

Redefining the Boundaries of Work: Apparel Workers and Community Unionism in the Global Economy

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This article focuses on new forms of community unionism that are being developed by apparel workers. Based on ethnographic research in Mexico and the United States, it argues that because so many apparel workers are women, because women have been excluded from unions in many contexts, because the relationship of apparel workers to their employers is "flexible" and unstable, and because the high turnover rates associated with low wages and poor working conditions erode long-term relations among workers themselves, workers find it easier to organize outside the factory than within it. Challenging traditional definitions of what kinds of issues labor activism should address, women working in the apparel sector have invented radical new agendas for social change that confront the state as well as industry, attend to the social reproduction of their communities as well as the wage, and call on employers to recognize that workers have gendered and fallible bodies.

Key Words: gender, labor, community unionism, apparel industry, United States, Mexico

Many people, from the journalist William Greider to Nobel Laureate economist Amartya Sen, have argued recently that we cannot have workers' rights in societies that do not have human rights. Greider, in particular, has said that improving the wages and working conditions of the poorest workers in the world economy would be difficult to achieve in the best of circumstances, but it is impossible to imagine without political freedoms that allow people to organize to demand it (1997). What neither Greider nor Sen say explicitly, but what is obvious if the focus is on global industries such as apparel, is that those human rights must include a full array of rights for women. What the International Labor Organization (ILO) calls the "core labor rights" of free speech and freedom of assembly mean little if women workers are excluded from unions. Women's labor activism is impeded by inequalities that give them exclusive responsibility for the care of family members, restrict their ability to participate in unions, or make them afraid to travel outside the home in the evenings. Bringing these

concerns into the conversation when we talk about labor issues and democratic practice is crucial to ensure that workers in these industries have a voice as workers and as citizens.

This article focuses on new forms of community unionism that are being developed by apparel workers. It draws mainly on examples from Mexico, but also from organizing efforts in the United States. The women whose practices I will be discussing feminize work by redefining who the worker is and insisting that she has a body. They also follow work out the factory door and demand recognition for the subsidies it receives from the household and community.

This article is based on research on the global apparel industry that was funded by the National Science Foundation. It involved a case study of two very large apparel firms. One—Liz Claiborne—produces relatively high-end fashion apparel. The other—a now-bankrupt firm called Tultex—produced low-end tee-shirts and sweatshirts for places like Wal-Mart and Target. The research involved a multi-sited ethnography of United States and Mexican operations for both companies. It compared the labor process of high- and low-end apparel firms to see if there were important differences and examined whether the firms organized their operations and labor processes differently in the United States and abroad. But, most importantly, the project sought to understand what it meant to be a worker in an industry whose labor market was global in scope—where firms can choose (in the case of Liz Claiborne, for example) to produce a given apparel item in any of 256 factories in 32 countries around the world. It asked how being part of a single global labor market shaped the day-to-day experience of workers and affected their opportunities to organize (Collins 2003).

In the apparel industry, these questions are complicated by gender. Garment work in the United States has always been predominantly female, although immigrant men have also been part of the labor force. Women also are the majority of workers in the industry internationally. About eighty percent of the workers in the sewing shops that I studied were women. In garment work, women are “at the heart of the story of both industrialization and de-industrialization” (Cowie 1999: 197). They are the recruits into new jobs as the industry globalizes and they are the ones who turn off their sewing machines and try to find new work when companies close their United States operations. While we tend to think of deindustrialization as a phenomenon that affects white men in hard hats, the decimation of the apparel industry in the United States has mainly affected women and minority workers.

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As the apparel industry globalizes, moving into new regions and constructing new labor markets, it does so in accordance with well-established understandings of public and private. Firms benefit from the ways that our society defines public and private because these definitions render certain issues incontestable or depoliticized, and also because they are able to draw subsidies from certain spheres that are denominated private. But, for a variety of reasons, the borderline between public and private has recently come under contest in the organizing efforts of apparel workers.

Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, in their book *The Politics of Gender After Socialism* (2000), have argued that public and private are not places, domains, spheres of activity, or types of interaction. They are not distinctive institutions or practices. Rather, Gal and Kligman suggest that the distinction is a discursive one, marking a zone of contest. The ability of a social actor or social institution to *fix* that boundary, they suggest, has been a source and sign of power. The ability of a *social movement* to *shift* the boundary also is an emblem and result of its power.

If the boundary between public and private is a zone of contest, what is at stake there? Nancy Fraser has suggested that the constitution of the “domestic” and of the “economy” as private domains is a discursive move that “enclaves and depoliticizes” key issues (1989). In her view, what is political (and therefore contestable) is defined in contrast to what is economic on one hand and what is domestic or personal on the other, demarcating both these realms as zones governed by private (and therefore incontestable) prerogatives. An example of the former is the work that feminist social movements have done to establish domestic violence as a political concern, one that should be addressed by the courts and state programs. Opponents of this view attempt to perpetuate broadly circulated cultural definitions of abuse as a private matter that should be resolved within families or, if not, within specialized social work institutions that serve families. In a parallel way, Fraser argues that questions about workplace democracy “may be enclaved as ‘economic’ or ‘managerial’ problems” that should be left to the market or, in some cases, to industrial relations or human resource specialists. So boundaries between public and private are crucial in policing what issues can be brought to the table, what can be negotiated, and what can be regulated.

