



Time and Money:

Women Workers, Unions, and the Political Economy

By

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1998

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These comments were originally delivered as the Dorothy McGuigan Lecture at the University of Michigan in March 1998. The lecture was part of a week-long conference, "Rocking the Boat: Women in the Labor Movement," sponsored by the Center for the Education of Women, the Women's Studies Program, and the Institute for Research on Women and Gender, the Labor Studies Center, and others.

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What are the time and money predicaments of women working in the service sector in the contemporary political economy of the United States, and what do these difficulties suggest about union agendas? I would like to try to answer this question in three parts: (1) by looking at how general developments in the political economy construct the temporal and financial problems of low-paid women working in the more formal service sector; (2) by looking in some detail at several specific time and money problems which women confront; and (3) by exploring how trade union bargaining and political agendas might address the needs of low-paid women in the service sector.

The political economy: without Ford or Father

We are living in new political-economic times, without Father or Ford, to adapt a phrase of British social geographer Linda McDowell (McDowell 1991). Let me say a little bit first about Ford, or Fordism, and then about Father.

Without Ford(ism)¹

Fordism political-economic order was built upon mass production with (predominantly male) workers at fixed machines producing standardized products. Workers had substantial regular working hours and received relatively high wages. Mass consumption was based upon a family wage paid to the (white) male breadwinner, and it was related to expanded commodification--private home ownership, car purchases, the acquisition of home appliances. The state supported this paradigm of high production and high consumption through Keynesian economic policies and some welfare provision--less in the U.S. than in other advanced capitalist countries. Most women's work fell outside this paradigm, but through their household arrangements, many women had access to male wages (McDowell 1991, Wood 1988).

Today, these high paying, stable jobs have been replaced by low-paid feminized service sector jobs. Service sector jobs now comprise 80% of all non-agricultural employment (Macdonald and Sirianni 1996; Mishel, Bernstein and

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Schmitt 1997: 184-190). Paradoxically, the service sector's phenomenal growth has depended upon women's employment, yet it has maintained women as marginally employed (employed in bad jobs that do not constitute a basis for women's workplace power or economic independence and security) (Smith 1986).

The service sector depends, first, upon low pay, because it generates profit through intensive use of cheap labor operating for long hours. Employing little capital, the service sector relies upon labor for increased output; labor intensity leads to relatively high wage costs. Employers, usually operating in a highly competitive environment, therefore, hold wages down. The average weekly pay in service and retail industries is about \$277 compared to \$514 in manufacturing (Albelda and Tilly 1997: 6). A disproportionate number of minimum wage workers are concentrated in the retail and service sector (Bernstein 1997).

To maximize competitiveness and profitability, managers in the service sector try to maximize numerical flexibility--they want to be able to vary the number of people they employ or numbers of hours they work again to minimize wage costs. The service sector depends upon part-time and temporary workers, and workers working irregular and nonstandard hours. Workers in the service sector have a substantially higher role of part-time employment than those in manufacturing.

Low pay combined with flexibility creates contingent, insecure work and a work force treated as if it's disposable; they are the basis of the employment "low road"--the expansion of employment in the U.S. based upon bad or secondary jobs. Low pay and flexibility are in the interest of management, though they are often rationalized as what women, constructed still as secondary wage earners and primary family caregivers, want or need.

The state has been relegated to the sidelines in this period of post-Fordist neo-liberalism or market expansion. It no longer tries to maximize employment and demand, and leaves management a freer hand in making investment, production,

and employment decisions. Our public discourse has shifted. We seldom recognize the importance of non-market goods -- individual and social well-being (the dignified meaning of the term welfare), community, fairness, or equity -- which the state had a role in securing. The dominant ideology valorizes only the market and its values--entrepreneurial freedom, efficiency, productivity, consumption.

Without Father

The Fordist model was tied to a traditional family, and the family economy is no longer based upon a male breadwinner and a woman working in the home. Women's labor force participation has increased sharply, from less than 40% in the mid-1950s to about 60% in the mid-1990s; three of four women between 24 and 54 are in the work force; both single and married women with children are working and making vital contributions to family income; and women work nearly as many years as men. Traditionally African-American women have had the highest labor force participation rates, but participation rates are converging across racial-ethnic groups (Mandelson 1996, Dunn 1997).

