

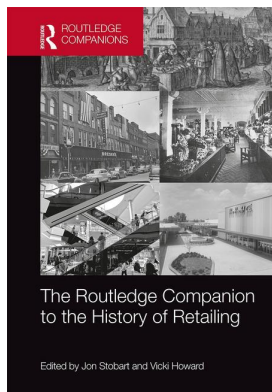
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RETAIL WORKERS AND THEIR UNIONS, 1850–2016

Daniel Opler

In many ways, the history of workers in the American retail industry is very similar to other well-established narratives about American workers. Meagre efforts at unionisation in the nineteenth century led to much more effective strategies and struggles in the 1930s, followed by a serious and rapid decline in workers' power in the later twentieth century. As in other industries, retail workers' control over their jobs and conditions lessened throughout most of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. While the story looks slightly different in European countries, there too, one sees the rapid decrease in retail workers' control over their jobs, and the overarching failure of retail workers' unions, although there are a few scattered signs of more powerful retail workers' unions in a few European countries, where unions generally are far more powerful.

If retail workers fit fairly well into these overarching narratives, there are some important aspects of retailing that make the industry unique in labour history. Women workers, for instance, have represented a far higher percentage of workers in the retail industry than in other industries. Also, retail work conditions were often significantly worse than in other industries: retail workers' hours in the nineteenth century were generally significantly longer than in other industries (before a shift to part-time employment reversed this trend, bringing with it a new set of problems), and retail workers' pay was often lower. In addition, the unions in the retail industry, even more so than elsewhere in American labour history, have been noticeably fractured, mired in internal conflict and powerless to effect important changes in workers' lives, even at their height. Finally, the forces that worked to the grave detriment of other workers in the late twentieth century, mechanisation and globalisation, have had far more mixed and complicated effects on retail workers; the challenges workers faced were far more likely to result from suburbanisation, the rise of online retailing and the rise of new retailing strategies such as self-service shopping.

Also unlike many other industries, retail workers are relatively rarely studied. Although there have been a few local studies of retail workers and their unions – especially New York City's left-leaning District 65 and its affiliated locals – and some good studies of retail workers' strikes throughout the country, there has not been a full-length study of retail workers and their unions in almost fifty years. And, while historians' understanding of retail workers continues to grow, it remains largely an incomplete picture, with key developments in retail history largely unexamined.

The AFL era, 1850–1930

Working in nineteenth century retail stores in the United States was, by all accounts, strenuous. Workers in the stores seem to have made even less than workers in factories (Obenauer 1913, 6–7). In addition, store managers were as demanding and patriarchal as any employer of this era. In an 1850 list of instructions issued at one store, the owners warned against smoking and dancing and suggested that ‘leisure hours should be spent mostly in reading’. Finally, and most frustratingly for many retail workers, the hours of work were significantly longer than in many factories; a 112-hour work week was the norm for many store workers, in part to make sure that stores remained opened so that other workers who worked long hours would be able to shop after work if they wished (Kirstein 1950, 4–5).

The long workdays meant that some retail workers got involved in labour organisations as early as the 1840s, when New York clerks formed an association specifically targeted at shortening their working hours. The association amassed a great deal of public support, holding mass meetings in Union Square attended by important political figures like Horace Greeley, but did not seem able to shorten working hours. For the next thirty years, clerks at grocery and small dry goods stores throughout the country issued petitions, organised small associations, and wrote letters to newspapers in an effort to convince the public that these long working hours were morally objectionable and should be stopped. Their efforts at getting the public to condemn their long working hours continued throughout the 1870s and 1880s, and spread throughout the country to cities large and small. Despite the decades of effort, however, these public relations campaigns were largely unsuccessful, perhaps because the long working hours of clerks (and the long hours the stores were open) seemed good for the consumers to whom the early closing associations would have had to appeal to have any lasting impact (‘Clerks congratulatory meeting’ 1863).

The early closing associations were also generally limited to relatively small retail establishments. They did not exist in the great palaces of consumption, the department stores that were an increasingly important part of upscale consumption in America in the late nineteenth century. There were a few reasons for the absence of the early closing associations in the department stores. Certainly gender played a role; the leaders and many of the members of the early closing associations were men, and the women workers of the department stores were somewhat foreign to their organising experience. Equally important was the status of department store workers, who were at least on occasion eligible for promotion to low-level managerial positions, a rarity for any worker in this era, let alone women. But perhaps most important of all, as Susan Porter Benson argued in her landmark study, *Counter Cultures*, workers in the department stores had their own system for challenging employers’ power. Women working in these stores, Benson demonstrated, were particularly adept at fashioning a work culture that allowed them all sorts of small perks, defiantly riding the elevators that were reserved for customers, taking full advantage of their charge accounts, and occasionally openly criticising the store to customers if they felt they were ill-treated by store managers. These techniques meant that formal organisations to fight for workers’ interests were simply not necessary in the department stores (Benson 1986).

