to be touched by collective bargaining — and from some unions. Not only that, women have long remained the most likely to be outside this system because they were the most likely to do our nation's unpaid work, as mothers and caregivers.

Today, unions and collective bargaining can't improve social welfare in the way they once did – – too few people can enter into the system. Weak labor law doesn't support workers' efforts to form unions, and too few people are even eligible for collective bargaining because they are contractors or contingent workers, job categories uncovered in labor law. Today's challenge for working people and their organizations is to forge a new, twenty-first-century grand bargain that leverages government support in novel ways to build workers' social protections, perhaps unhitched from the employment relationship. What's exciting is that we have the opportunity remake the social compact in a way that serves what feminist social philosopher Nancy Fraser calls "emancipatory ends," meaning that issues of gender and racial equity can be at its core in a way that they weren't in the twentieth century.

And it's already happening. The women-led Jobs with Justice and National Domestic Workers Alliance, for example, are part of the Maine People's Alliance's Homecare for Allcampaign that would create an entirely fresh social welfare benefit. They have gathered the 67,000 signatures required for a November, 2018 ballot initiative that would initiate a new universal in-home care subsidy for Maine seniors and those with disabilities, paid for by a tax on those wealthy citizens' earnings that are exempt from the Social Security tax. So not only would this universal benefit free up caregivers, largely women, to remain in the job market, but it also includes higher wages and greater professionalization for the mostly female home health aides who replace them.

Or consider the red-shirted teachers; they didn't just demand higher wages and benefits. They demanded more money for students and an end to the right-wing gutting of our schools. Such calls for more classroom funding aren't entirely new, points out Jon Shelton, author of *Teacher Strike!*, which chronicles teachers' 1970s uprisings. What is unprecedented today, he asserts, is both teachers' commitment to these demands and the public's outraged support. Teachers, in fact, have been central to forging "bargaining for the common good," one of the labor movement's most forward-thinking innovations. Bargaining for the common good redefines collective bargaining not as zero sum contest between employer and employees, but instead as a social and economic platform that

engages in larger community issues, like class sizes, racial profiling in schools, or municipal debt and spending.

Women's activism will be especially important if the labor movement must forge a new path in the wake of a negative decision in the *Janus v. AFSCME* Supreme Court case. This decision could strip public sector unions of the right to require fees in exchange for representing workers, thus eroding public sector unions' funding base. A majority of the nation's public sector workers – – 55 percent – – are women. If unions are to continue as an anchor for the nation's progressive movement then women like those red-shirted teachers will need to be on the front lines of redefining union membership and renewing connections with members in the decision's wake.

Women are testing the ground for a new workers' movement that both rethinks how workers exercise their power and expands the limits for the changes they can win. Look up from the Trump headlines, look around, and you can hardly miss that they're already showing the way.

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