The growth in mother-only families is the most dramatic change in family structure throughout the advanced capitalist west in the last 20-30 years (Kamerman 1995). In the U.S. female-headed families comprise about 30% of all families, and female-headed families are 70% of all poor families (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1995). African-American women are the sole support of about 50% of families with children, Latinas of about 35% and white women about 20% (Amott 1993: 94). Thus, many women have lost access to male breadwinner wages and are losing access to social services for supporting themselves and their children.

Part of the Fordist economy in the U.S. was modest provision of a federal safety net for single mothers and their children. It was a frayed net, with inadequate levels of benefits and degrading and humiliating rituals attached to it, perhaps more an entrapping, entangling web than a safety net, and racialized rules and practices made it especially difficult for African American women to receive benefits (Quadagno 1994; Piven and Cloward 1993). At the same time, this safety

net lifted millions of women and children out of poverty, 27 million people in 1995 (Primus, Porter, Ditto and Kent 1996). This safety net allowed low income women to do the hard work of parenting in conditions of poverty and powerlessness. However, many of these programs are being dismantled, and the key cash assistance program for single mothers and their children, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, has been abolished (Welfare Law Center/Center on Social Welfare Policy and Law 1996; Mink 1998). Since passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, women with children face mandatory work requirements of 20-30 hours per week as a condition of receiving assistance, a policy which coerces women into providing cheap labor in the service sector, not coincidentally feeding that sector's need for cheap labor.

So we are without both the familial and state Fathers, that is providers--often exploitative and controlling to be sure--who made it more possible for women to engage in unpaid caregiving at home. It is difficult to agree with Heidi Hartmann's assessment (1987) that recent social and economic changes have lessened the most oppressive structures of patriarchy and created space for women's independence and autonomy. New forms of labor market, state and familial subordination have developed for women who are least well off. Women are caught in the vice, the jawlike grip, of a political economy that squeezes their time and money.

Time without Father or Fordism

Six years ago, Juliet Schor (1992), an economist, documented that Americans in general were overworked because of capitalist retrenchment, economic competition and new managerial strategies, and the weakening of unions which traditionally fought for civic and family time. Recently, Arlie Hochschild (1997) and Leslie Perlow (1997) have shown how organizational culture creates time binds for professional women and men. Critical observers of restructuring in the manufacturing industry point to and 10-12 hour shifts, as managers work their expensive capital equipment around the clock (Moody 1997). But, what are the time dilemmas of low-income women, especially single parents, in the service sector?

Long hours

First, low-income women are also working long hours, often moonlighting for low pay. Long hours for low paid women are not the result of the intrinsic interest of the work or of organizational cultures which emphasize long hours as a mark of professional dedication. They are a product of economic desperation and the proliferation of "bad" low-wage part-time jobs, and in the absence of the availability of high quality affordable child care, they create particular perils for children. Women do not work disproportionately long hours compared to men, but their problems resulting from long hours are often different because of their responsibility for children.

Valerie Connor, a nursing home worker in Hartford, explained to Juliet Schor that she and many of her coworkers work two 8-hour shifts a day. According to an official of the Service Employees International Union, nearly one-third of nursing home employees now hold two full-time jobs. And a HERE official in Boston told her that two-job families were the good old days. " Now we have four-job families" (Schor 1992).

By 1989, 3.5 times as many women were working two or more jobs as a decade earlier and many more were moonlighting because of economic hardship--to meet regular household expenses or to pay off debts--not to save for something special, to get experience, or to help out a family member or friend. African-American women and Latinas were the most likely to report that they were moonlighting to meet regular household expenses, while white women were more likely to report saving for the future, a difference related to lower average income of women of color and the greater likelihood that they were raising children on their own (Schor 1992, Amott 1993).

Involuntary part-time work

While some women are forced into excessive work hours, other women are stuck in part-time jobs. Women are about two-thirds of all part-time workers (U.S.

Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 1994: 222). One quarter of part-time workers are involuntary--they would prefer full time jobs--and many workers recorded as voluntary part-time are trapped by the unavailability of satisfactory child care or elder care (Tilly 1996). The fraction of the labor force working part time but desiring full-time work increased more than seven times during the 1980s. The Teamster's United Postal Service strike made visible the problem of involuntary part time work in a traditionally male industry, with the theme that half a job is not enough, appealing not only to part-timers but also the full-time United Parcel Service workers threatened with reduction to part-time hours and to the general public.

