

WORKING WOMEN: THE POTENTIAL OF UNIONIZATION AND COLLECTIVE ACTION IN THE UNITED STATES

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Synopsis—In the United States in recent years, there have been many instances of successful direct action by working women, including the Willmar Eight organizing effort, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (A.F.C.S.M.E.) strike over comparable worth, the J. P. Stevens boycott, the Oneita Knitting Mills strike, and the formation of Local 925 of the Service Employees' International Union.¹ The author is generally optimistic about the prospects of organizing women workers in the future, based on the success of these cases and the formation of groups such as the Coalition of Labor Union Women. The author argues that strikes are generally effective and that consumer boycotts are also effective when used selectively.

In recent years, there have been a number of dramatic examples of direct action taken by working women in the United States, in order to gain power in the workplace. Strikes and boycotts by clerical workers, bank clerks, and textile workers have received much popular attention, and have even become the basis of several Hollywood box office successes, thus catapulting the problems of working women into new visibility. The working woman is now on the public policy agenda. This is evidenced by the extensive press coverage of relevant issues such as comparable worth. There also have been notable developments within the labor movement, such as the formation of the Coalition of Labor Union Women, an advocacy group for women within the labor movement.

The efforts of working women did not suddenly burst forth into full bloom. In fact, women have a long history of labor organizing, dating back to the early textile workers'

efforts (Flexner, 1968; Foner, 1977). More recently, the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, the consumer movement, and the drive to unionize public sector employees all helped to lay a foundation for the actions described here. Also, the legal protections afforded individual employees under nondiscrimination policies and health and safety protective legislation have led to a growing litigiousness and assertiveness among employees in general (Feller, 1976; Gleason, 1981; Hoyman and Stallworth, 1981; Lieberman, 1981). Finally, these direct actions by working women did not happen in isolation. The feminist movement was engaged in its latest major effort to pass the Equal Rights Amendment. To achieve this, the National Organization for Women launched a consumer boycott of convention facilities in unratified states. This boycott had the support of labor and professional associations.

This article will examine the following examples of direct action: the J. P. Stevens boycott, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (A.F.S.C.M.E.) strike over comparable worth, the Oneita Knitting Mills boycott, the formation of 925 of Service Employees International Union, and the Willmar Eight action. The article also will provide a brief analysis of the different types of direct action used, particularly strikes and consumer boycotts, and an assessment of these tactics in

The sources on which this paper is based include: printed references cited; general coverage of the events in union newsletters and the feminist and popular press over a period of years; and in-depth interviews, in person and by telephone, with a number of activists who were directly involved (names cited in the references). The author gratefully thanks these union activists for giving generously of their time. The author also wishes to acknowledge the extremely valuable efforts of Stephanie Winter, the research assistant on this project, and the resources provided by the Center for Metropolitan Studies and the Department of Political Science at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

making changes in the status of women in the workforce.

STATUS OF WOMEN IN UNION ORGANIZATIONS

A key problem of women in the workplace, besides their lack of economic equality, is their lack of *power* or political representation within unions. Women are also underrepresented in union leadership; this underrepresentation is worst in the higher echelons (Schwartz & Hoyman, 1984; 71).

It has been true for some time that the proportion of female union members is increasing at a faster rate than the percent of unionized workers as a whole (Rattner & Cook, 1981: 10). It remains to be seen whether the proportion of female leaders will increase rapidly (Glassberg, Baden, & Gerstel, 1980; Schwartz & Hoyman, 1984: 71). The work of the Coalition of Labor Union Women should aid in achieving this, since one of its main goals is to increase the number of women union leaders.

CASE STUDIES

J. P. Stevens campaign

The J. P. Stevens campaign was a highly visible direct action in an industry with a relatively high percent of female workers compared to most other manufacturing industries. This case is included here because there were substantial numbers of women involved as organizers, as members of the local branch's organizing committee, as members, and later as boycott staff members. The case was dramatic because of the well-known difficulties of organizing in this industry.

Not since the United Farm Workers boycott had a consumer boycott attracted as much attention and support as the J. P. Stevens boycott. The relevant workforce was approximately 50% female and 25% to 30% Black. The boycott came after a successful union election at one Stevens site, the Roanoke Rapids plant in North Carolina, in which *one* rank and file woman, Crystal Lee Sutton (then Crystal Lee Jordan), figured rather prominently.

