

Hard Sell

Work and Resistance in
Retail Chains

Peter Ikeler

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1

All Quiet on the Service Front?

This book starts with a strike—almost. On June 16, 2011, more than four thousand workers at four New York Macy’s stores came within hours of walking off the job. It would have been the first such action at the storied department store since 1972. Instead, in the wee hours of the morning, representatives of Local 1-S of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) agreed to a tepid five-year deal and called off the strike. One day later, workers at a nearby Target store in Valley Stream, New York, cast ballots in a widely watched unionization drive. Like most such elections in the last twenty years, it failed. Hopes for a beachhead of unionism in big-box retail were dashed, at least temporarily.

Shortly after these events, I began interviewing salespeople from two of the unionized Macy’s stores. Opinions on the settlement were not hard to find. “We should’ve went out,” said Jerry.¹ “It was right before Father’s Day—bust their chops! We should’ve, but after all that we got 65 cents.” Ethel felt the same: “We should’ve had a strike,” she told me. “I think they sold out. We got a 65-cent raise the first year, but they knew we wanted a dollar, so they

1. This and all other workers’ names have been changed to conceal their identities.

screwed us.” Carol, however, was more ambivalent: “If they [the union] had said so, we would’ve gone on strike. But it’s up to each individual, whether to show up or not. Because you are trying to live for yourself and if you are striking you never know how long that would be.” Harry, a stock clerk in his early twenties, was one of these individuals. “Me personally, I still would’ve went to work,” he said, “because if you strike you’re not going to get paid. I just do what I have to do.”

A few months later, when speaking with New York City Target workers, I found that some were aware of the recent drive to organize. Joan, a cashier, knew that “Valley Stream was trying to go union,” and described a concerted effort by management to avoid this: “One of our executives [managers] was pulling people into rooms and telling them, ‘If these people come in here, don’t even bother talking to them.’” Karissa, a summertime salesperson, noted that the first time she ever heard about unions was “a week after I got back [in June 2011]. I heard about Valley Stream and they showed us a video, the HR people. I really didn’t care to see the video; they pulled me away from my work section and I was like ‘what am I doing here?’” Anthony, a stock clerk who had also seen the video, was wary I might be an organizer and asked for assurances to the contrary. “I heard they [unions] are trying to target the stores in the New York area,” he stated, “but if they come by I’m not signing up because I don’t want to be a part of it.” Though many were unaware of the Valley Stream drive and some unfamiliar even with the concept of unions, several, like Joan, were clearly pronoun: “We could use the union. Because what is the union supposed to do? Fight for the people that work for the company!”

Alongside fast-food, retail is among the most recognizable low-wage industries in twenty-first-century America. From *Saturday Night Live*’s Best Buy and Target skits to Walmart as the

proverbial rock bottom in *Fun with Dick and Jane*, it has become synonymous with low-wage, unstable, “stopgap” work (Tannock 2001; Appelbaum, Bernhardt, and Murnane 2003; Coulter 2014). Average wages for frontline workers are 30 percent below the private-sector average, and those in general merchandise—which includes Macy’s, Target, and Walmart—are 44 percent lower, at \$11.23 per hour (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014a). As might be expected, the industry is also broadly nonunion: fewer than 5 percent of retail workers are in unions today, down from more than 10 percent in 1983 (Hirsch and Macpherson 2014). On the face of it, retail thus appears ripe for organizing and the boost in wages this has historically brought. Some go further, arguing that big-box retail provides “the template of twenty-first-century capitalism” (Lichtenstein 2006) and that it is “hard to imagine a revitalized and powerful labor movement in the U.S. without a unionized Wal-Mart”—or retail sector, for that matter (Moody 2007, 234).

Yet the experiences related above suggest deeper obstacles: first and foremost, the tenacity of employer resistance; second, the timidity of many existing unions. But deeper still are the subjective hurdles faced by many workers: Why are wages so low? Why can’t I afford the company’s health insurance? Is management on my side? Are my coworkers? What are the alternatives? What, for that matter, is a union? From a certain standpoint, one could “impute” answers to these questions and try to relay them to workers—as could groups that aim to advance their interests. A more scientific and ultimately more democratic approach, however, is to contextualize workers’ own answers within a robust description of their lived experience. If we can grasp the relationship between work and consciousness in this paradigmatic service sector, we can better assess the forces for change.

