

Unionizing Retail

Lessons From Young Women's Grassroots Organizing in the Greater Toronto Area in the 1990s

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Unionizing Retail: Lessons From Young Women's Grassroots Organizing in the Greater Toronto Area in the 1990s

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Introduction

UNIONIZATION IN THE RETAIL SECTOR is not well researched or understood and the work of everyday organizing in retail sites is rarely discussed. This is surprising since the most common occupation for both women and men in Canada is now retail salesperson/clerk.¹ Furthermore, retail work continues to be characterized by low wages, few, if any, benefits and job insecurity. Despite these conditions and the rapid growth of retail work as an area of employment, this sector remains one of the most unorganized in the Canadian labour force. In 2009, 29.5 per cent of Canadian workers were represented by a union but only about twelve per cent of retail workers were union members.² Within the retail sector, unionized workers are concentrated in food retail/grocery and warehouse work.³

As a contribution to the larger project of understanding the challenges and possibilities of organizing retail workers, I examine two retail unionization drives in the Greater Toronto area in the 1990s which were led by young women. During this period of neoliberal capitalism, material and ideological attacks on labour unions and working-class livelihoods and identities were widespread. However, unionization continued to appeal to many workers who

1. Statistics Canada, *Canada's Changing Labour Force*, 2006 Census (Ottawa 2006), 13–14.

2. Statistics Canada, *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Ottawa 2009), 30–31.

3. Jan Kainer, *Cashing in on Pay Equity? Supermarket Restructuring and Gender Equality* (Toronto 2002).

saw their well-being as inextricably tied to the pursuit of collective rights. Even some who had no experience with unions, and who did not have a long or strong history of working-class consciousness, chose to organize. This in an exploration of two such cases, and of the relationships among material conditions, political consciousness, and collective praxis.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews I conducted with Wynne Hartviksen and Debora De Angelis, the two women who led the organizing drives being considered, and informed by a close reading of the mainstream and labour media coverage of their efforts, I chart the commencement, progression, and resolution of both unionization efforts. I then move to an analysis of what these cases reveal about organizing in the retail sector, assessing the similarities and differences between the two drives. In particular, I seek to identify what factors contributed to these successful drives.

I also propose avenues for future research that would build towards a better understanding of retail workers' political consciousness, labour, and lives. Such research must form part of a broader scholarly and political project to improve the lives of retail workers and reduce economic inequality, a task made more pressing as gendered and racialized precarious work increases within and across de-industrializing capitalist contexts.⁴

From a Joke to a Collective Agreement: Organizing Young Workers in Street-Front Retail

ALTHOUGH WYNNE HARTVIKSEN, currently Executive Assistant to the President of the Ontario Division of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), has held leadership positions in local, provincial, national, and international unions and organized workplaces of all sizes, she still sees organizing a chain of futon stores in her early twenties as one of her greatest accomplishments. It was the galvanizing experience that ignited her union consciousness.

While studying English at the University of Toronto in the early 1990s, Hartviksen worked for both the student newspaper and a small chain of street-front futon stores which had locations along busy thoroughfares across the city. She found the job at the futon store through a friend and quickly came to recognize the work force as largely "a community of friends."⁵ She and her co-workers earned the minimum wage and certain minimal benefits were co-funded by the employer and the workers. Because the boss would arbitrarily fire people with little or no warning, job security was an important issue for

4. See, for example, Cynthia J. Cranford, Leah F. Vosko and Nancy Zukewich, "The Gender of Precarious Employment in Canada," in Vivian Shalla, ed., *Working in a Global Era: Canadian Perspectives* (Toronto 2006), 99–119; Vicky Lovell, Heidi Hartmann and Misha Werschkul, "More Than Raising the Floor: The Persistence of Gender Inequalities in the Low-Wage Labor Market," in Dorothy Sue Cobble, ed., *The Sex of Class: Women Transforming American Labor*, (Ithaca 2007), 35–57.

5. Wynne Hartviksen, Interview with Author, 27 July 2009.

the workers, most of whom were women in their twenties working part-time hours at various locations. Working in street-front stores, many of the staff, especially women, also had concerns about personal safety, particularly when forced to work alone. They felt their employer did little to address these safety issues.

In her interview with me, Hartviksen explained how these concerns turned into a decision to unionize. When the employer unexpectedly fired a well-liked, full-time employee, it served as a key catalyst.

I think she actually had a child, she was a single mom. And people were pretty outraged that she had just lost her job like that, and her benefits, and everything that sort of came along with it had just been gone.⁶

The outrage the workers felt about the unfairness of the firing led to an informal meeting.

So we got together and we talked about it over beers ... the whole staff, because there were about twenty, twenty-five people in the stores. We got together, talked about it over a beer, and somebody said, as a joke, "maybe we should form a union." And I thought – that's just crazy enough to work.⁷

Although Hartviksen's father was unionized, forming a union was not something she had ever thought of as a solution to her own workplace woes. "I saw trade unions as for and about workers in the manufacturing sector, and mostly for white, male workers. I didn't even think of organizing a union until someone suggested it as a joke."⁸

Hartviksen believes she was identified as the one who should actually follow-up on the idea because she was at university, and had spoken to union representatives in her capacity as a student journalist.