In the context of labor mobilization among Mexican apparel workers, issues from the private domain have spilled over into the zone of public discussion. They have done so because, in a context of state-led

unionization and female exclusion from union leadership, women have not seen the issues that matter to them brought to the table. In response, they have had to invent their own forms of organizing.

Mass production and gender activism in the apparel industry: Historical antecedents

Up until the 1850s, even in the industrializing nations of Europe and America, families produced the vast majority of clothing in the home. Women sewed and knit a wide range of items for their families, although by the 1830s, usually from purchased cloth and yarns. Tailors produced made-to-order garments for those wealthy enough to afford them. These artisans and their assistants made virtually all purchased clothing in the United States and Europe in the 1850s. People referred to the few ready-made, or off-the-rack, garments that circulated as "slops" and took them as a marker of poverty (Coyle 1982: 100).

Tailoring was a trade and most shops consisted of a skilled worker who, with the help of apprentices and family members, sewed an entire garment from start to finish. Most tailors were men, although seamstresses specialized in women's dresses and underwear. Despite the predominance of men in the trade, garment work has historically been the largest employer of women after domestic service. In shops and through homework for tailors, women performed a wide array of tasks at many skill levels. The industry also provided employment for many of the immigrant women and men who arrived in the United States from the 1840s until 1920 (Glenn 1990: 98–99; Green 1996: 411–33; Wertheimer 1977: 61).

The structure of the garment industry changed significantly with the invention of the sewing machine in the 1850s. The revolution that the sewing machine unleashed in production was complemented by a contemporaneous revolution in retailing, as department stores and mail-order houses became the purveyors of clothing produced by the new machines (Kidwell and Christman 1974). In the 1860s, wholesale establishments such as Marshall Field's set up retail lines and dry goods firms such as Macy's expanded into full-fledged department stores. These new retail establishments sold a broad range of consumables to growing urban markets; they included ready-made apparel items among the goods they purveyed. In the 1870s, Aaron Montgomery Ward reached out to rural consumers through his mail-order firm, followed in the 1880s by Sears, Roebuck and Company (Chandler 1977: 218–219, 230). Mail order took off with the improvement of rural roads and the development of rural free delivery after the turn of the

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century (Gladwell 1999). Twenty-first century branded manufacturers of apparel build on these late nineteenth century precedents in manufacturing and in mass distribution and sales.

Producing for mass markets revolutionized the apparel industry, as clothing went from being “made for somebody” to “made for anybody.” Most importantly, it led to a shift away from a system in which one or a few individuals made whole garments. Instead, the shops implemented “section work,” in which each operator sewed the same piece—a collar or a sleeve—over and over again and whole garments emerged out of a process much like what later came to be called an assembly line (Kidwell and Christman 1974).

By the early days of the twentieth century, the vast majority of sewing workers no longer produced whole garments. A first-class white shirt passed through twenty-five to thirty hands before completion and the manufacture of a coat involved thirty-nine different operations performed by thirty-nine different individuals (Kidwell and Christman 1974: 94–95). The introduction of scientific management practices to the garment industry after World War I further “rationalized” this kind of section work (Glenn 1990: 152). By the 1930s, most factories had organized their sewing lines into what was called a progressive bundle system. When workers completed an operation on a garment, they placed it in a buffer or bundle. Factory owners laid out their machines to facilitate shuttling these bins of garments between workers. At the end of the line, workers gave the garment a final pressing, attached labels, and packed it for shipping. Managers assigned each of these tasks a target time in standard allocated minutes (SAM) and time study engineers calculated SAM for each operation in the process (Abernathy et al. 1999: 27–28).

These changes reallocated responsibilities among workers and reduced the total number of tasks required of any one operator. Nevertheless, individual tasks still required precision and care and a knowledge of machines and of fabrics. Over time, however, there was a tendency for managers to reconstrue skill as speed. As several authors have argued, the ability to work at high speed became a new “skill,” inadvertently created by deskilling (Coyle 1982; Glenn 1990: 100). The practice of paying workers by piece rate, and the adoption of SAM for each task, fueled this trend. Because of the difficulty of further mechanizing a process involving limp fabric, the progressive bundle system and piece work continued to characterize garment production throughout the twentieth century.

Labor struggles in the apparel industry recognized that section work and the progressive bundle system eroded craft control. They also reflected the difficulty that women workers had operating within

the traditional craft unions. In the first years of the twentieth century in Chicago, a group of Swedish seamstresses, who remained committed to sewing whole garments in the way that tailors had in the past, formed the Custom Clothing Makers' Union (CCMU). Their goal in this union—which was the first in United States history to be headed by women—was to resist the spread of section work. At the height of its power, the CCMU had 3,000 members, and fought for and won a (shorter) nine-hour day, higher wages, and a banning of child labor in its shops. Its resistance to section work proved futile, however. After they affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, that organization ordered the CCMU to merge with the United Garment Workers (UGW). The UGW did not oppose section work and they forced the CCM to use the UGW label instead of their own. This undermined the attempt of the seamstresses to market “custom-made” clothing as a distinct product and led to the demise of their movement (Wertheimer 1977: 320–321).