Labor Movements in Crisis and Renewal

Occurring so close in space and time, the events of June 2011 appeared to symbolize the twin dilemmas of the American labor movement: cautious conservatism in its remaining areas of strength and inability to gain traction in new ones. But the crisis of American labor is hardly new. While the slide in working-class power that began after President Reagan's crushing of the 1981 strike by the Air Traffic Controllers is well known, stagnation was evident long before, with some even pointing to the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. By this account, it would seem that America's industrial unions, if not those in the older American Federation of Labor (AFL), began to die only shortly after their birth. The tragedy of American labor, when compared with its European counterparts, consists precisely in this belated birth, early decline, and the failure to transmit its practices to a new generation of service workers.

Plenty of ink has been spilled trying to explain labor's predicament and identify the sources of its renewal. But broadly absent is a sustained interrogation of the service labor process and how it affects workers' will to organize. In what follows, I present the highlights of this decline-and-renewal debate in order to tease out four underexamined questions. These questions, in slightly different form, were central to debates about the future of industrial unions in the 1970s and '80s; among sociologists of service work, they have received more recent attention with respect to work itself. Yet advocates of union renewal have largely sidestepped them, focusing instead on organizing tactics, union forms, or worker demographics (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998; Clawson 2003; Cobble 1991b; Fine 2005; Milkman 2006; Ness 2005). This book attempts to unite these divided fields and, as Juravich and Bronfenbrenner

admonish us, “bring the study of work back to labor studies” (2005).

Front and center in most accounts of labor’s decline since the 1970s is a set of processes summed up by the word “globalization.” Defined as the expansion of economic activity beyond the boundaries of nation-states, globalization has been cited time and again as the cause *tout court* of the weakening of workers’ bargaining power. Alan Tonelson’s *Race to the Bottom* (2002) is a primary expression of this, with Beverly Silver (2003) providing a much-needed rejoinder. In line with such expectations, unions in private-sector manufacturing—those most exposed to global competition—have suffered severe losses, declining in the United States from nearly 8 million members and a 40 percent density rate in 1973 to only 1.4 million members and 10 percent today (Hirsch and Macpherson 2014). In response, authors such as Kim Moody (1997), Kate Bronfenbrenner (2007), and Jamie McCallum (2013) have considered the utility of so-called global unions. But as Ruth Milkman (2013) points out, it is not only in globally exposed industries that U.S. unions have fallen: membership in construction and trucking—place-bound industries—has declined almost as much. Additional forces must be at work.

Industrial relations scholars cite “the emergence of a nonunion model” and attendant union resistance among U.S. employers (Kochan, Katz, and McKersie 1994). During the postwar heyday of collective bargaining firms such as Kodak, Sears, and Thompson Products honed their skills at union avoidance through a combination of welfare provision and punitive oversight (Jacoby 1997). Thomas Kochan, Harry Katz, and Robert McKersie (1994) describe a shift even within unionized firms toward “human resource management” (HRM). By the 1980s, this approach had gained enough momentum—and was bolstered by Japanese-style “lean

production”—to constitute what Michael Goldfield calls a “capitalist offensive” that contributed significantly to union decline (1987, 189). To combat such maneuvers, some call for unions to pursue “rank-and-file intensive” and “comprehensive organizing” (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998; Voss and Sherman 2000). Others consider new forms of worker organization that could circumvent employer antiunionism (Cobble 1991b; Fine 2005; Heckscher 2001).

Employers, however, do not act alone. As Moody notes, “The decline [of U.S. unions] has a definite turning point . . . the years 1980–81” (2007, 1). The “Reagan Revolution” consisted of a series of government actions that greatly augmented the power of capital over labor: financial and industrial deregulation, reduced taxes on wealth, the firing, by presidential fiat, of more than eleven thousand air traffic controllers, and the restructuring of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) from an ostensibly neutral body to one with a decidedly probusiness tilt. Such “reforms” did not end with Republican reign in 1992 but continued under Clinton, whose signature “achievements” were the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the curtailing of welfare benefits. Combined with more recent attacks on union rights in former strongholds such as Wisconsin, Michigan, and Indiana, the state (writ large) has played an important role in determining that “by the 2010s . . . the New Deal labour relations system was a dead letter” (Milkman 2013, 647). Movements for political reform, mostly local, have appeared and been further publicized by scholars such as Stephanie Luce (2004), whose study of living wage struggles helped them take center stage in the fight against inequality.