My dad was a CUPE member. He worked at the U[niversity] of T[oronto] for most of his life. I knew that was the reason I got a free degree – because of his collective agreement I was always sort of progressive, [and had] lefty leanings. [I] didn't know a lot about how to form a union though. Nobody ever really taught you about your rights under employment law or how to form a union. I just knew who to call because I was interested in the press. I knew who you could call to get comments about labour.⁹

A male representative from the United Food and Commercial Workers met with Hartviksen and suggested she contact the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) because it was branching out from representing workers who sewed products for retailers, to organizing workers who sold those products in the stores.

6. Hartviksen, Interview.

7. Hartviksen, Interview.

8. Wynne Hartviksen, "Wynne's World: Bringing the Union to the Mall," *Our Times: Canada's Independent Labour Magazine* (September/October 1996), 21.

9. Hartviksen, Interview.

So I hooked up with the Ladies Garment Workers' Union, and they decided to organize us. It was card-check jurisdiction at that time. So they literally came to our next meeting, which again, was at a bar. We talked it through, distributed the cards, signed the cards, and applied for certification. We had a union within a week! Everybody but one person signed a card.¹⁰

Hartviksen believes that her co-workers wanted respect and dignity, as much as, if not more than, higher wages and it was this desire that encouraged people to sign their union cards.¹¹

The staff of the ILGWU provided substantial assistance to the retail workers as they fought for a first contract in 1992. Alexandra Dagg, then Ontario manager of the ILGWU, and Hartviksen negotiated the first contract, resisting employer attempts to establish provisions below the employment standards of the time. In the end they had to take advantage of the first contract arbitration processes that were available under the *Labour Act* to get their first collective agreement. The next task was to enforce the agreement. Hartviksen recalls with some humour that their biggest test came when the employer "tried to fire the one guy who had not signed a card" and the union defended his rights. The collective agreement was in effect for two years until all of the stores were closed during the height of the 1990s recession.

Unionizing in the Mall: Organizing Suzy Shier Stores in the Greater Toronto Area

DEBORAH DE ANGELIS IS now National Representative for Training and Education with the United Food and Commercial Workers. She started in a different part of the food sector when she was in high school, as a low-wage service worker at McDonald's. As a teenager, she saw the chance to work in a mall selling clothes as an exciting possibility that would allow her to avoid smelling like cooking oil. She began working in a Suzy Shier store, in North York Sheridan Mall in the early 1990s. Suzy Shier was a chain of stores that sold low- to mid-priced women's clothing.

Shortly after beginning the job at Suzy Shier, De Angelis began university and enrolled in a Labour-Management Relations program. One day at work the operations manager for Suzy Shier who was visiting the location chatted with De Angelis about the possibility of working in human resources for the company down the road. De Angelis was outspoken and took the opportunity to speak to this manager about the present, asking for a wage increase, since she and other workers had been told they would get higher pay after six months on the job.

10. Hartviksen, Interview.

11. Susan Bourette, "Organized Labour Lures Growing Number of Youth," *Globe and Mail*, 4 July 1997.

So I asked for a wage increase, and she said no. I asked for five cents an hour for the single mothers in the store and she said no I thought I was moving up but it was only a perception. It only took six months for the honeymoon to end and to realize that they weren't going to give me a wage increase. My wages only went up when [Ontario New Democratic Party Premier] Bob Rae brought the minimum wage up.¹²

In addition to receiving low wages, De Angelis and her co-workers were required to show up at work fifteen minutes early for their shifts to apply make-up and prepare their appearance for the sales floor. A stack of résumés was kept by the phone which the workers saw as a deliberate reminder that they were easily replaceable, and they felt as though they had little job security. Managers made schedules and would allocate shifts based on personal preferences and on past sales performances. Some managers required sales associates to stand at least one meter away from each other so they would not talk too much. De Angelis, who worked at multiple Suzy Shier locations after her initial hiring, recalls strong indicators of disrespect and volatility from managers, and feelings of insecurity among the women working in the store.

De Angelis made links between her university studies and her workplace experiences. Among her first year courses was an introductory sociology course which included the study of Marx and labour.

It was funny sitting in those classes, talking about Marxism and sitting there thinking 'oh yeah, that is exactly how I feel.' And at the time I didn't feel empowered because there was no solution, but rather I just felt bitter.... So [I thought] I am alienated, I know that. I am bitter, I know that. I remember sitting at the dinner table and my dad said, 'why don't you unionize?'¹³

De Angelis' father, an immigrant from Italy, worked for the Toronto Transit Commission and was unionized himself, but their family did not discuss unions at home. De Angelis told her father that she thought unions only represented men in blue-collar work, and he suggested she do further research because that was not true.