The boycott was the culmination of approximately 40 years of sporadic efforts and 10 years of intensive efforts to organize a

union at the many J. P. Stevens sites in North Carolina and South Carolina. The Textile Workers Union and its precursor, the Textile Workers Organizing Committee, had attempted to organize the Roanoke Rapids plants in the 1940s, in the 1950s, in the early 1960s, and again in the 1970s. The union finally won an election in 1974 (Hoyman, 1984; Jorgensen, 1984).

Why would the international union¹ decide to engage in a boycott? The answer lies in the problems of using the traditional labor union strategy of a strike in the South. First of all, the task of organizing in the South does not end with the winning of an election by a union. The union often has reason to fear a decertification² or a plant closing if it fails to agree to a contract with the employer within a year of the election. In fact, this period immediately following the strike can be critical in terms of the union's survival. Secondly, the J. P. Stevens Company had many plants all over the South to which the work from a struck plant could be transferred. This meant the traditional strategy of a strike was doomed to failure. Finally, the J. P. Stevens Company had an extremely tough negotiating stance. Thus, the union decided on a somewhat nontraditional route—a consumer boycott.³ This tactic had the advantage of applying more pressure on the employer to bargain at all sites where the union had won an election. Otherwise, the union would have faced the prospect of organizing each of the many plants, one plant at a time. It was in light of this that the successor union to the Textile Workers, the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, embarked upon a massive boycott and publicity campaign against J. P. Stevens.

The purpose of the boycott was to reduce the sales, and thus profits of J. P. Stevens, so that the firm would go to the bargaining table with a more pliant attitude. It was hoped that enough publicity could be generated to raise public support for future organizing efforts (Douglas, 1985). The tactics which the union used, not to mention the rhetoric, depicted J. P. Stevens as an unfair, anti-labor, discriminatory, and almost immoral employer. The union, in other words, was successful in capturing what can best be described as "the moral high ground."

The boycott had two or three distinct

parts to it. Perhaps the most challenging stage was to achieve product visibility for J. P. Stevens sheets and towels, in an effort to get consumers to stop buying them. The boycott effort was thrust into the limelight by many direct actions taken by union groups and women's groups alike. Such actions included throwing J. P. Stevens sheets out of the hotel windows of union convention hotels, picketing outside retail stores which carried J. P. Stevens products, and demonstrating in "Boycott J. P. Stevens" t-shirts inside a New York City department store. The latter resulted in some arrests though charges were eventually dropped. A popular film called *Norma Rae* featured the life of the rank-and-file organizer, Crystal Lee Jordan, in the successful union campaign in Roanoke Rapids. This transformed "Norma Rae" and "J. P. Stevens" into household words, thus adding to the press attention.

Another facet of the boycott was much less visible but perhaps equally important. This was the process of getting large stores that placed orders for J. P. Stevens products to participate in the boycott. In effect, the goal was to recruit the retail sector to participate in the boycott, rather than only individual consumers.

A third part of the J. P. Stevens campaign was the effort to expand the scope of the conflict by building a coalition with other groups across the nation. One manifestation of this was the Southerners for Economic Justice for Stevens Workers, a coalition of clergy and concerned citizens. This group attempted to get Stevens stockholders to take action because of Stevens record of possible labor law violations, race and sex discrimination complaints, and poor health and safety conditions. This group was successful in getting time to speak at several shareholders' meetings.

Another tactic was to apply pressure on members of the board of directors of Stevens to resign, appealing especially to those who were also chairs of other boards. As a result, David Mitchell, Chairman of Avon Products, and Ralph Manning Brown, Jr., President of New York Life Insurance, resigned from the Stevens Board in 1978 amidst a large amount of publicity.

The result of the Stevens campaign was a collective bargaining agreement at the ten

Stevens plants for the women and other employees who worked there. (The union agreed to halt boycott activities once a settlement was reached.) The effects of the campaign and the surrounding mobilization of consumers and Stevens employees were more far-reaching than just the achievement of a union contract. It appeared that the U.S. consumer became educated regarding the working conditions in the southern non-union textile mills. In some respects, the J. P. Stevens campaign was a consciousness-raising experience at least for the liberal, labor, church, activist, and student sectors which supported the boycott.