An older line of thinking also places blame on labor’s doorstep—more specifically, on U.S. unions’ bureaucratic leadership. As early as the 1960s Art Preis claimed that “union officials want to stifle

the class struggle, not lead it” ([1964] 1972, 11). This criticism continued through the 1970s and gained renewed traction in the 1980s, as many leaders proved unwilling to combat the onslaught of concessions and plant closures (Aronowitz 1972; Bluestone and Harrison 1982; Moody 1988; Piven and Cloward 1979, 96–180). In 1995, dissatisfaction reached the upper echelons of U.S. labor, culminating in the election of John Sweeney as president of the AFL-CIO on a promise of renewed growth through organizing. Nearly two decades and a major split² later, this promise has not been fulfilled—some argue because of the entrenchment of “do nothing unionism” (Lopez 2004). The remedy, they assert, is rank-and-file activism that can challenge leaders and invigorate peer-to-peer organizing (Burns 2011; Early 2011; Moody 2007).

A final oft-cited cause of union decline is more secular in nature. Touted by some as “the great hope of the twentieth century” (Fourastié 1949) and by others as a force for “the end of ideology” (Bell 1960, 1973), the rise of service employment is frequently given as a reason for union decline due to the sector’s supposedly less alienating conditions. Today it is hardly useful to speak of “services” as such since they constitute more than three-quarters of advanced capitalist workforces. Of the five major subgroups—health and education, retail and personal services, business and financial services, transportation, and government and security—theories of union obsolescence are clearly disproven for the first, fourth and fifth, which boast some of the highest unionization rates in the developed world.³ But for the second and third, which encompass

2. That of the Change to Win (CtW) rival federation in 2005.

3. It is arguable that “transportation,” with its material rather than interpersonal focus and long-standing traditions of conflict and unionism, more closely approximates goods production than service provision.

nearly half of U.S. workers and are less than 10 percent organized, union irrelevance appears hauntingly true. Why then are unions so broadly absent here, particularly in the low-wage sector where conditions seem to cry out for redress? Is there something intrinsic to interactive services that mitigates unionization and its seeming prerequisite, a collective, oppositional consciousness? And how are such workplaces changing? Are they tending in directions that might encourage or further inhibit worker organizing?

These are the questions this book seeks to answer. Through a focused comparison of two iconic department stores in New York City, I interrogate the organization and social relations of service work, how it evolves, and how these forces shape workers' consciousness. I integrate these findings to identify the obstacles and inroads to service-sector organizing in the United States. This is aided by the work of those who have probed these dynamics in the past. It is to a consideration of their contributions that I now turn.

Work and Consciousness

Perhaps the most well-known author to address the question of workplace consciousness is Michael Burawoy. Arguing in *Manufacturing Consent* that "conflict and consent are not primordial conditions but products of the particular organization of work," he refocused discussions of worker consciousness on the labor process (1979, 12). Work, in his view, is "relatively autonomous" from the wider social environment and its changes under monopoly capitalism largely responsible for the decline in labor militancy. Yet Burawoy's research, which involved extended participation in a Chicago-area machine shop, uncovered anything but a monolithic workplace. On the contrary, occupational divisions and the evolving character of worker-manager relations were found to

differentially shape workers' attitudes and behavior. These same dimensions—work organization and employment relations—have since gained currency as the defining features of manufacturing. But there is discontinuity with services. Service-work scholars, propelled by Arlie Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor and Robin Leidner's (1993) of the service triangle, have proceeded in more subjective directions and only in the last decade begun to reconsider structure (Bélanger and Edwards 2013). The challenge at hand is thus to disentangle each debate and unite their core insights.

Work Organization

For much of human history, the organization of work has been simple: one person performed all tasks needed to produce a useful thing, be it a sharpened spear, a pair of shoes, or a plate of food. Cooperation, to be sure, emerged very early but was mainly confined to large-scale hunting in preagricultural societies and large-scale construction in agricultural ones. It was only with the Industrial Revolution of the late 1700s that cooperation and a detailed division of labor became widespread. Adam Smith ([1776|1993] was the first to recognize this; Karl Marx took the analysis further: "A large number of workers working together, at the same time, in one place (or, if you like, in the same field of labour), in order to produce the same sort of commodity under the command of the same capitalist, constitutes the starting point of capitalist production" ([1867|1976, 439). If collectivization is fundamental to the capitalist labor process, then it is surely a defining feature of its organization. Embedded within collectivized work is also the potential for domination. Control from above, or "command" as Marx puts it, thus constitutes another dimension of work. And just as

collectivization makes possible but does not require control, so do both provide the necessary yet insufficient conditions for simplification. Smith, again, was the first to take note. Examining work in a pin factory, he found the complexity of tasks greatly reduced from preindustrial methods:

One man draws out the wire, another straightens it, a third cuts it, a fourth points it, a fifth grinds it at the top for receiving the head; to make the head requires two or three distinct operations; to put it on, is a peculiar business, to whiten the pins is another; it is even a trade by itself to put them into the paper; and the important business of making a pin is, in this manner, divided into about eighteen distinct operations, which, in some manufactories, are all performed by distinct hands. ([1776] 1993, 12)

Harry Braverman later described this same process as the “the separation of conception and execution” or the de-skilling of frontline work (1974, 79).

Service jobs, however, are harder to collectivize than their goods-producing counterparts. When a commodity is consumed simultaneously with its production and involves personal interaction, it can hardly be stockpiled; it also presents fewer opportunities for worker cooperation. Nevertheless, the twentieth century saw the emergence of large-scale service enterprises in health care, education, hospitality, and retail. Clearly services can be collectivized, or at least aggregated, even if unevenly. But control and complexity are more problematic. Leidner’s (1993) study of fast-food servers and insurance salespeople uncovered alternate axes of control: customers, rather than simply providing “raw material” for service performance, were unpredictable agents whom managers and workers sought to regulate; in other instances, customer reports were used by managers to monitor workers. Hence the old dyad of

worker-manager becomes a triad in services, with multiple pathways for alliance and conflict.

Hochschild also identified service work's unique content. Rather than manipulating things, as in goods production, or symbols, as in intellectual production, service provision "require[s] one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (1983, 7). She called this "emotional labor" and distinguished between "surface acting," in which workers engage in superficial encounters, and "deep acting," in which they develop long-term relationships. Though Hochschild's emphasis on the interpersonal remains largely unchallenged, the intensity of emotional labor, as well as patterns of alliance and conflict and their impact on consciousness vary widely among workplaces. They require firsthand investigation.

Employment Relations

Burawoy's (1979) study, like many before and since, showed how not simply work itself but also its embedding social relations shape consciousness. The most fundamental relation in all but a few workplaces is the wage-for-effort bargain: workers agree, often tacitly, to show up at certain times, expend energy in predetermined ways, and generally submit to employers' direction. In return they receive more or less wages, security, or comfort, and these are more variable than relations of ownership. Sanford Jacoby (1997), for example, traces the rise and persistence of American "welfare capitalism" in which large employers provided generous wages and benefits—as well as sophisticated paternalism—in order to keep unions out. Unions and collective bargaining also reveal the elasticity of wages and workplace relations. Indeed, a

central finding of *Manufacturing Consent* was that unionization had transformed the managerial strategy of work speedup into a fair “game” in which workers could “make out.”

Since the late 1970s, however, such fairness and preemptive generosity have largely vanished. Kochan, Katz, and McKersie argue that “concession bargaining, workplace innovations, and the rise in the importance of nonunion human resource management systems represent a breakdown of the industrial relations system that was shaped by New Deal labor policies and the early institutionalization of collective bargaining during and immediately after World War II” (1994, 21). What they call the “nonunion industrial relations system” originally looked much like welfare capitalism. But as union decline became more permanent, it morphed into a low-road model epitomized by Walmart and McDonald’s. Workers at Walmart and similar firms often receive sub-living wages and have little access to benefits and almost no job security; many also struggle—and fail—to attain full-time hours or predictable schedules (Kalleberg 2011; Lichtenstein 2006, 2009). The decline of organized labor thus seems to have accentuated the “mean” side of many U.S. firms (Gordon 1996).

Services have been more central to discussions of employment relations than to those about work organization—probably because service employers, particularly retailers, were among the early innovators in this field. Susan Benson (1986, 143) notes how prewar department stores purveyed “[w]elfare work [that] included store facilities and social service programs for workers”; Jacoby (1997) details Sears’s deployment of high wages, profit sharing, and patriarchy to inculcate loyalty; and Bethany Moreton (2009) traces the southern origins and compliance effects of Walmart’s morning rituals and gendered paternalism. In sum, service workers have often been guinea pigs for the latest

managerial trends, which typically involve altering pay, benefits, or supervisory style. But how these are arranged in individual workplaces and how they are received by workers remain open empirical questions.