So the next day I went to the library and pulled out articles, and sure enough, unions do represent more than 'old white men in blue-collared work.' The sad part is that I didn't realize that until I was nineteen... that is the first thing you should learn in high school So I picked up the yellow pages and turned to Amalgamated Textiles and Retail Workers – it was the old name for UNITE [the Union of Needle Trades, Industrial and Textile Employees]. I called one of my friends working at Suzy Shier at the time and we met with him [the union representative] in Yorkdale in the middle of the food court He passed over the cards, I asked him about the benefits. [I said] I'll pass out the cards, I'll get them signed. I thought the women would have a better relationship with me than with a third party coming in.¹⁴

De Angelis spoke confidentially to workers in six stores, explaining the unionization benefits and responding to their concerns. She had to speak to

12. Debora De Angelis, Interview with Author, 10 December 2008.

13. De Angelis, Interview.

14. De Angelis, Interview.

some repeatedly to ease their concerns and counter anti-union information they had heard, while many responded very favourably to the idea.

All you had to say to many women was 'do you think you have dignity at work? Is this a place you can go and have your concerns heard? Are you making fair wages?' Although a lot of them came from immigrant families, [and] they had no context whatsoever. Many of their parents were in jobs where there were no unions. [It] was a strange idea that we could file a grievance, and we would be able to fight for better wages.¹⁵

A manager from one of the locations found out about the drive and, in a panic, the union suggested only submitting the cards from the three stores with the strongest union support, a decision De Angelis regrets in hindsight because it made the numbers smaller, and thus workers were even more vulnerable to management identification, isolation, and manipulation. During the week between the application submission to the Labour Board and the vote, the company sent senior representatives in to talk to all of the workers to try and dissuade them from supporting the union.

Three top Suzy Shier personnel managers, all very powerful women, came down from Montréal and took every single employee (except me) out for one to three hours at a time. They just bawled and cried that we are a family here at Suzy Shier; that they were sorry they had forgotten about us; that they didn't mean it – and they always blamed somebody else The company was so sure that they had won the other two stores that they paid for a taxi for anybody who wasn't working to go in and vote on February 14, 1996.¹⁶

When the ballots were counted, only De Angelis' home store had voted for the union. During the five days of head office involvement, the key women in the other locations had spoken to De Angelis about their co-workers' fears of being identified as union supporters. Precisely because the company representatives had spent so much time talking to each worker, some had been convinced that things would improve without a union. Others were afraid that they would lose their jobs for having been open to unionization, because in such small workplaces they were too easily identifiable. The result was that the other two stores voted as a block against the union.

However, the North York Sheridan Mall Suzy Shier location, led by Debora De Angelis, had made history. It became the first women's clothing store in Canada in a mall to join a union under the mandatory-vote legislation. Indeed, the store negotiated its first collective agreement which provided the workers with a modest pay increase of around three per cent, grievance procedures, bereavement days – an issue of particular importance to the women in the store because a worker whose father had died had been told she had to show up at work the next day – and other basic rights.¹⁷

15. De Angelis, Interview.

16. Debora De Angelis, "Wake up Little Suzy: Women Retail Workers Organize," *Our Times: Canada's Independent Labour Magazine* (March/April 1998), 26.

17. Valerie Lawton, "Plucky Worker Brought Union to Store," *Toronto Star*, 23 August 1997.

The collective agreement provided these unionized workers with a united voice and protections for two years, until the Sheridan Mall location of Suzy Shier was closed down. It has not been re-opened.

Learning from Retail Organizing and Organizers

BOTH THE SIMILARITIES and differences between these two cases offer valuable insights into the politics of retail organizing. Beginning with the similarities, these are two examples where workplace-based friendships and community led to important discussions of daily frustrations with the material conditions of shared labour. Workplace relationships and dialogues among retail workers are important because they counter management's promotion of identification with and allegiance to the corporation, a strategy intended to minimize worker solidarity across the retail sector. Hartviksen also notes that understanding the central place of workplace relational networks must be part of any organizing strategy because "retail workers will trust other retail workers long before they'll trust someone they see as a professional organizer."¹⁸

In the two cases I explore, the crucial shift from personal complaints to collective action was dependent on an explicit suggestion that unionization be considered, and then a conscious decision to take the option seriously. Workers can complain but remain confined to the level of dissatisfaction if certain integral political labour is not performed to channel anger into organizing. Hartviksen points out that some workers will share their frustrations with each other, and may even do something collectively, but can opt for a strategy like shaming bad bosses through social media sites rather than unionization. Thus, at least one person needs to assume a leader or facilitator role to do the work of researching possibilities, learning about both the logistics of organizing and the benefits of unionization, and pursuing the organizing option. For Hartviksen and De Angelis, this work included a range of tasks such as making phone calls, keeping records, organizing meetings, attending meetings, having frequent conversations, answering questions, providing materials, getting cards signed, and so on. This work involves both organizational labour and the emotional work necessary to address co-workers' fears and uncertainties. The degree to which both kinds of labour were necessary and, in particular, the need to understand and then address the feelings of co-workers, depended in large part on the vulnerability workers felt. The vulnerability was directly linked to labour law, a crucial issue to which I will return below.