While some part-time work is created to retain valued workers with family commitments, most part-time work is in bad jobs. "Secondary" part-time work receives its primary impetus from employers' drive for flexibility in a competitive market; it creates numerical flexibility, it intensifies work, and it is cheap. While overtime is often the way employers achieve numerical flexibility in high-wage male industries, part-time work is preferred in low-waged "women's work". For workers, it fails to provide employment security, benefits, or a living wage.

Nonstandard hours

There is a third time conundrum that of non-standard hours--irregular hours, hours outside the 9-5 working day, and weekend hours (see Kahn and Blum 1996). Over 4 million women with children and low incomes are working nonstandard hours. The expanding service sector accounts for 42% of all shift workers. Low-paid service occupations with high proportions of shift workers are growing, and African-American women are overrepresented in many of these jobs (U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau 1995). Women on public assistance often hold these jobs. Their creation is driven by some service imperatives but also by employers' drives for flexibility and profitability.

Harriet Presser (1997) has recently shown that less educated mothers are disproportionately represented in occupations with non-standard hours because

they lack other labor market options, not because they choose these hours to be compatible with child care needs. On the contrary, these hours create alarming problems of child care, especially for poor single parents.

Denise has two children, eight and eleven. When I interviewed her in 1995 she was working as a custodian at the University of Michigan Hospitals on the afternoon shift from 3:30 to midnight. She also only had one year on the job--no seniority. She told me:

I'm trying to get on days or midnights because I would love to be home with my children. I miss them a lot as far as being there for them as a parent. My 11-year-old really needs me at home. She goes to middle school this year and her work load will be larger. She is going to be experiencing different things as far as boys. I remember when I was eleven. A lot of things went on with me and my mom was never home.

Her children let themselves in after school, and sometimes her sister or a baby-sitter helped out.

A mother of two working at the University Hospital laundry from 6 am to 2:30 told me:

My kids started out at the age of five and six years old getting up to an alarm clock, fixing their own meals, getting dressed. I had another alarm in the living room that went off in time for them to walk out the door and catch the bus. That's how we managed. It wasn't legal, but I had to do it.

Money without Fordism or father

The new economy is constructed not only on women's forced flexibility, often rationalized as women's choice in view of caregiving responsibilities, but also women's low pay. Women in general still have lower earnings than men, and their pay is often low not only in relation to men but in relation to basic survival needs. The high poverty rate of single parent families is tied to women's segregated,

subordinated labor market position and the absence of public benefits and services for single mothers.

Women's earnings relative to men's

Women's average annual earnings are about half of men's and median weekly earnings of full-time women workers about 75% of full-time men's median wages. In 1995, Hispanic women employed full time year round earned just 53% of white men, black women 63% and white women 72% (IWPR 1997; Lewin 1997). A considerable portion of the earnings gap is due to continued segregation of women from all racial and ethnic groups into women's jobs. Segregation disproportionately relegates women to the kinds of jobs that employers compensate poorly, and employers continue to devalue workers' achievements in jobs filled primarily by women (Reskin 1996, Reskin and Padavic, forthcoming, England 1992). Women remain low paid child care teachers and assistants; home health aides and attendants; they do the lower paid housekeeping jobs in hospitals; they wait tables in cheaper restaurants; and they are still confined to low paid feminized jobs at the front of the grocery store. Women of color work in an even narrower range of feminized occupations, doubly stigmatized and devalued. For many women, the problem is not the glass ceilings that block upwards mobility but a sticky floor that crowds them into and confines them in low wage work.

Women's low pay

Not surprisingly, a disproportionate number of minimum wage workers are women; women were about 58% of such workers in 1997. While the opponents of raising the minimum wage always argue that most minimum wage workers are just teenagers working short hours to earn a little extra money, the majority are adults working more than 20 hours to support families. Yet, in 1996, the minimum wage was 40% of the average manufacturing wage, and its real value had fallen to 31% of its value in 1978 (Bernstein 1997). Full time work at the minimum wage does not raise women and their dependents above the official poverty line, set artificially low at about \$13,000 a year for a family of three (\$15,600 for family of 4) in 1996.

Tonya Outlaw of Windsor, North Carolina testified in government hearings on raising the minimum wage:

I am the single parent of two girls, age six and eight. I work as a teacher at Kiddie World Child Development Center. I have worked there for 3 1/2 years. I have just finished my North Carolina Child Care Credential at our community college.