A.F.S.C.M.E. strike over comparable worth

For nine days in July 1981, Local 101 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (A.F.S.C.M.E.) struck over a comparable worth dispute with the city of San Jose, California. Local 101 represented the city employees of San Jose. The union had negotiated for six months over a pay inequity issue which an outside consultant had identified. Female-dominated jobs were paid 18% less than male-dominated jobs with the same number of job evaluation points (A.F.S.C.M.E., 1983: 11-12). The union had filed charges with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (E.E.O.C.) to the effect that workers in occupationally segregated classifications were being underpaid. Notwithstanding the fact that there was a female mayor and a female majority on the city council of San Jose, the city and the union could not agree to a bargained solution without a strike (A.F.S.C.M.E., 1983: 12).

The strike resulted in 1.5 million dollars being awarded to more than 800 employees, 70% of whom were female. This was in addition to the regular pay increases of 15.5%. An interesting point about this action is that employee support for the strike was strong in a local which was not entirely female. In fact, only a minority of the bargaining unit was female—approximately 30% (Newman, 1984). The fact that males supported rather than resisted a demand perceived as a "women's issue" is notable. Another significant fact is that the strike succeeded in dealing with a highly technical and legalistic issue, comparable worth.

The short-term effect of this was to gain wage increases for the members of these occupationally segregated classifications and to get a collective bargaining agreement. Obviously, the long-term impact of this direct action depends on the vigilance of this particular local union as future job analyses are done. The action appears to have set the stage for others of this type, such as the more recent strike by Yale University clerical workers (Local 50). More such actions may occur either as a substitute for or in addition to litigation, which is the more traditional route for resolving claims concerning job evaluation and comparable worth.

Oneita knitting mills

Another interesting case but one which was less well-publicized was the prolonged strike at Oneita Knitting Mills. Oneita Knitting Mills had a workforce of about 1000 people—85% female and 75% Black. The strike committee was 50% Black and about 75% female. The strike lasted from January 14, 1973 to June 15, 1973 (Johnson, 1984). It occurred eighteen months after a National Labor Relations Board (N.L.R.B.) election in which the Textile Workers Union of America won bargaining rights. Although the strike was accompanied by a national boycott, it did not gain nearly the visibility or the popularity that the J. P. Stevens boycott did. The workers involved were Black women at two plants in the small towns of Andrews and Lane in South Carolina. The issue in the strike was whether or not the contract would contain what was fairly standard language in southern textile contracts on issues such as grievance, arbitration, seniority, and union security (a checkoff provision) (Johnson, 1984).

The strike was notable in terms of what it may have symbolized as a potential challenge to the power structure of these communities. Strikes in small southern textile towns often amount to challenges of not only the employer's authority but the entire power structure, including the political leadership and the church. Often, the church has an extraordinary amount of influence over conflicts in the southern textile mill towns (Earle, Knutson, & Schrieber, 1976). Significantly, in the Oneita case, the strikers had widespread support from the Black community, particularly

from Black political leaders and Black clergy. They also had the support of unionized workers such as the Steelworkers, the Rubber Workers, the Retail Clerks, and the Furniture Workers from neighboring communities (Johnson, 1984). Some of these unions had memberships which were predominantly Black and others were more racially mixed. Some of the Black union activists in Oneita had gained experience in the civil rights movement in the South and had established some sympathetic ties in the community and the state through those efforts.

What is unusual about this case is not that the strike occurred, but that it succeeded. The question is why the employer strategy of "wait it out" was not successful at Oneita. One activist in the Oneita conflict cited several reasons for this success (Johnson, 1984). The first was the dedication and stamina of the workers themselves. For example, there was no erosion of support over the length of the strike. This amount of solidarity is highly unusual in a long strike.

The second reason for its success was the support of the other labor unions. One manifestation of this was the strike rally which gave a big morale boost to the strikers. A third reason both for the strike and for its success may be the change in the workforce at Oneita. A new breed of worker was dominant in this strike compared to the previous generations of workers at the plant. The new Oneita workers were predominantly Black, younger, and more militant than previous generations (New breed of workers, 1979). Many of them had been involved in the civil rights movement in the South and represented potential Black union leadership. For example, James Johnson, one of the rank and file activists who was Black and who became the first President of the Oneita local, went on to become the President of the entire South Carolina state A.F.L.-C.I.O.⁴ in 1980, a mere seven years after the strike.

A final reason was the pressure of the boycott in addition to the strike. When the employer began having to turn down orders and facing complaints over the quality of the product, there was pressure to settle the dispute.