In both cases, Hartviksen and De Angelis had fathers who were in unions, but neither had seriously considered unions as a possibility for themselves as women and retail workers. Both young women saw unions as representing groups of workers who did not look like them or do what they did, and they knew little about the building blocks of forming a union, a gap in their

18. Hartviksen, "Wynne's World," 22.

knowledge they attribute to the failure of their formal schooling. The disconnect from unions shifted dramatically after they took the initiative to learn more and lead the organization drives in their workplaces. Both Hartviksen and De Angelis felt empowered by their political action. Their first experiences with unionizing their retail workplaces led to further organizing attempts, increased union activism, executive positions in their own unions and the broader labour movement, and careers as labour leaders. They not only gained professional advancement, but courage, pride, confidence, and enhanced class consciousness. In contrast to the bitterness and disempowerment felt in their daily work as retail employees, union activism provided a source of personal and collective power, a pattern Conley also observed with the women retail activists she studied. For some, their union engagement was “the first time they envisaged themselves as confident, intelligent beings outside of the private sphere.”¹⁹ Of her experiences, De Angelis explained:

It was very empowering. I really felt that we could make a difference in these women's lives. I shared what I was learning in the university classroom all the way to the retail floor, to the minimum wage workers. It was fantastic. Then going to these union meetings, finding out about all these other people, and the benefits of unionization, it was really empowering. Obviously I continued down that vein, I changed my courses, decided I was never going to work for a corporation, and I veered all my courses towards the sociology of work and gender I still run into some of those ladies [with whom I worked at Suzy Shier and] all of them say ‘really good job Debora, you actually went ahead and are still working and fighting for people.’²⁰

Hartviksen agreed:

You do something, you start getting involved in the process, and you start asking yourselves questions. Like, why is it that a retail employer can [sit] straight-faced at a table and say ‘I think you should have less than the basic standards of our province?’ You see somebody do that, and it's insane, but it's not uncommon. And why is it that retail is so devalued in our society? It was my awakening, both of my [consciousness of my] position as a working class youth, and as a working class female. I started taking Labour Studies courses at the U of T first, and [these issues] were what I started talking about, because nobody else was talking about it.²¹

Similarly, Eaton's workers interviewed by McDermott in the 1980s during a bitter strike were also unequivocal that the strike changed them for the better, making them stronger, and more aware of their rights and potential, as well as broader social injustices and inequities. Although she does not trace whether any of the strikers went on to leadership positions in the union movement, McDermott found an enduring commitment to critical consciousness and action among strike participants. Identifying the links between solidarity and empowerment, one worker put it this way: “It was eye-opening, it was

19. Hazel Conley, “Front Line or All Fronts? Women's Trade Union Activism in Retail Services,” *Gender, Work and Organization*, 12 (September 2005), 492.

20. De Angelis, Interview.

21. Hartviksen, Interview.

mind-opening. I don't find things tolerable like I used to – like sexual harassment. I've talked to a lot of strikers on different lines and they say that as women they will never be uninvolved again...that in itself is a big plus because we've been put down for so long in that company."²²

In the cases of De Angelis and Hartviksen, the two women made dialectical connections among their material conditions at work, broader social processes, and the realm of formal ideas, seeing how social and political theory was connected to daily life, and how unions could play a central role in alleviating injustices. The collective praxis in which they engaged was both a cause and an effect of their developing class and gender consciousness, and these women's intellectual and political journeys reaffirm the importance of teaching and learning about unions and class politics in schools, universities, workplaces, and union settings.

Their organizing experiences also illuminate real and recurring challenges confronting those who seek to organize retail workers, but these, too, tell us something about how retail workplaces can be organized. Both Hartviksen and De Angelis highlighted the transient nature of retail work, and, as a result, the difficulty of maintaining a supportive majority when workers are being terminated at the will of the employer, or are themselves leaving before the conclusion of an organizing drive in search of elusive greener pastures. Union organizer Eileen Sufrin highlighted this as a serious challenge to the organizing drive at Eaton's in the mid-twentieth century, and no doubt, it figures in all organizing drives centred around insecure, low-wage work.²³ Maintaining a supportive bargaining unit requires a particularly high level of ongoing worker engagement on the part of retail organizers.

The most significant difference between the two cases is the presence of card-check recognition in the first and mandatory-vote legislation in the second. In Hartviksen's case, the workers were able to express their desire to join a union by signing cards which were submitted to the Ontario Labour Board. As a result, the names of which workers had signed stating they wanted a union were not known to the employer. Although all but one worker had signed a card in this case, had there been a smaller majority, those workers would have been protected by the process. As Hartviksen put it, "we talked it through, distributed the cards, signed the cards, and applied for certification. We had a union within a week!"²⁴ She outlined a collective feeling of having "nothing to lose" by submitting the application and trying for a union. However, had the process been more complex, and their identities more

22. Patricia McDermott, "The Eaton's Strike: We Wouldn't Have Missed it for the World!" in Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott, eds., *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy and Militancy* (Toronto 1993), 40.