How It All Evolves

Taken together, work organization and employment relations compose the total labor process that workers experience. At any given time these are relatively fixed, but a prime feature of work under capitalism is that it constantly changes. How and why this happens has been the subject of much debate. Since the 1970s, three general positions have been staked out.

Braverman (1974) put forward a radical de-skilling hypothesis that saw capitalists as increasing control through observation, routinization, and mechanization of workers' tasks. Later contributors in the same vein emphasized worker resistance to such degradation, with Richard Edwards (1979) and Burawoy (1979) identifying alternate employer strategies when de-skilling is impractical. Upgrading theorists, for their part, assert the opposite. Robert Blauner (1964) and Daniel Bell (1973) cite technological change; Michael Piore and Charles Sabel (1984) point to normative shifts in industrial relations; and lean production, or "Toyotist," enthusiasts argue that the rational interests of employers compel them to seek "high performance workplaces" whose spread raises overall skill levels (Whitfield 2000; Ohno 1988; see Dohse, Jürgens, and Malsch 1985 for a critique). Last, contingency theorists take issue with the very directionality of change. Stephen Wood (1987) and Paul Attewell (1987, 1990) question whether degradation can ever be empirically verified, Roger Penn (1986) sees frontline de-skilling as offset by growing maintenance and management staff, and

Cynthia Cockburn (1983) argues that gender, rather than job complexity, plays a major role in skill designations.

Service work has rarely been studied through the lens of these hypotheses. While Braverman included services in the purview of his theory, and even dedicated a short chapter to their investigation, both his and more recent efforts (e.g., Ritzer 1993) are empirically weak (with the exception of Curley and Royle 2013). How frontline service jobs are changing and to what extent they are becoming more skilled, less skilled, or simply more differentiated are thus broadly open questions that this book seeks to answer.

Class Consciousness

Working-class consciousness presents a different can of worms. Predicated on the social division between capitalists and workers, it has long been sought by activists as a key ingredient for progressive change. Historically, it is also on the basis of class that workers have formed the most effective unions and political parties. Michael Mann (1973) defines class consciousness as having four distinct moments:

class identity—the definition of oneself as working-class, as playing a distinctive role in common with other workers in the productive process . . . *class opposition*—the perception that the capitalist and his agents constitute an enduring opponent to oneself . . . *class totality*—the acceptance of the two previous elements as the defining characteristics of (a) one's total social position and (b) the whole society in which one lives. Finally comes the conception of an *alternative society*, a goal toward which one moves through the struggle with the opponent. (1973, 13)

Ethnographers and historians critique this formulation. Rick Fantasia (1988, 11) believes it ignores the “transformative associational

bonding” workers undergo in struggle, while Ira Katznelson (1986, 14–20) argues that consciousness is but one stage in a historical (and typically national) process of “class formation” (see also Thompson 1963). But to study the localized consciousness of workers not in open struggle—as most workers are most of the time—Mann’s schema provides the most useful starting point, if needing some modification. First, it is unlikely for experience in a single workplace to engender views of “class totality” or of an “alternative society.” Excluding these “higher levels” leaves the first two—identity and opposition. Second, Mann’s “identity” has two points of reference: “with other workers” and “in the productive process.” Because of this, class identity appears to consist more directly of “co-worker solidarity”—identifying the interests of colleagues with one’s own—and “occupational identity”—identifying with the role one plays on the job (Cobble 1991b). This yields a three-part model of what might be termed “workplace-based” class consciousness.

Aside from overblown assertions to the contrary, the question of whether services can generate this or other forms of class consciousness has been approached only at the margins. Hochschild and others have linked the performance of emotional labor to self-alienation and feelings of inauthenticity (Hochschild 1983; Wharton 1993; Erickson and Wharton 1997; Sloan 2007). This dynamic can be extended to also limit occupational identity. For another, the triangle of service relations and the alliances they enable may also reduce workers’ opposition to management (Bolton and Houlihan 2010; Leidner 1996). But the effects of sex-typing are more ambiguous. Many service jobs are explicitly gendered, with “caring labor” often defined as an extension of “feminine” duties (England 1992; Guy and Newman 2004). To the extent this ideology is effective it may hinder job identity and opposition. Where not

effective, however, such “special oppression” can produce gender solidarity and opposition (Cobble 1991a; Hartmann 1981; Jones 2001). Furthermore, where employers encourage workers to have a “positive mental attitude,” authoritarian supervision may be less effective than supportive, collaborative techniques (Leidner 1993; Korczynski 2002; Sherman 2007). Such “soft” management leads one to expect less opposition from workers.