The greatest outpouring of resistance and activism in the garment industry followed the innovations of scientific management in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The “uprising of 20,000” in 1909–1910 in New York City began in the Triangle Shirtwaist shop and ultimately spread to young women making shirtwaists all over the city. Following a dispute with their employer, young women at the shop approached the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) to inquire about affiliating. Managers fired the workers who had taken this action. When their co-workers began picketing to show support for the women who were fired, managers called in thugs, who assaulted them, and the police, who arrested them. After five months marred by frequent violence, the uprising reached an anticlimactic conclusion as a number of shops signed individual agreements with the union and ILGWU leaders called off the strike. Two key demands that managers did not meet at the Triangle shop were unlocked doors and functioning fire escapes. This led to the deaths of 146 young women in the Triangle Shirtwaist fire of March 1911 (Wertheimer 1977: 297–310).

In the Great Revolt of 1910, 60,000 ILGWU cloak makers walked out to demand a reduction in the work week, the elimination of sub-contracting, paid holidays, weekly payment in cash, and grievance procedures. The union reached historic settlement with employers that became known as the Protocol of Peace. The Triangle Shirtwaist fire the next year gave rise to a renewed outpouring of protest and resulted in government investigations and the introduction of a new industrial code in the state of New York (Wertheimer 1977: 313).

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with textile mills in the 1880s. But with the passage of restrictive immigration laws in the 1920s, this situation began to change. While the urban centers of the Northeast, Cleveland, Chicago, and later Los Angeles have remained important hubs of garment production, with the restriction of new waves of immigration, apparel manufacturing firms began to open up sewing shops in small southern towns. By 1960, the south had over 308,000 apparel workers (Hodges 1994: 54). Forty-four percent of all United States apparel jobs were in the south in 1974, compared to seventeen percent in 1950 (NACLA 1977: 10–11). Apparel firms moved south in search of a “favorable business climate” that included low wages, low rates of unionization, right-to-work laws, cheap resources, and community subsidies (Gaventa 1990: 85). The strategy of attracting industry through cheap labor would leave southern communities vulnerable in later periods. In 1998, when a major corporation in a small southern town closed its sewing shops, a laid-off worker asked the mayor what could be done. “I told her I was mighty sorry,” he reported. “But years ago . . . companies came out of the north for cheap labor. Now they’re going on south to Honduras and Mexico” (Kegley 1998).

The globalization of the apparel labor market

News coverage of the demise of the apparel industry in the United States creates the impression that United States workers are losing jobs to “foreign imports,” as though foreign companies were making lots and lots of clothing and exporting it to the United States. In fact, however, the vast majority of clothing imported into the United States is produced by U.S. firms, or by their subcontractors, abroad. Companies such as Liz Claiborne, Nike, and the Gap are organizing production offshore. The United States Association of Importers of Textile and Apparel is far more powerful today than the older American Apparel Manufacturers Association. Big apparel firms of the 1990s lobbied, not for protectionism (which has been the traditional demand of firms in the industry), but for the easing of import restrictions. This reflects the changing interests, and the increasingly global scope, of apparel firms.

As this account suggests, the garment sector today is not the same as it was a generation ago. It is no longer made up of small shops tucked into the garment districts of New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles or of small apparel factories in southern towns. Even a generation ago, anyone with a few thousand dollars could rent a space and install a few sewing machines and be on the road to apparel entrepreneurship. The industry was considered easy to enter and economists said that it

evidenced conditions of "near perfect" competition among small firms (Dickerson 1995: 290).

As the apparel industry moved into the 1990s, it experienced the same fate as many other sectors of the economy. Competitive pressures and the need to continually increase stock value on Wall Street drove firms to become bigger and bigger. The industry experienced a wave of mergers and acquisitions. Industry analysts said that while a firm doing \$100 million in annual business was "big enough to survive in 1990, by 1999, only those with \$2 billion in annual sales were secure" (Conrad 1999).

One of the major reasons that apparel firms had to grow was to increase their negotiating power with retailers. The 1990s saw an astonishing pattern of retail consolidation among department stores, but also among mega-retailers such as Wal-Mart and Target. Among department stores in 1999, the six largest received ninety percent of consumer dollars (*Apparel Industry Magazine* 1999). These large retailers had sufficient buying power to say to manufacturers, "I want this shirt at this price, and if you can't provide it, I will go elsewhere." This led to an unprecedented situation of deflation in the apparel industry. The consumer price index for clothing was lower in 2000 than in 1991 and is continuing to decline (AAFA 2000). This is a very important trend to understand in order to grasp why apparel companies are roving the world in search of cheap labor.

While this was a difficult situation for the industry, it was not experienced in the same way by all firms. The 1990s were the best of times for some firms and the worst of times for others. For small and mid-sized firms it was difficult. Many went bankrupt. But many large firms, in contrast, were able to use the situation to their advantage.