23. Eileen Sufrin, *The Eaton Drive: The Campaign to Organize Canada's Largest Department Store, 1948 to 1952* (Toronto 1982).

24. Hartviksen, Interview.

vulnerable to employer identification, hence increasing the potential for subsequent punishment, worker enthusiasm for the unionization process likely would have been more tempered.

With the change from a New Democratic Party government to the anti-union Progressive Conservative government in 1995, the terrain for organizing all workers, but particularly those in smaller workplaces, changed dramatically. The mandatory vote model introduced by the Conservatives requires two steps. First, at least 40 per cent of the employees must sign union cards and the union must file for certification with the Ontario Labour Board. Then, one week later there is a secret ballot vote, and 50 per cent + one of the workers must vote in favour of unionization. The effects of this two-stage process with a built-in delay are significant, particularly for small workplaces like retail stores.

De Angelis is adamant about the impact of mandatory-vote legislation on the women with whom she worked, because she heard and saw the effects of the week of management involvement during the drive.

The secret ballot vote in small workplaces is devastating. Women had a fear of the consequences, they generally believed that [the corporate representatives] knew which side of the line they were on and if the union didn't go through, they would be fired We had enough cards signed. We had convinced the women, they understood; their husbands had agreed. Everything was good but when it came out and it was time for the vote, people said 'oh my god, there are only fourteen of us.' They were scared that they were going to be picked out, because managers had talked to them for hours. It was the secret ballot vote that killed us.²⁵

Although De Angelis and other workplace-based leaders engaged in substantial organizational and emotional labour to counter the effects of the five days of oppositional organizational and emotional labour on the part of the high-ranking women from Suzy Shier's head office, the corporate representatives managed to convince some store workers that their conditions would improve without a union. This, combined with the belief that their identities as union supporters were known and documented, and, consequently, that there was a real danger of reprisals, led to workers rejecting unionization.

Hartviksen, too, sees that the legislative change in Ontario had a fundamental impact on retail organizing.

In 1995, when [Conservative Premier Mike] Harris passed his labour legislation, it in many ways stomped on retail organizing because it just made things so hard. You had to have the cards signed, then go through a vote [a week later], and then for that week these companies could crush you. And they did.²⁶

Workers' fears of losing their jobs, of having to go on strike, of being punished by management are well documented.²⁷ When there are fewer workers, it

25. De Angelis, Interview.

26. Hartviksen, Interview.

27. See, for example, Daniel Opler, "Monkey Business in Union Square: A Cultural Analysis of the Klein's-Ohrbach's Strikes of 1934-5," *Journal of Social History*, 36 (Autumn, 2002),

is easier for employers to identify, divide, and conquer. If small workplaces like retail stores are going to have a chance of being unionized, the two case studies suggest legislative change is very important. The Canadian labour movement has actively called for a return to card-based certifications where mandatory-vote laws exist, and this effort to effect change must continue if the terrain is to be made fairer for those workers who are interested in organizing unions.

All told, the two retail organizing cases emphasize the importance of workplace-based leaders, and reveal the breadth of political work they do as pivotal for unionization success. Both Hartviksen and De Angelis worked hard, but the demands on De Angelis were greater because of the mandatory vote legislation. She had to engage not only in organizing and logistical work, but substantial emotional and intellectual work to obtain and sustain support from her co-workers. Arguably, the Suzy Shier case suggests that some small workplaces can be unionized despite mandatory votes, if the workplace social relations and solidarity are sufficiently strong and solidified around unionization. Indeed, the one store to vote for unionization was organizing leader De Angelis' home store, where she was best able to engage more thoroughly and continuously with her co-workers to maintain a supportive majority, and where she had longer standing relationships. The key pro-union women in the other locations identified increasing fear and decreasing union support between the filing of the application and the vote. Had these women been able to allay fears and re-convince their co-workers that a union was important, the results may have been different. Important questions for further research are raised by the differences among the stores. Were the workers very different from store to store and, if so, in what ways and how did this affect levels of fear? What role do different forms of organizing leadership play in the success of union drives? If De Angelis had logistically been able to spend more time with all workers and use her skills to reassure and re-engage them, would the results have been different?

These cases suggest that relationships in small workplaces matter a great deal and the "like-recruits-like" organizing model can come into play as part of grassroots organizing.²⁸ Hartviksen is clear that workplace friendships were a key facilitator of the unionization of the futon store chain, yet leadership and the completion of organizing tasks, although modest in size given the ease with which workers could join a union because of card-check recognition, were still essential. Even though her focus was a retail strike, McDermott also found that support and community was crucial for the women workers to maintain commitment to union struggle despite a host of personal, financial,

149–164; Larry Cohen and Richard W. Hurd, "Fear, Conflict and Union Organizing," in Kate Bronfenbrenner, Sheldon Friedman, Richard W. Hurd, Rudolph A. Oswald and Ronald L. Seeber, eds., *Organizing to Win: New Research on Union Strategies* (Ithaca 1998), 181–196.