These expectations about how services shape consciousness lie at the heart of this book. They are tackled in chapter 6, after the contours of work at two retailers have been fully laid out. What remains before embarking on this journey is to describe my research process—a task that occupies the rest of this chapter.

The Research Process

In early 2011 I set out to understand the experience of contemporary service workers and the chances for militancy among them. I wanted to study more than one site and hear workers’ direct opinions on their jobs, workplace politics, and U.S. society. Participant observation, for all its merits, would have made these goals hard to achieve. I therefore opted to conduct a series of in-depth interviews rather than embed myself as a frontline employee. But where to start?

Of the nine major service sectors defined by the U.S. Census,⁴ education and health, wholesale and retail, and professional and business services are the largest. The first are mainly in the public sector

4. Wholesale and retail trade, transportation and utilities, information, financial activities, professional and business services, education and health services, other services, and public administration (although transportation and utilities have high proportions of production-type jobs) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014d).

and because of that are highly unionized (Hirsch and Macpherson 2014). Professional and business services, though only 3 percent unionized, employ mostly professional workers whose average wages are well above the private-sector mean (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014a, 2014d). In retail, however, fewer than 10 percent of workers are managers or professionals, and their average wages are just 63 percent of the private-sector mean (*ibid.*). Nearly 12 percent of all U.S. workers are employed in retail, but fewer than 5 percent of them are union members. Retail is America's largest low-wage, nonunion service industry and thus fertile terrain for the exploration of class consciousness.

Within retail I focused on department stores, and among them I studied those in New York City. Home to some of the most well-known traditional retailers, New York has only since the late 1990s been colonized by big-box and discount chains (Angotti 2008). Macy's in particular has its oldest—and in four cases unionized—stores in the city, and I chose these both because they likely resemble earlier modes of selling and because they offered a window into existing retail unionism. Among the big-box entrants to the New York market—which do not include Walmart—I chose Target for comparison. Target is the third-largest discounter after Walmart and Costco, is completely nonunion, and is seen by many as a trendsetter in the genre (Spector 2005). The uniqueness of New York's economy and workforce also made it imperative that any comparison case be in the same place (Sassen 2001). Table 1.1 displays key characteristics of both Macy's and Target for the year my research began.

Between June 2011 and August 2012 I spent several hundred hours roaming around two unionized Macy's and three nonunion Target stores, all within the five boroughs of New York. I initiated informal conversations with salespersons, stock workers and

TABLE 1.1
Selected characteristics for Macy's, Inc. and Target Corporation, 2011

	Macy's, Inc.	Target Corporation
Model	Traditional, full-line	Discount
U.S. outlets	842 (including 44 Bloomingdale's)	1,763
Employees	171,000	365,000
U.S. sales	\$26.4 billion	\$68.5 billion
U.S. profit (post-tax)	\$1.3 billion	\$2.9 billion
Profit rate	4.8%	4.3%
Sales per employee	\$154,415	\$187,578
Unionization	10% of national workforce	None
Sales method	Individual: some commission; personal sales goals; no cashiers	Collective: no commission; storewide sales goals; cashiers

Sources: Macy's 2012a; Target Corporation 2012b.

cashiers by asking basic questions about their jobs. If they seemed open, I invited them to a formal interview at a nearby café or park and offered \$20 in return. Over the course of fourteen months, sixty-two workers (thirty-one from each company) and the president of the Macy's union local sat with me for interviews. During the summer of 2013, I interviewed an additional thirteen workers from a nonunion Macy's store in the same city. In the course of each interview I asked questions about work dynamics and conditions; about workers' feelings toward management, coworkers, and customers; and about their individual backgrounds and future plans. Each discussion was only semistructured, however, and respondents were encouraged to develop their own narratives. Table 1.2 provides basic demographics of the seventy-five workers interviewed.