Large firms used three important strategies to improve their profitability. The first of these was to brand their products more and more prominently. Naomi Klein (1999) has documented the importance that branding has come to hold for consumer products firms of all kinds. The second strategy was to move from direct ownership of factories to subcontracting of operations. This gave firms more flexibility to move production around from one place to another. It also gave them less liability for the conditions in their factories. But the third and most important strategy was to move jobs offshore. Firms began to organize their production globally beginning in the 1970s. The numbers that did so increased through the 1980s and grew to massive proportions in the 1990s. Employment in the United States apparel industry peaked in 1973 at 1.5 million jobs. By 2002, it had declined to around 500,000 (U.S. Department of Labor 1994; Ramey 2002: 3).

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For firms that move jobs offshore, decisions about where to locate production are based on several factors. These include transportation costs and trade agreements—such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)—that offer other incentives for production in specific regions. And they also include consideration of the relative cost of labor, which can range from approximately twenty-five percent of United States wage levels in Mexico to ten percent in Malaysia to three percent in China (Dickerson 1995: 201–202).

Shopfloor and community in Aguascalientes, Mexico

Aguascalientes emerged as an export platform for apparel in the early 1990s, as firms that had been doing business along the United States–Mexico border sought new production opportunities in the less costly cities of central Mexico. The town presented the advantages of good transport opportunities, good infrastructure, a location north of Mexico City, and a strong industrial elite that devoted itself to the building of industrial parks and to accommodating investors. It also combined a resident population of approximately 500,000 with access to a hinterland of small rural communities. By the late 1990s, as the labor market within the city of Aguascalientes itself began to tighten, apparel firms recruited the majority of their workers from rural areas of the state of Aguascalientes and neighboring Zacatecas.

The Confitek plant, which sewed knitwear for a variety of low-end brands from 1995 to 2000, was located in a warehouse-like building in downtown Aguascalientes. Confitek fit the pattern of a traditional maquiladora. Its workers assembled garments from fabric that other workers had knit and cut in the United States. It was a dark and cramped facility, and unlike some other apparel plants, workers remained seated at their stations during most of the work day, with very little movement about the plant. Partly because of the simplicity of its operations, it made few investments in training, infrastructure, or machinery. Approximately eighty-five percent of its employees were women and the age of the workers ranged from 17 to 28.

A group of Mexican investors started Confitek in 1995 in order to accept production contracts from transnational firms. In the year 2000, its workers sewed knitwear for Sara Lee, Pluma, Hanes, Tultex, and Highlander among other labels. Managers described the work done in the plant as "pure assembly." "They send us the raw materials and all that we do is assemble and return them." The products themselves—mostly sweatshirts and "golf" shirts—were not particularly complicated and styles did not change a great deal.

Workers at Confitek assembled garments according to the progressive bundle system. A "chico de bultos" or "bundle boy" moved stacks of twelve sweatshirts from worker to worker. Line managers gave workers a coupon for every bundle of twelve sweatshirts they completed and calculated their income based on the number of coupons they held at the end of the day. They paid a bonus to workers whose quality ratio was ninety percent—that is, who produced nine out of every ten bundles without defects. Given the rapid growth of the industry and the tightening labor market in Aguascalientes, managers listed the main requirements for new workers as: "good health, good eyesight, and no criminal record." They did not require experience or prior knowledge of sewing.

A second factory in Aguascalientes, Burlmex, produced apparel under contract for "fashion brands" such as Liz Claiborne, the Gap, and Calvin Klein. The facility opened in 1999 and was located in an industrial park about twenty minutes from the center of Aguascalientes. The factory complex included two large buildings and an office suite. The buildings were bare, well lit, and clean. Workers dressed casually in jeans or pants and tee-shirts or slacks. There was not a lot of talking in the plant, as the machines were very loud.

The facility in Aguascalientes produced "fashion" jeans for Liz Claiborne and Calvin Klein, as well as more basic jeans for Levi's and Rocky Mountain. Burlmex ran a separate line of 50–200 seamstresses for each of its contractor firms. The company employed a little over 1,000 production workers in the year 2000 and approximately eighty-five percent of those workers were women.

While similar in many ways to Confitek, Burlmex differed in its "state of the art" system of quality control, known as "statistical process control." Statistical process control is different from earlier methods of quality control in that it measures the accuracy of the sewing process rather than the adequacy of the final product. Traditional methods, such as those used at Confitek, examined a sampling of items from each bundle, or from a sampling of bundles, at the end of the line. With statistical process control, sampling was based on time. Every hour, inspectors would examine the garments emerging from every work station. Each was assessed based on several attributes: some "visual" or qualitatively assessed and others "variable" or quantitatively measured. An example of a visual attribute might be whether a seam was puckered. An example of a variable attribute would be the depth of a seam. An inspector at each of the four stations made these measurements and graphed them on a chart. She discussed the results with a line supervisor who provided feedback to the operator.