I earn \$4.25 per hour, and it is very hard to get us the things we need--like coats. Sometimes I haven't had money to pay for the medicine the children needed when they were sick. I stay at my parents' house with my uncle and my sister. I can't afford a place for me and my children. I have an old used car, which I can't afford to repair when it breaks. Everything is just very hard.

I love my job because I enjoy teaching children. I used to work at Purdue Chicken Factory where I earned more than the minimum wage. However, earning more than the minimum wage was not enough to pay for child care. I needed child care to work. That is why the job at Kiddie World is a good job for me. I could bring my children with me and they would have child care.

Alexandria Gonzalez, a white woman with three children living in San Antonio and working at just above minimum wage as a receptionist, told Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein (Edin and Lein 1997) that she really liked her job, though there were no advancement prospects. She took home \$800 a month from her job but had expenses of \$1000, even with child care subsidy and a rent subsidy. Meanwhile she worried about how her schedule affected her three preschool children. She worked forty hours a week and commuted one hour each way, for a total of fifty hours away from home. She brought her children to day care at 8 am and picked them up at 6 pm. After arriving home she fed and bathed her children and put them to bed.

Edin and Lein (1997) studied 165 women working just above the minimum wage at \$5-7 per hour, usually full-time year round. Their earnings typically covered only two-thirds of their expenses; they were never able to afford market rates for child care, and used either a limited government subsidy, adult relative care, sibling care or no supervision. Twenty-four percent experienced food shortages, 15% couldn't purchase adequate winter clothing, 20% had no medical insurance for their children or themselves, 8% had been evicted, and 12% had

experienced an episode of homelessness. The sticky floors are more like deep pits, out of which it is impossible to climb.

It is this labor market, with its low-wage unstable jobs and long hours, not a psychopathology of dependency, that forces women onto public assistance. Women on public assistance have never just worked at home: they have worked to supplement inadequate benefits and they have used benefits to survive the low-wage labor market.

Low-paid women and unions in an era without Father or Fordism

The popular media and corporate human resource departments trumpet "self-help"--individual initiative and resourcefulness. But low-skilled women in the service sector cannot solve many of their work and family problems through better time-management or individualized negotiation with supervisors. They are caught in the systemic, structural dynamics of capital's post-Fordist strategies. They need collective solutions--collective representation at the workplace, public policies, and new employment practices. Unions, too, face structural obstacles--to organizing and winning improved terms and conditions in the workplace and public policies--hostile employers, restrictive labor laws, a new global economy, technological transformations. But they are more powerful than individual workers and have begun both to intensify more traditional organizing campaigns in the service sector and to pioneer new forms of organizing, such as Justice for Janitors in Los Angeles (see Bronfenbrenner, Friedman, Hurd, Oswald and Seeber 1998).

The mutual dependency of women workers and unions is clear. On the one hand, women need unions as they and their children are increasingly dependent upon women's labor market earnings, as they have less access to a male wage and as the state withdraws welfare assistance. On the other hand, women's growing and permanent presence in the labor force means that unions need to organize them if the movement is to remain viable. Since the mid-1980s women have made up the majority of the more than 100,000 new workers who gain representation each year, and they dominate sectors of the economy, such as health care and

leisure services, where unions have the greatest organizing potential (Bronfenbrenner 1997).

Not only the numerical centrality but the strategic centrality of the female labor force is important. Dorothy Sue Cobble (1993) refers to women as the new proletariat, by which she means that the contradictions women are articulating and experiencing--between paid work and the unrecognized, unpaid work of parenting, between hard work and low pay, between commitment to work and uncommitted employers--are becoming more general. Increasing numbers of men are employed in secondary, "bad job" labor markets on terms that were traditionally regarded as female, and they are losing from restructuring strategies that define new jobs as women's jobs. As Ann Taylor and Jane Phillips (1986) suggested a decade ago, we are all becoming women workers now, regardless of biological sex. We could go a step further and say that we are all becoming women workers of color, who in the U.S. have always been looked upon as cheap labor and denied status and protection as mothers of their own children. Neither "deviants" nor "special interests", neither unorganizable nor natural militants, women workers are at the core and cutting edge of the work force and require new strategic union responses.