TABLE 1.2
Sample characteristics, Macy's and Target New York City workers, 2011–13

	Macy's (N=44)	Target (N=31)
<i>Job title</i>		
Salespersons	82%	61%
Cashiers	N/A	19%
Stock clerks	9%	13%
Food servers	N/A	6%
Merchandisers	7%	N/A
Supervisors	2%	0%
<i>Employment relations</i>		
Union members	66%	0%
Full-time	61%	42%
Average hourly wage (\$)	\$11.41	\$10.29
Average job tenure (years)	3.5	2.0
<i>Worker characteristics</i>		
Average age (years)	28	24
Primary earners	59%	35%
Women	64%	52%
Black	64%	71%
Asian	14%	3%
Latino	7%	13%
White	16%	13%
Foreign-born	34%	45%

Overview

This story unfolds in the next six chapters. Chapter 2 provides a historical overview of retail trade and unionism since the early twentieth century. It shows how large firms developed relatively late in retail and how, because of this, sales work did not become highly collectivized until after World War II. Unionism, for its part,

began among small, independent retailers but shifted to chain and department stores in the 1930s and '40s, making rapid gains along with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) upsurge. But these gains proved ephemeral, and retail unionism never achieved the industry-wide clout of its mass-production peers. The assault on labor since the 1980s and the rise of nonunion discounters have placed sales workers in an increasingly precarious and hostile organizing environment.

Chapter 3 begins my comparison of Macy's and Target, examining the organization of sales work at these two iconic retailers. They display starkly different processes. Macy's was specialized, decentralized, and competitive, with many jobs requiring workers to apply detailed product knowledge. Target, by contrast, was routinized and collectivized, with few jobs requiring any measurable or transferable skills. I argue that these represent two distinct modes of selling: "eroded craft" at Macy's and "service Toyotism" at Target.

In chapter 4 I discuss the social relations that underpinned and enabled these regimes. Macy's had an adversarial culture where authoritarian supervision and distrust of managers were common. Target, for its part, was more "harmonious": it cultivated a Disney-infused teamwork that was deliberately antiunion and often enough worked. While both were low-wage employers that paid most workers less than twelve dollars an hour, Target, surprisingly, had a two-dollar higher wage floor than unionized Macy's. The caveat was that Macy's wages ranged much higher, and its unionized workers had far more security than their nonunion peers. Altogether, I argue that Macy's adversarialism was part and parcel of its semiskilled, eroded craft model in which what workers did was less understood by managers. In parallel fashion, Target's "teamwork" was both an enabler and result of its de-skilled sales

process in which managerial control was embedded in the very structure of work.

Chapter 5 combines the results of the preceding chapters to assess how sales work has changed and where it is heading. Using chapter 2 as historical context and Macy's and Target as proxies for older and newer sales models, I interrogate the grand hypotheses of labor process theory as they pertain to department stores. Comparing transformations in work organization, employment relations, and worker characteristics, I argue that emotional labor has undergone de-skilling, that this has been accompanied by a shift from adversarialism to paternalism, and that the transition from a "primary" workforce of self-supporting adults to a "secondary" one of students and dependents has been an integral part of these changes. I then outline an emerging regime of "contingent control" in low-wage workplaces. Building upon Edwards's (1979) influential schema, I identify four features of this regime and pinpoint Target as ideal-typical, unionized Macy's as a more distant predecessor, and nonunion Macy's as a transitional case.

In chapter 6 I turn to the question of class consciousness. I explore service workers' subjectivity through a four-part prism of job identity, solidarity, opposition, and union support. Unionized Macy's workers, as might be expected, showed greater identity and opposition and were more pronoun than their nonunion peers at either firm. But solidarity was much stronger at Target. I attribute this to Target's collectivized, team-based model as compared with Macy's individualized and competitive one. There was little to support the idea that service work dulls class consciousness in and of itself, since Macy's workers—union and nonunion—were more class conscious while engaging in deeper acting and more high-stakes interactions with customers. Jobs at both firms had a clear gender gradient, but this created few differential attitudes,

while Target's softer managerial style seemed to mollify worker resistance.

In the concluding chapter I return to the question of struggle, confronting the promises and challenges of organizing service workplaces in the twenty-first century. The main obstacles, I argue, are fierce employer resistance and limited structural power, which has been further eroded by de-skilling. Yet counteracting forces are also at work. The routinization of sales is entwined with collectivization, which at Target engendered heightened solidarity—a key factor in successful organizing. Furthermore, contingent control produces new grievances around insecurity that unions can take up—and some already have. Unionized Macy's, however, exposes the shortcomings of many existing unions, as well as their indifferent attitude toward many younger members. Insofar as services are tending toward collectivized, precarious, and paternalist regimes, it seems that unions must rethink not only their tactics and organizing models but also the content of their appeals and the definition of membership. The burgeoning campaigns to raise wages and respect at Walmart and fast-food chains show that this process has already begun. But the pathway to unionism in low-wage services can only be aided by a deeper understanding of workers' lived experience, which this book provides.