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The pressure to make these quotas, while at the same time doing work that met quality standards, was causing burnout within a very short period. As one inspector said, "I could work here for perhaps two years before being exhausted, but the sewing operators get more pressure on them so they can't stay as long." She explained the relationship of the speed-up to the global scope of the apparel labor market. "When people slow down or complain," she said, "the manager tells us that the workers in their Indonesian plant get paid much less and work harder."

Both Confitek and Burlmex recruited their workers from villages as far as two hours away, using trucks with loudspeakers that passed through settlements to advertise good wages and "free dining," and leaving leaflets with local officials and store owners describing employment opportunities. As one manager at Burlmex noted, "Many times when there is overtime, the cars leave to take them home at ten o'clock at night and they live two hours from here, so they arrive at home very late, and nevertheless they have to leave home again extremely early the next day. It costs a lot to cover this transportation." While the cost to the firm was undoubtedly significant, such hours must have also affected the health and well-being of workers. As one worker (a single mother with three children) noted,

You have no energy after work. I get home by 6:30, but I have to wake up again at 5:30 in the morning. In the smaller towns, some get home at 8:30 p.m. and have to wake up at 3 or 4 in the morning.

If a worker at Confitek or Burlmex wanted to speak to her employer, she would first need to figure out who that was, and this was no small task. Workers at Confitek, for example, had only an abstract idea that they worked for corporations whose headquarters were far away in the United States. Tultex, Hanes, and Fruit of the Loom were only names on the labels they placed in garments. From the perspective of workers on the shop floor, shifting labels signified small changes in production protocols: a different set of the sleeve, a plastic vs. metal zipper. It was not immediately clear that these shifts also entailed changing bosses. Workers at Burlmex faced a similar question—which large United States-based multinational was their employer? Was it Burlington Industries, which owned and ran the Aguascalientes plant, or was it Liz Claiborne or Calvin Klein, which certified its operations, provided fabric, specified the labor process, and branded and sold the products? It was not impossible for workers to trace these relationships, but it required access to information that was not immediately available to them. Rather than engaging in daily, face-to-face relations with the

firm's owner, a worker had to conduct what amounted to a research project in order to identify the individuals who had responsibility for conditions of work.

Relations among workers themselves were shaped by several factors. Many observers of the Mexican political situation had hoped that the ascendance of the National Action Party (PAN) to national governance in 2000 might open new opportunities for independent workers' organizations (*Maquila Solidarity Network Update* 2001). During the period of dominance of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), two state-sponsored labor federations had dominated the national scene. The Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) was formed in 1936 under President Lázaro Cárdenas and grew to be the dominant labor organization in the country. Historians and political scientists have widely perceived the CTM to have traded radical demands and democratic governance for strong ties to administration and state subsidies. The Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants (CROC) was established in 1952 under President Miguel Alemán. While critical of the CTM's servility to the ruling party, the CROC was also strongly allied with the PRI. Both federations secured their survival and strong national presence through loyalty to the state, but at the cost of the ability to act independently in defense of workers' rights (Cockcroft 1998; Cowie 1999: 120–121).

While opportunities for independent unions appeared to increase with the defeat of the PRI in 2000, the legacy of the old unions was strong and the prospect of building autonomous organizations where no such tradition existed was daunting. Workers in the apparel sector faced an additional challenge—the fact that they were predominantly female. Official unions in Mexico have historically excluded women and, thus, women workers did not emerge from the PRI period with much experience in those institutions. In addition, women in Mexico—as in many other parts of the world—face a double day. That is, they return home from work to perform an additional day's work cooking, cleaning, and caring for their families. It is hard for any worker to find time to attend meetings after a ten-hour day, especially if they have a two-hour commute ahead. It becomes even more difficult, however, if one returns home to additional hours of labor. While this is less of an issue for single women, over half of Mexico's apparel workers were married in 1990 (Carrillo 1994: 223).

Gendered workers in a global economy

As firms relocate their apparel production to new regions, they must find a way to harmonize their existing business and employment practices with the social reality of the new site. In other words, work relations

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must be instantiated in the new context. Employers have to find ways to recruit, train, and control workers. This is a particularly important issue when apparel firms engage in what are sometimes called "green-fields" employment practices: moving into regions where a strong labor market does not exist and tapping new populations that have not previously been incorporated into the labor market. In Mexico, export apparel production began along the United States–Mexican border in the 1960s. Over time, as demand for labor exceeded supply and as workers gained experience and began to advocate for their rights, firms began moving their operations into the interior of the country.

Mexican economist Huberto Juárez has noted that the rapid growth in export apparel operations in the interior of Mexico in the 1990s has not occurred everywhere equally. It has tended to be concentrated in zones of high out-migration to the United States. In these regions, women and children have remained in their home communities piecing together a living while awaiting remittances from husbands and fathers who have migrated. Family members of migrants are disproportionately represented in the apparel labor force (Juárez 2002). This is reminiscent of Michael Burawoy's account of how, in the 1960s, women's work in South African homelands subsidized male workers in mines and urban industry and how the work of women in rural communities of Mexico helped to support men who migrated to the United States (1976). In an ironic twist, Mexican factory owners and the United States firms who contract with them have found a way to take advantage of the remittances that migrant men send to their families in rural communities, by incorporating their wives and daughters into the apparel work force at less than a living wage. For many families, labor migration and maquila work become part of an intertwined strategy of social reproduction, made necessary by the insufficiency of the wages paid in either location.