The result of the direct action in this case was to gain the first contract for the one thousand workers, mainly Black women, at

Oneita and to effectively ensure their bargaining rights. Moreover, it may have done a fair amount to empower Black workers in the state of South Carolina.

District 925 of the Service Employees International Union

The formation of Nine to Five, the National Association of Working Women, and its sister organization, District 925 (Nine-to-Five) of the Service Employees International Union, is one of the most promising developments for working women over the last few years. Nine to Five has 12,000 members and the union represents a total of 50,000 members. The organization is virtually all women. District 925 did not begin as a formal union effort, but as a response to specific grievances, such as complaints of sex discrimination and poor treatment of women in clerical, banking, and insurance positions. Women in these jobs in Boston, Cleveland, Washington, DC, and other cities, guided by Karen Nussbaum and others who were active in early organizing efforts, went the union route after trying to redress each of the problems in a piecemeal fashion. Thus, they began engaging in bargaining and eventually affiliated with the Service Employees International Union.

Efforts such as these formed the subject matter of another popular film, *Nine to Five*. There have been many similar groups across the country, such as Women Employed and Working Women. Their tactics and actions have varied in each setting. These efforts have had a surprising amount of success given how difficult it is to organize in these industries—such as banking and insurance—and in these positions—largely clerical. Conditions in these industries are such that they have been dubbed “the white collar ghetto” for women.

The Willmar Eight

The Willmar Eight action began on December 16, 1977 when eight women employees of the Citizen's Bank of Willmar, Minnesota went on strike. Considering the rather traditional conservative background of these women, one would not have expected them to form a union. There were several precipitating events which mobilized them. One of these was when a male loan officer with no

previous experience was hired at \$700 a month while the starting salaries for female tellers was \$400 or \$500 a month with no overtime (Seitz, 1982: 47). Another fact was that women were passed over for job promotion opportunities in favor of men with less experience. They filed charges of sex discrimination with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and also went to the National Labor Relations Board. The N.L.R.B. remedy was not forthcoming due to a technicality. The ultimate outcome of the action was that the bank was sold and most of the women did not resume employment at the successor bank (Update on the Willmar Eight, 1980).

In the process of this lengthy struggle, the women became committed feminists and unionists. They eventually gained the support of both women's groups and union groups across the country. They also made labor history: this was the first strike against a bank in Minnesota history. The strike transformed their lives. Their action was perceived as threatening the whole town and sometimes alienating their spouses, families, and friends. The confrontation was seen as antithetical to the fiber of the small town of Willmar. Willmar, a town of 16,000, is a center of tourist and commercial center. Notwithstanding rapid growth over the last two decades, its residents think of it as exemplary of small town values such as family and church (Amato, Nass, & Radzialowski, 1978: 25–27).

The strike had a significant impact on the banking industry as a whole. Many in the industry pondered the possibility of a Willmar action in their bank. Bankers flocked to see a film based on the events in order to avoid a Willmar action in their bank. But it is still too soon to assess the long-term effects of the Willmar Eight action upon labor organization in the banking industry.

What seems most significant about this case is that there was no objective basis for believing that these women would take any militant or direct action. Nothing about their family background, the local subculture, or the banking industry would have hinted at this transformation. Yet, this case became a *cause celebre* and a documentary film on it is shown frequently on television and for women's and union groups.

ASSESSMENT OF DIRECT ACTIONS

One question which can be asked about these case studies is which actions were successful? Most of the direct actions succeeded in achieving their immediate objective, with the exception of the Willmar Eight action. The Willmar Eight action did have some positive long-term consequences, such as a certain amount of publicity for efforts to organize the banking industry and also the transformation of the lives of the particular women involved. What is notable is that organization occurred in all these cases even though the objective conditions which are conducive to organizing drives did not exist. Take, for example, the hostile atmosphere of a small southern town in which the J. P. Stevens (Roanoke Rapids) plant was organized.