28. E. Heery, M. Simms, D. Simpson, R. Delbridge, and J. Salmon, "Organising Unionism Comes to the UK," *Employee Relations*, 22 (2000), 38–54.

political, and cultural obstacles.²⁹ The Suzy Shier case suggests that a rooted and effective leader is important for organizing in retail. The strength of workplace community also plays a role in workers' abilities to maintain support for a union, despite an employer's anti-union efforts. At the same time, the political work of organizing builds women's courage and political commitment, thus reinforcing a union-building pattern.

Conclusion

THE PLIGHT OF RETAIL WORKERS needs to be taken seriously and strategies to address different parts of the sector are needed. While retail workers are not positioned in economic locations whereby the removal of their labour power shuts down valued services or dramatically disrupts other pieces of the economy, many people work in retail and warrant better conditions. Both De Angelis and Hartviksen argue that the labour movement had a strong interest in organizing youth in the mid-1990s, and, since many young workers are in retail, the sector was taken more seriously at that time. As individuals, each of them received labour and mainstream media coverage including appearances on talk shows and coverage in news articles, as did youth organizing in food retail.³⁰ De Angelis, Hartviksen, and other young workers, largely from retail, organized themselves into a youth caucus at an Ontario Federation of Labour convention, and quickly succeeded in getting a youth vice-president. As Hartviksen observed:

You had Sarah Inglis trying to organize McDonalds in Orangeville, then I did Black's, and Starbucks was being organized out in BC and people were asking questions like 'Is this the future of the labour movement? Is it in retail?'³¹

The moment passed, however. Hartviksen suggests that too often retail is seen as "girls' work," and thus allegedly temporary and providing non-essential income. This gendered belief serves to devalue retail workers and women's work. "Girls" deserve good work in their own right, of course, but the reality is that the retail workforce is more complex. The two workplaces considered here were largely comprised of women workers, many of whom were immigrants and/or racialized, a reflection of the deepening feminization and racialization of precarious and low-income work, a trend particularly prevalent in large Canadian urban centres.³² While the bulk of the workers in the two cases were

29. McDermott, "The Eaton's Strike," 30–31, 41.

30. See, for example, "Unions on a Youth Kick in Bid for New Members," *Hamilton Spectator*, 14 May 1996; Gord McIntosh, "Retail Workers Buy Into Unions, Labour Encouraged," *Kingston-Whig Standard*, 30 August 1997.

31. Hartviksen, Interview.

32. See, for example, Punam Khosla, "If Low-Income Women of Colour Counted in Toronto," in Maria A. Wallis and Siu-ming Kwok, eds., *Daily Struggles: The Deepening Racialization and*

younger women, this was not exclusively true in either case. Certainly, both stores employed young women. Some were students seeking to pay for their post-secondary education, and others were young mothers trying to support their children on their wages.

At the same time, both stores had workers older than thirty. In the futon chain, an older man was seeking to supplement his pension income through the job, for example. In the clothing chain, some women were hoping to build careers in fashion as buyers or merchandisers. While we have some data about the demographic composition of retail work from industry reports,³³ few labour studies scholars have explored the composition of these workplaces and who exactly is now working in retail, for how long, and why. As pension funds are threatened, we can assume that more seniors will need to take on additional waged work to subsist, and thus that many will end up in retail. As more university and college graduates are unable to find work in the fields for which they prepared, we can predict that more will need to stay in or take up retail work, something Hartviksen had to do for many years. As industrial and manufacturing jobs disappear, more men are turning to retail work, thereby re-shaping the gendered terrain of the sector. What are the common issues, as well as the different struggles, for younger and older workers, women and men, immigrant workers, and racialized workers in retail? What are the implications of these changing workforces for workplace politics and unionization?

Both union activists and labour studies scholars argue that traditional modes of union organizing may need to be re-conceptualized when approaching retail workplaces. Both McRobbie and Leslie suggest there are possibilities for organizing across the fashion industry or clothing commodity chain, a strategy used by the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union when it moved from textile workers to retail salespeople in the case of Hartviksen's futon stores.³⁴ McRobbie argues that unions should explore vertical organizing in the fashion industry, incorporating the women who sew the garments right through to those who model, market, and sell fashion. In her view, this would be the way to organize clothing stores because "fashion retail staff identify strongly with fashion and less with retail."³⁵ However, I suggest this claim

Feminization of Poverty in Canada (Toronto 2008), 223–47; Leah Vosko, *Temporary Work: The Ride of a Precarious Employment Relationship* (Toronto 2000); Isik Urla Zeytinglo and Jacinta Khasiala Muteshi, "Gender, Race and Class Dimensions of Non-Standard Work," *Industrial Relations/Relations Industrielles*, 55 (2000), 133–67.

33. Paul M. Jacobson, "The Structure of Retail in Canada," prepared for the Retail Council of Canada in Partnership with Industry Canada (n.p. 2006); Retail Council of Canada, "Behind the Store Front: The Retail Industry in Canada," (n.p., n.d).