Mexico's real income per capita in 1998 was less than in 1960. In 1997, the purchasing power for most workers was at its lowest level since 1935 (Cockcroft 1998: 349). The minimum wage that most apparel workers received in Mexico in 2000 was \$3.50 a day. A cost-of-living study by Ruth Rosenbaum has shown that this wage did not come close to meeting the nutritional needs of workers or their family members, much less to permit them to secure adequate housing. She argues that between four and five minimum wages would be required to meet these basic needs (2000: 68).

The question of the apparel workers' wage and its sufficiency is inflected by the gender of workers. Managers use contradictory, but gendered, arguments to justify payment of low wages. As Rosenbaum notes,

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Some argued that many workers are not married, and that a woman's take-home wage needs to support only the worker. Others argue that the worker is married and therefore the take-home wage should be half of what is needed to support the family. The reality is that persons are not ordinarily paid according to family size (2000: 5).

The parallels between this logic and that of the early twentieth century employers that Alice Kessler-Harris quotes in her work on women's wages, is remarkable. The words are almost the same. The irony is, of course, that then, as now, many of the women who are supposedly ensconced in families are raising children on their own, or their partners are unemployed or earn very little. For those women who are married to migrants, the timing and amount of remittances may be unpredictable. Paying women for "what they are, rather than what they do," in Kessler-Harris' words (1990: 15–17) makes vulnerable anyone who does not have the ideal set of family arrangements or whose responsibilities exceed those of the "ideal" female worker.

The activism of Mexican apparel workers

Women who work in factories like the ones in Aguascalientes live and restore themselves in households and communities. It is through the social relations of these family and community networks that they find care for their children while they work and are cared for themselves when they are sick. It is through these networks that they pool resources in ways that allow them to afford housing, food, and other necessities. These are the relationships that sustain workers and reproduce the labor force—they are what David Harvey calls "the social infrastructure which supports life and work" (1999: 116). When large apparel firms relocate their operations, especially into "green-fields" areas, they tap the resources of these communities. By paying less than a living wage, they require them to supplement and subsidize the work that is done in the factory. This is the part of the secret of the low-cost labor of the developing world, that families where wage earners make so little sustain themselves by putting together a range of other kinds of income: the wages of other family members; transactions in the informal economy; rent; remittances from abroad; and a range of self-provisioning activities. These relationships are outside the wage contract and are considered to be a private source of support for public work.

Scholars and activists have recognized the significance of these domestic and community resources, and in response they have elaborated new models of "community unionism" or "social movement

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unionism" that take these relationships into account. Community unionism has tried to build alliances between industrial workers and other organizations and to "reach beyond the workplace" to individuals and groups who share the interests of workers (Moody 1997: 207). As important as these efforts have been, some of them have a curious quality. They tend to talk about alliances between labor and community groups as though labor inhabits only the workplace and people in communities never go to work at all. In his otherwise excellent book, *Workers in a Lean World*, Kim Moody talks about community unionism as "the strongest of society's oppressed and exploited—organized workers—mobilizing those who are less able to sustain self-mobilization: the poor, the unemployed . . . the neighborhood organizations" (1997: 276). Drawing examples from Gay Seidman's work on unions in Brazil and South Africa (Seidman 1993), Moody notes that women were heavily represented in the unions of the textile, garment, and food-processing sectors. He then goes on to talk about union members making alliances with the women of the new neighborhood associations. It does not seem to occur to him that the women who lived in the neighborhoods and the women in the unions might be the same people, or that these women's activism spilled over from where they work to where they live. Nor do those who write about community unionism often consider that there might be something about the family responsibilities that women workers often shoulder that leads them to be as concerned about urban services, clean water, and day care as they are about the wage.

It is not an exaggeration to say that women in Mexico have historically been excluded from traditional venues of labor organizing. Under the corporatist unions organized by the PRI, which dominated the Mexican political scene until 2000, women had few roles in union leadership, even in sectors where the majority of union members were women (Cockcroft 1998). As Devon Peña has said, "trade unionists, on both sides of the border, do not seem to think that Mexican women can be successfully organized" (1997: 104). Because of this situation, as women were drawn into industrial employment, they had to find their own ways of organizing.

As a workplace, the apparel maquila is not ideally suited for labor organizing. This is partly because of the situation of subcontracting described earlier. Workers may never be quite clear about who they are working for—is it the owner of the factory or the owner of the label? One hour they may be producing for Liz Claiborne, the next for the Gap, the following for Calvin Klein. Contracts come and go based on shifts in quota and exchange rates. In addition to this lack of clarity about who the employer is, any hint of labor mobilization can be

grounds for a United States firm to pull its contracts. The turnover of workers in maquila plants is notoriously high—generally well over 100 percent a year. Relationships between workers and their employers, and among workers themselves, are “flexible” in the new parlance of industrial organization, fluid and unstable from the perspective of workers. The dense webs of social connection and shared experience out of which labor activism grows have little chance to emerge in these contexts. This is another factor that shapes women’s labor activism.