Organizing women workers

Union organizing campaigns often begin as a specific protest over a grievance (Serrin, 1985). There is not much systematic thinking on the question of whether an individual's grievance will transform itself into a viable union or employee association. Although there is no exact formula for women organizing themselves, there appear to be two or three different routes available. The first is to address particular grievances as they come up through litigation and other means, with no permanent structure such as a union or an interest group. The second approach is to form a union through the help of an established international union. A third route is one in which a local group, often all women, springs up in order to handle grievances on an *ad hoc* basis and then evolves into a local union, gradually adopting the bargaining functions which characterize unions. The group may then affiliate either directly with the A.F.L.-C.I.O. or with an international union. This route looks the most promising for organizing women workers because it is a gradual process; the process of becoming militant is a slow one. This is the route which 925 took and may be the reason why it was so successful.

Effectiveness of strikes and boycotts

Historically, the use of strikes by and for women workers has been limited by several structural and legal factors: (a) women are a

minority within their unions; and (b) the principle of exclusive representation in U.S. labor law, which makes it unlawful to have one certified bargaining agent for women workers and another one for men within the same bargaining unit. Given these two factors, the strike has been much more frequently used for economic or contractual gains for all workers than it has been as a vehicle to make gains for women *per se*.

However, this is changing. The San Jose strike over comparable worth is an example of male support for what was viewed as a women's issue—comparable worth. Looking at the above cases of collective action, the strike does not appear to be an effective tool, with the exception of the Willmar Eight effort. Notwithstanding these successes, the strike has definite limitations. A strike is a more powerful tactic when it is short than when it is long. Also, since a strike is a confrontation, it may not be well-received or even tolerated by the broader community. Several of these strikes, such as the Oneita Knitting Mills strike and the Willmar Eight, occurred in places where strikes, not to mention unions themselves, challenge the dominant norms of the community, and thus generate hostility.

What about the effectiveness of the economic boycott or product boycott? The best example of this mentioned here is the J. P. Stevens boycott, although there are other famous labor boycotts, such as the United Farm Workers' boycott of lettuce and grapes and N.O.W.'s boycott of convention sites in states which had not ratified the Equal Rights Amendment. The Stevens boycott was successful in gaining bargaining rights for the workers covered under the agreement and in educating the public as to the problems of the female textile worker and indeed southern textile workers in general.

However, economic boycotts have considerable limitations: they require a long-term commitment, many resources, and a tangible product which consumers can identify. For the tactic to have maximum impact, the product should be nationally-known or distributed nationally, since a national network boycott of a local product is difficult. Moreover, it is helpful if the boycott can be elevated from the level of a labor dispute to the cause of social justice or women's equality,

as indeed happened in the J. P. Stevens struggle (Douglas, 1985).

CONCLUSION

There have been some extremely successful militant direct actions taken by working women, a few of which are described in this article. The strike can be a powerful and effective direct action, provided that it is not too prolonged. The economic boycott or consumer boycott is effective also, although it is limited to those groups with substantial resources.

It is evident that there is now a popular recognition of working women and their problems. It is unclear whether working women are actually more militant now than they were in the past or whether direct actions taken more recently are just receiving more publicity. The prospects for women organizing themselves in female intensive, white-collar sectors look promising, and some of the cases discussed here directly support an optimistic view. It appears that gains are being made by women workers using all three approaches mentioned earlier: the temporary women's advocacy group, the use of an international union, and a women's group which evolves into a union (the 925 approach). It is the author's opinion that the last route, the "hybrid" route, may be the most promising way to organize women workers. What may be necessary over the long haul is to build a stronger bridge between the feminist movement, which has largely been characterized as a middle-class movement,⁵ and the union movement. In any case, it would appear that we are entering an exciting era in which working women are beginning to gain militancy as a mass movement.

ENDNOTES

1. A labor union in the United States is designated "International" if it has affiliated local branches in Canada or any other country outside the U.S.A. "Local" is the term applied to a local branch (usually at a particular industrial plant site) of a national or international labor union.

2. "Decertification" is the loss of official recognition of a labor union as the exclusive bargaining agent for workers at a particular plant. Under U.S. law, such recognition is based upon an election by employees, and requires an employer to enter into negotiations with the

union which has won such an election, thus giving the union the right to bargain in behalf of the workers for wages, terms and conditions of employment.

3. It is worth noting that the product boycott is not a new phenomenon. The early craft guilds in the U.S. used consumer boycotts to supplement strikes as early as the late 1700s or early 1800s. There was also the early colonists' boycott of British goods.

4. The A.F.L.-C.I.O. (American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations) is the general federation of labor unions in the U.S.A.

5. See, for example, Fulenwider's contention that the membership of N.O.W. is essentially white middle-class and professional.

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