34. Angela McRobbie, "Bridging the Gap: Feminism, Fashion and Consumption," *Feminist Review*, 55 (Spring 1997), 73–89; Deborah Leslie, "Gender, Retail Employment and the Clothing Commodity Chain," *Gender, Place and Culture*, 9 (March 2002), 61–76.

35. McRobbie, "Bridging the Gap," 87.

requires further verification because a primary identification with fashion likely over-generalizes the motivations of retail sales staff whose experiences vary depending on position in the labour hierarchy, race and age, goals and reasons for working in fashion retail, and various other factors. Among fashion retail workers in Toronto, Hamilton, and St. Catharine's, Ontario, for example, Leslie found women's experiences differed even within the same store and city, depending on how much they were valued by their manager, how effectively they sold merchandise, how well they matched the aesthetic labour requirements of their store, and even what size of clothing they wore.³⁶ While McRobbie posits that fashion is the tie that binds, Leslie proposes that similarities in working conditions between women who make the clothes and women who sell the clothes, namely low wages, insecurity, and a lack of control over their work and lives, are the linked realities that affect organizing possibilities. At the same time, not all retail stores sell fashion. In general, efforts that encourage workers to identify common cause with other workers are important but it may be that the commodity chain model would work better as an educational tool, rather than an organizing framework because of the significant national and international jurisdictional divides that exist.

Hartviksen agrees that organizing along the commodity chain would be ideal but also suggests several other possible strategies to strengthen organizing initiatives. These include co-operative efforts among various unions to organize entire malls or chains, thereby preventing the isolation of unionized locations, or associate union membership programs. As she notes, these programs "allow workers to maintain contact with trade unions even if they can't organize their own workplace, or if they leave a job that's organized."³⁷ For unions, associate memberships provide a network of contacts within the sector and a pool of known pro-union retail workers actively carrying the union message into various workplaces. Hartviksen suggests exploring alternative models such as life-long or sector-based union membership, as well.³⁸ This approach could be comparable to the distribution of work among the membership by some building trades unions using the hiring hall model, but would also involve an unprecedented organizational structure. Such an approach would certainly require a paradigm shift in how union membership is conceptualized and organized for the service sector. Although unusual, this strategy may hold the most promise given the challenges of organizing transient workers and small workplaces.

Hartviksen also posits that there are certain flagship stores aimed at particular consumer markets which companies will not close, regardless of whether

36. Leslie, "Gender, Retail Employment and Clothing."

37. Hartviksen, "Wynne's World," 22.

38. Bourette, "Organized Labour."

a union is present or not, and that these should be identified and targeted.³⁹ Nevertheless, as long as a small minority of corporate leaders and capitalists wield substantial power, unions' abilities to stop store closings, as well as plant shutdowns, will be limited. This inequity serves as an important reminder of the need to envision and pursue greater economic power and control for workers.

As both Sangster and Belisle demonstrate, the history of how Canadian unions largely dominated by men have approached, or avoided, workplaces dominated by women and immigrants, is complex.⁴⁰ Conley and Franzway also emphasize that contemporary work by both scholars and labour unions must recognize that gendered factors affect workers' consciousness and abilities to initiate and/or engage in union activities, which often require a great deal of time.⁴¹ In particular, when dealing with workplaces dominated by women, the social reproductive labour required at home, the degree of support from and labour shared by a partner, and/or the absence of a partner, greatly influence the amount of time available for union work. Feminists point out that we can extend this analysis to bargaining and union campaigns. The degree of interest in and support for unionization by women can be enhanced by taking up issues that reach beyond the store, such as the pursuit of benefits for dependents, child care provisions, tuition fee rebates or educational grants, and so on.⁴² In fact, working women in female dominated workplaces of all sizes and types have a long and rich history of organizing, coalition building, and political struggle. The political action of women workers, whether they are waitresses, health care workers, welfare recipients, or factory workers, demonstrates that organizing is possible, despite various social, cultural, political and logistical impediments, and women's accomplishments and struggles offer valuable lessons.⁴³ Indeed, the two union drives explored in this paper

39. Hartviksen, Interview.

40. Joan Sangster, *Transforming Labour: Women and Work in Postwar Canada* (Toronto 2010); Donica Belisle, "Exploring Postwar Consumption: The Campaign to Unionize Eaton's in Toronto, 1948–1952," *Canadian Historical Review* 86 (December 2005), 641–72.

41. Conley, "Front Line"; Suzanne Franzway, "Women Working in a Greedy Institution: Commitment and Emotional Labour in the Union Movement," *Gender, Work & Organization*, 7 (October 2000), 258–268.

42. See, for example, Carolyn York, "Bargaining for Work and Family Benefits," in Dorothy Sue Cobble, ed., *Women and Unions: Forging a Partnership* (Ithaca 1993), 129–143; Netsy Firestein and Nicola Dones, "Unions Fight for Work and Family Policies – Not For Women Only," in Cobble, ed., *The Sex of Class*, 140–154.