Women’s exclusion from unions and the instability of employment relations have meant that the locus of struggle among apparel workers in Mexico has been, not the shop floor, but the community. The most important examples of this form of organizing come from the northern Mexican border region where, in the 1960s, the Center for the Orientation of Women Workers (COMO) was formed to support women workers in their health and safety concerns. COMO emerged out of labor mobilizations at the RCA electronics plant in Ciudad Juárez. The organization provided a context outside the plant itself for workers to discuss and analyze problems (Peña 1997: 149). COMO supported the formation of an independent union and a strike at Acapulco Fashions in Ciudad Juárez in 1978. But it was not primarily a workplace-based organization. It offered courses on a variety of topics and sponsored literacy and health campaigns. It also organized cooperatives among women working in the informal sector.

A second community-based organization that has supported women in the apparel industry is the Border Committee for Women Workers (CFO). Begun in the 1990s, this committee works to promote improvements in working conditions in the maquiladoras and to inform workers of their rights. Edmé Dominguez has called the CFO “a workers’ organization without being a trade union” and she argues that it needs to take this form because of the difficulties that trade unions have working in the maquila area (2001: 6). While the CFO provides support for workers in negotiating with specific companies, it has also organized against actions of the Mexican state, such as peso devaluations, and conducted more general programs in worker education.

A third non-union organization that serves apparel workers is Casa de la Mujer—Factor X, established in 1989 in Tijuana. Casa de la Mujer is renowned for combining its organizing around labor issues with initiatives support of women’s health and reproductive freedom. It sponsors workshops in sexuality, contraception, and domestic violence prevention as well as on environmental conditions in the workplace and their effects on women’s health. Casa de la Mujer insists that these issues are interconnected, supporting women’s autonomy as workers and as people.

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These organizations, and others like them, were built on principles of community unionism that emphasized alliances between labor and other groups and that linked workplace and community issues. But they also represented a very gendered model of community unionism that recognized the specific ways in which women negotiate the relationships among work, home, and community, the difficulties of operating through male-dominated political institutions and the gender-specific concerns of women workers. As women who work in apparel maquilas have invented their own forms of organizing, they have brought issues from what society has construed as the private domain into the zone of public discussion.

Non-workplace-based organizations were made necessary by the way in which state-run unions like the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) and the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants (CROC) dominated the Mexican labor movement, and by the way these groups marginalized women workers. This is not unlike the situation in other parts of the Americas. As Jennifer Mendez has noted, most of the organizations in the Central American Network of Women in Solidarity with Women Workers in the Maquilas were formed as a direct result of gender conflicts within unions or organizations of the Left (2002: 127). This situation began to change in the late 1990s. In his recent history of Mexican politics, Cockcroft has noted that, as struggles for union democracy heated up in the 1990s, the concerns of women workers began to shift the agenda of some of the independent union movements. For example, the Frente Auténtica de Trabajo (FAT) began to champion legislation such as affordable child care, maternity and family leave, and public transportation. Its female members played an active role in "internationalist and anti-NAFTA" mobilizations as well as labor and democracy issues (Cockcroft 1998: 351).

New forms of organizing, such as those developed by COMO and the CFO, were not important just because they provided an autonomous space for women to develop agendas and strategies, outside the domination of the traditional unions. The community was also an important site of organization because of the transience of the ties of workers to any one employer and the difficulty of forging connections among themselves on the shop floor. While turnover rates in the factory were high, residence in the community was more stable and women could continue to work together if they were laid off or changed jobs. And, as previously suggested, the work that they did in these contexts pushed at the historical boundary between the public and private spheres.

Working outside of traditional union organizations, women did not have to argue with their male colleagues about whether birth control

and reproductive health were appropriate topics of discussion or whether child care was a priority. They were not constrained by charters or agendas from deciding that fighting the effluents from the factory that poisoned their water supply was more important than demanding a higher wage. (This issue is extremely important to Mexican apparel workers because so many Mexican apparel factories specialize in working with denim and because so much denim is chemically processed, especially stone-washing or softening.) In starting from the issues that affected their bodies, families, livelihood, and quality of life, Mexican apparel workers confounded existing definitions of what was properly contestable by labor; they challenged what could be brought to the table and redefined work.

In *Unbending Gender*, Joan Williams (2001) has developed the concept of the "ideal worker norm" that establishes work schedules and practices around an imagined male worker. This ideal worker (and I would argue that this holds for both the United States and Mexico) is a worker without a body and a worker unencumbered by family. Disability, ill health, childbirth, and child care take time away from the trajectory of work; they create "embarrassing" hiatuses, eroding seniority and "human capital." These bodily realities are departures from the "ideal worker norm," allowing employers to construe them as evidence of a lack of commitment and as a reason for paying women workers less.