1) Time

Unionization helps women get control over time through negotiating contract provisions that limit management's right to schedule. But what principles govern the allocation of working hours? Should seniority, which disadvantages younger women with children and those whose work force participation has been interrupted, govern hours assignments, as it does now in many unionized workplaces? Unions have insisted upon seniority as a mechanism for allocating opportunities and benefits in the workplace for good reason, but, as a union local president in Flint told me, her voice breaking as she remembered back to her years of struggling on afternoon shifts, seniority became a principle before the large-scale entry of women with children into the work force.

Though we often think of scheduling as a private matter transacted between employers and workers in the labor market, there may be a role for public policy in this matter. In different and incomplete ways, the Netherlands and Sweden have begun to address this problem: parents of young children must be assigned hours compatible with their with their caregiving responsibilities. In the United States, the ADA now requires that employers take into account emotional disability in scheduling hours, yet we have no discussion of taking caregiving responsibilities into account.

What might unions' stance towards part-time work be? There are three traditional collective bargaining and public policy orientations. First, some unions have argued against part-time work and tried to restrict it directly; this may make sense in some workplaces, where managers are trying to substitute bad part-time jobs for good full time ones. This dynamic was an important catalyst in the UPS strike. Secondly, trade unions have tried to improve the terms and conditions of part-time work by using both work-place based and public policy measures. For example, unions can fight to include part-time workers in bargaining units, establish pro-rata pay and benefits, and include part-timers in seniority lists and training opportunities. At the public policy level, unions aim for legislative frameworks that would mandate parity between full-time and part-time workers, such as exist in many European countries, partly on the grounds that treating part-timers less favorably than full timers is indirect discrimination against women. An increase in the minimum wage would also reduce employers' incentives to hire cheap part-time workers. Finally, the attempt to win universal benefits, especially child care and health care, not tied to employment conditions, would assist part-time women workers.

2) Money

Women's underpayment is related to continuing sex segregation and devaluation of women's work. In organizing drives and unionized workplaces, the devaluation of women's work especially in traditionally feminized occupations is a central issue. In these occupations, the percentage of women earning less than the

official poverty level for a family of three ranges from 15% in administrative support (mainly clerical work) to 54% in "other services" (a variety of personal services) (Lapidus and Figart 1994). The Equal Pay Act of 1963 never addressed the position of most women, who do not do the same work as men. Arguments that predominantly female jobs involve invisible and uncompensated job demands have a role to play, as does bargaining which closes wage differentials in workplaces by leveling up the lowest paid, for example, going for flat-rate across-the-board rather than percentage pay increases.

General economic policy which targets low-paid workers is also essential. We need to raise the minimum wage so that full-time work at minimum wage lifts families out of poverty and maintains the worker's purchasing power over time. Several local labor movements have launched living wage campaigns that would set the lowest wage at a level that allows workers to live with some dignity and participate in the common life of community. As Valerie Polakow has pointed out, in the absence of universal child care services, a living wage must also allow women with children to pay for good child care while they work sometimes long hours.

3) Time and money converge: a child care policy

A central theme that runs through low-paid women's struggles over time and money is the problem of access to affordable, high quality child care, at the hours they require. Child care workers themselves are paid at or just above the minimum wage, because their work is devalued as women's work, parents cannot afford to pay more, and government will not subsidize child care; the result is a demoralized work force with high turnover rates.

It is not clear for many low-paid women, working at small establishments, that workplace-based childcare is the solution. Employers are reluctant to subsidize low-paid workers they see as easily replaceable, and workplaces are often at some distance from communities of residence. The United States needs a national political commitment to publicly subsidized and publicly provided high quality child

care, like we see in France and Sweden, and subsidized, licensed providers to go into homes during non-standard hours.

(4) Finally, unions need to continue to act as a voice in the workplace and the polity that redefines our responsibilities and priorities and helps us keep markets in their place. We need markets that serve people, not people who are used and dehumanized by markets. Unions must reaffirm their historical stance of arguing that workers, women and men, are not simply inputs into the production process to be manipulated by managers to best advantage, but human beings, and human beings in caregiving as well as providing relationships with one another. Low paid women's lives in a political economy without Father or Fordism have added to the challenges of the union movement

Traditionally, the labor movement has centered its concerns on how workers can maintain jobs, earn living and fair wages, maintain some control over their labor power, and generally be treated with dignity and respect at work. The lives of women in a political economy without father or Fordism urge consideration of an additional question: how do workers raise children, providing for them economically and giving them emotional, social and physical care. Answering this question requires a process in which unions take the lives and time and money dilemmas of women workers seriously and in which women engage with unions.

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