43. See, for example, Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Champaign 1991); Vanessa Tait, "Expanding Labor's Vision: The Challenges of Workfare and Welfare Organizing," in Cobble, ed., *The Sex of Class*, 194–210; Linda Briskin, "Socialist Feminism: From the Standpoint of Practice," *Studies in Political Economy*, 30 (Autumn 1989), 87–114; Linda Briskin and Mona Eliasson, eds. *Women's Organizing and Public Policy in Canada and Sweden*, (Montreal & Kingston 1999); Rebecca Priegert Coulter, "Alberta

were not initiated or won by national unions or outside organizers, but rather by working-class women confronting poor working conditions, caring about their co-workers, making connections between ideas and collective action, and doing the work needed to get certification. Unions organizing retail workers and retail workers organizing their co-workers are both important strategies.

There is clearly a role here for labour studies scholars in collecting data and producing insights to inform and shape organizing strategies, in addition to better illuminating the changing and gendered nature of contemporary work, and the enduring and shifting nature of working-class consciousness and action. As the small body of social science analysis of retail suggests, workers feel varying degrees of connections to the brands and products they sell⁴⁴ and these loyalties have been actively created and exploited by employers.⁴⁵ As Williams and Connell have suggested, assessing how workers in stores of different “statuses” understand their work and identities overall may reveal both barriers to and possibilities for organizing, as well as deeper understandings of contemporary class politics.⁴⁶ In contrast to the cultural theorists who emphasize the desires and pleasures of consumerism and exclude discussion of the class interests that determine, among other things, who gets to consume what,⁴⁷ politically engaged researchers are enjoined to link analyses of retail work to avenues for collective action and social change. The political consciousness and complex positioning of the women and men who are responsible for selling both the material products and the cultural emphases of contemporary capitalism, while simultaneously living as low-wage workers affected by neoliberal policy and ideology, is an especially neglected area of analysis. How do retail workers understand their socioeconomic location and labour? What public policy changes would improve their standards of living? What would make unionization appealing to them? Does collective class consciousness exist among retail workers?

Nurses and the ‘Illegal’ Strike of 1988,” in Briskin and McDermott, eds., *Women Challenging Unions*, 44–61.

44. See, for example, Pei-Chia Lan, “Working in a Neon Cage: Bodily Labour of Cosmetics Saleswomen in Taiwan,” *Feminist Studies*, 29 (Spring 2003), 21–45; Lynne Pettinger, “Gendered Work Meets Gendered Goods: Selling and Service in Clothing Retail,” *Gender, Work and Organization*, 12 (September 2005), 460–78; David Wright, “Commodifying Respectability: Distinctions at Work in the Bookshop,” *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 5 (2005), 295–314; Marisa Corrado, “Teaching Wedding Rules: How Bridal Workers Negotiate Control Over Their Customers,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 31 (February 2002), 33–67.

45. Donica Belisle, “Negotiating Paternalism: Women and Canada’s Largest Department Stores, 1890–1960,” *Journal of Women’s History*, 19 (Spring 2007), 58–81.

46. Christine L. Williams and Catherine Connell, “Looking Good and Sounding Right: Aesthetic Labor and Social Inequality in the Retail Industry,” *Work and Occupations*, 37 (August 2010), 349–377.

47. McRobbie, “Bridging,” 73–82.

Retail workers expose the complexities and contradictions of contemporary class relations while occupying an increasingly large portion of the labour market and experiencing the inequalities of neoliberal capitalism. Accordingly, both labour unions and scholars should take retail workers more seriously and, then, perhaps, more retail workers will take unions seriously, too.

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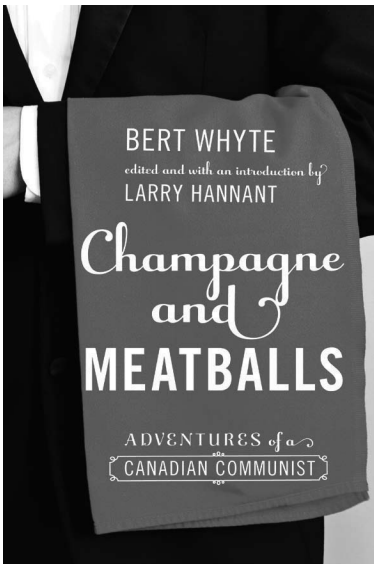
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Adventures of a Canadian Communist

Champagne and Meatballs

Adventures of a Canadian Communist

Bert Whyte, *edited and with an introduction by* Larry Hannant



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Larry Hannant is a Canadian historian specializing in twentieth-century political dissent. He is the author of *The Infernal Machine: Investigating the Loyalty of Canada's Citizens* and the editor of *The Politics of Passion: Norman Bethune's Writing and Art*, which won the Robert S. Kenny Prize in Left/Labour Studies. He also researched and co-wrote a feature-length documentary film on the Doukhobors, *The Spirit Wrestlers*, which was broadcast on History Television in 2002. He currently teaches at Camosun College and the University of Victoria.



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