Family and medical leave in the United States was fought on the ground of what was properly public and what was private. Conservatives argued that the legislation was "too public" in several ways. It was too public in bringing concerns about family into the workplace, forcing employers to support (in the form of unpaid leave) care in the domestic realm. That realm was supposed to be private, its motivations emotional, its ministrations unpaid. The FMLA was also construed as "too public" in getting the state involved in regulating the activities of firms—interfering in the private sector or free market. Mexican apparel workers challenge precisely these boundaries through their activism, opening up new arenas to public debate.

In 1999, the administration of the University of Wisconsin, where I teach, held a series of public fora on its newly developed code of conduct for the sourcing of its collegiate apparel. At the second of these fora, students who were involved in the national anti-sweatshop movement presented a number of new points that they wanted to see incorporated into the code. They asked for a clause that would require firms that produce collegiate apparel to respect the rights of women workers—specifically, that they not subject them to pregnancy tests, fire them for being pregnant, or allow sexual harassment on the shop

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floor. Both the University of Wisconsin administration and the representatives of organized labor who were present at the meeting seemed puzzled by how this issue had gotten onto the agenda and what it had to do with the issue. In fact, the new clause had emerged out of communications between the student movement and the non-governmental organizations supporting Mexican apparel workers and it reflected the concerns that came out of the non-union labor activism of these groups. For those in the public hearing, it represented a shifting of the boundary between public and private, in Gal and Kligman's words. Its acceptance as part of many of the voluntary codes of conduct now in use suggests at least a small measure of power and success.

Boundary-shifting of the type described here is not only happening in Mexico. In a similar way, as Mendez has shown, new organizations of export sector workers in Central America "are not just concerned with traditional labor issues" but "work to empower women and improve their daily lives. . . . Their programs and strategies cut across the public/private divide by addressing women's social positions at home, in the workplace and in society in general" (2002: 129). These groups run programs on domestic violence and sexual abuse and other educational programs as well as administering credit and job-training programs.

Community unionism was not part of the story in the United States factories I studied. There, the activism of workers—who were mainly women and minorities—was channeled through UNITE, the union that represents the majority of apparel workers in this country. While it is among the most inclusive and democratic of AFL-CIO-affiliated unions in the United States, UNITE maintains a traditional focus on the shop floor as the locus of organization and on improving wages and enforcing fair work rules as key activities. To find examples of such boundary-crossing union organizing among apparel workers in the United States, it is necessary to look at the work being done by immigrant workers in large urban centers.

Miriam Ching Yoon Louie's recent book, *Sweatshop Warriors*, provides many examples of this kind of boundary contestation. Louie documents the way in which ethnic organizations like the Chinese Staff and Workers Association in New York City, La Mujer Obrera and Fuerza Unida in Texas, and Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates in Los Angeles operate as neighborhood-based platforms to support workers. They organize a range of services and advocacy programs both in factories and in what Louie calls "civilian life." Perhaps most importantly, in an industry where employment relations are casualized and unstable, they "follow immigrant workers into expanding industries, and accompany them through de-industrialization, runaway

shops, layoffs" (Louie 2001: 219). They are not premised on stable employment, but adapt to shifting conditions. Louie playfully suggests that these organizations are engaged in "just-in-time" organizing of small batches and micro-markets of women workers segregated at the bottom of the new economy.

Conclusion

In the context of globalization in industries such as apparel, new forms of work tend to reproduce boundaries between public and private that have been at the heart of capitalist enterprise for centuries. As transnational organizing "reaches out across space and time . . . to confront the universal and transnational qualities of capital accumulation" (Harvey 2001: 390), it all too often takes these boundaries for granted. Even new models of community unionism that take non-workplace issues seriously start from the premise that work is what happens in the factory. In community unionism, workers may support community struggles, but labor issues remain conceptually separate from the social reproduction of the family, the health of the workers, and the well-being of the community where they live.

These kinds of social geographies are not just reproduced, however, but can become the locus of powerful contradictions (Harvey 1999: 403). In the context of global apparel work, these are the factors that come to contradict historical definitions of public work and private social reproduction: the fact that so many workers drawn into globalizing industry are women, that women have been excluded from unions in many developing world contexts, that the relationship of apparel workers to their employer is "flexible" and unstable, and that the high turnover rates associated with low wages and poor working conditions erode long-term relations among workers themselves. These factors work together to create a situation in which it is easier for workers to organize outside the factory setting than within it. In contexts characterized by these features, apparel workers have organized in community venues. Outside the framework of traditional unions, they have invented radical new agendas for social change that confront the state as well as industry; attend to the social reproduction of their communities as well as the wage; and call on employers to recognize that workers have sexed, gendered, and fallible bodies.

For traditional unions and transnational activists, supporting these efforts requires rethinking what work is and what workers need. It requires figuring out how "core labor rights" can be extended to groups of workers who, by virtue of their gender, have never been considered full citizens or members of the political community. And it requires

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depoliticizes" concerns for environmental safety, child care, continuing
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need, more than ever, to cross national boundaries and to develop
more inclusive ways of organizing, observing what women (and new
immigrant organizations) in the apparel sector have done is instruc-
tive. These forms of organizing already exist; they bring feminist cri-
tique into labor politics and they offer promising new ways to confront
corporate power in the global economy.

Notes

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