The Making of Big-Box Retail

Capitalism can reproduce itself only by an incessant accumulation which develops as a mass production and consumption of commodities, a phenomenon generalized to embrace the sum total of activities of social life.

Michel Aglietta (1979, 81)

In twenty-first-century America, most of us know retail as a generic shopping experience that typically takes place in big-box suburban malls. Most of us are also aware that working in retail is often low-paid, precarious, and nonunion. Some, such as Nelson Lichtenstein (2006, 2009), argue not only that retail epitomizes America's "bad jobs" phenomenon but that retailers have played an outsized role in spreading them since the 1970s. Was this all inevitable? Were retail jobs predestined to be low-wage, insecure, and nonunion? Or are these the contingent outcomes of twentieth-century history? This chapter argues the latter by tracing the development of the industry, its labor practices, and retail unions since the late nineteenth century.

An undertaking such as this requires some analytic guideposts and periodization. For these I turn to the influential regulation school of political economy, exemplified by the work of Michel

Aglietta (1979), Bob Jessop (1982), and Alain Lipietz (1989). Regulation theorists argue for the existence of long-run periods of growth (“regimes of accumulation”) based on particular modes of extracting and realizing value. These stable thirty- to forty year stretches are made possible, they say, by supportive state policies and social norms (“modes of regulation”) but are bookended by acute phases of turmoil and change when the latter no longer suit the former. According to Aglietta, the greatest historical divide lies between the “extensive” and the “intensive” regimes of accumulation (71). The first, from the Civil War to the late 1920s, consisted in an expansion of labor-intensive manufacturing and a decline of independent ownership. Taylorism, based on the ideas of Frederick W. Taylor, came to the fore during the second half of this period as a method of extracting greater value from workers by routinizing their tasks, but because wages remained low, they had limited capacity to consume. This limit is often cited as a main cause of the Great Depression, which itself is credited with the rise of the New Deal and industrial unionism in the United States. Emerging from this tumult in 1945 was a new regime often referred to as “Fordism”: assembly-line technology and widespread unionization paired with higher wages and mass consumption for many industrial workers. This regime underwent its own crisis in the 1970s and transitioned toward what many call “neoliberalism” in the 1980s—a regime that encapsulates trends observed during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, including wage stagnation, globalization, and de-unionization (Harvey 2005).

Here I employ this four-part periodization and the concepts of the regulation school to chart U.S. retail’s evolution. Within each phase, I focus on the structure of the industry, the organization of selling, and retail unionism. The story that emerges is of an industry late to the game of concentration, collectivization,

and rationalization but one that caught up rapidly in the 1930s and '40s. Retail unions, though held back by minimal disruptive power, made impressive advances in certain times and subsectors. However, their strategic missteps—and those of the wider labor movement—contributed to retail's predominantly low-road, nonunion status today, enabling the rise of what I describe in chapter 5 as contingent control.

The Rise of Capitalist Retailing

If capitalist industry, properly understood, consists in large-scale organizations producing for a profit, then capitalist retailing arose relatively late. As recently as 1929 independently owned stores employing just a handful of clerks (and sometimes none) accounted for 89 percent of stores and 70 percent of sales (Lebhar 1952, 63). Ronald Coase once described corporations as “lumps of butter coagulating in a pail of buttermilk” (quoted in Hoopes 2006, 85); by this metric, American retail was still largely milk at the end of the extensive regime of accumulation—one that had congealed most manufacturing industries into solid butter.

Nevertheless, tendencies toward concentration and large-scale organization were evident. These could be seen most clearly in the urban department stores that catered to the elite and upper-middle classes; in large chains such as A&P (groceries), J.C. Penney (dry goods), and Woolworth's (variety); and in mail-order houses, represented by Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward. Numerically, however, small owners predominated before the Great Depression. Hundreds of thousands of mom-and-pop shops offered everything from groceries to clothing to musical instruments. According to Godfrey Lebhar, each one “specializes in particular lines of merchandise, occupies relatively small space, has limited capital,