By the end of the 19th century, American department stores had developed into solidly non-union establishments, even as retail workers in other retail establishments, finding their independent early closing associations ineffective, sought permanent unions affiliated with national and international coalitions. As early as 1886, grocery store clerks in New York affiliated their early closing campaigns with the national labour union, Knights of Labor (‘Grocery clerks encouraged’ 1886). The Knights’ collapse later in 1886, in the aftermath of the Chicago Haymarket Bombing and the Red Scare that followed, meant that this affiliation was very

short-lived. Beginning in 1890, however, grocery store clerks in the Midwest organised the first permanent retail workers union in the United States, the Retail Clerks International Protection Association (RCIPA), affiliated with the powerful American Federation of Labor (AFL) (Kirstein 1950, 11–13).

In Europe the situation was more complex, and varied widely from country to country. But in Europe as in the United States, the primary concerns seem to have been working conditions and hours rather than wages. In France, the Catholic-inspired *Syndicat de Employés du Commerce et de l'Industrie* set out to organise workers in the growing department store industry as early as 1887, and won notable successes reasonably quickly. By 1900, French retail workers had forced legislators to pass the seat law, which gave women clerks the right to sit-down when not waiting on customers, and by 1906 they won an even more important legislative victory: the six-day work week for French retail workers. Employers, seeing the writing on the wall, began instituting early closing in France in these years, perhaps forestalling even more legislative action (Miller 2014, 146–147).

Workers in Germany took on similar issues in the late nineteenth century, though with different allies. As early as 1896, women's rights activists spearheaded campaigns for seat laws in Germany, forcing city governments to back down. By 1900, the German Industrial Code was amended to include the requirement that employers had to provide seats for sales clerks, only to run into the problem that most store owners, even if they did follow this code, instituted policies forbidding workers to actually use the seats. At the same time, German retail workers began working on a petition campaign to demand early closing, apparently getting their demands met in at least some cities where they were organised (Adams 1988, 57–59).

In England, employers seemed to have combined the American and French retail practices: workers had extremely long work weeks, ranging from 70 hours a week up to as many as 90 in some suburban stores. There, however, perhaps influenced by the famous upstairs dormitories for workers at the *Bon Marché* and other French stores, large retailers practiced the living-in method of employment, requiring some 400,000 workers in their stores to live in employer-owned lodgings, often in cramped conditions and in dangerous neighbourhoods. Employers in these circumstances had tremendous power, dismissing workers for such offences as getting married or putting up photographs or other pictures on the walls of the employer-owned housing (Richardson 1979, 5–7). In part in response to this system, in 1891, English retail workers formed the National Union of Shop Assistants, which, a few years later, expanded to the National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks.

In both England and the US, the unions set their sights on achieving earlier closing times. In England, the union was part of the formation of the Early Closing Association, which called upon employers to voluntarily establish shorter hours; when this proved ineffective, the union began organising strikes. In the US, by the early 1900s, the RCIPA, drawing on a longer tradition of struggles around the shorter workday, called upon customers to boycott stores that would not grant the 60-hour week. This tactic proved only slightly more effective than any of the other efforts at limiting working hours. They had a few scattered victories in mining towns where they were able to get the support of the comparatively powerful mine workers' unions, but outside of these communities, the union found managers unwilling to limit the number of hours potential customers could shop in their stores (Kirstein 1950, 19).

The early 1900s also saw a short-lived independent union campaign in department stores in the US. Spearheaded by the New York Women's Trade Union League, and bolstered by Progressive reform groups' investigations into the department stores, Macy's workers set up the Retail Clerks Union (RCU), which then attempted to spread to other department stores around New York City. Store managers quickly increased commissions and cracked down on any and

all union activity, establishing extensive informant networks, locking store exits near union meetings to physically prevent workers from attending meetings, and firing workers who were involved with the union. The RCU applied for AFL affiliation, but apparently never received it, and all but vanished from the historical record after 1914 (Johnson 2007).

The RCIPA and RCU alike generally avoided calling strikes. The RCU simply did not last long enough to launch any major strikes, and the RCIPA leaders viewed boycotts and public condemnation of recalcitrant managers as far more promising than strikes. Partially this was a sign of the times; strikes were expensive and risky, and many labour leaders were uneasy about their viability as a tactic in labour struggles. But the peculiarities of work in the retail industry might also have played a role; retail establishments, more directly than most other businesses, catered to the public at large and so a boycott could have very immediate, visible and devastating effects, if organised effectively.

Despite the union leaders' disinterest in organising strikes, retail workers did strike on occasion. In Buffalo in 1913, for instance, department store workers went on strike to demand both higher wages and an 8½-hour workday. In that strike, in which the RCIPA was only marginally involved, workers emerged with some important gains; weekly pay was raised to \$12 minimum for men and \$6 minimum for women, somewhat less than the workers had demanded when they'd begun their strike, though they did not get the hours of work shortened. Other strikes called by the union during the 1910s, most important at stores in Memphis and in St Louis, saw even less success, and by the end of World War I, the union was weaker than ever (Kirstein 1950, 42–49).

In Europe, conditions were more complex. In the United Kingdom, retail workers began striking against the living-in system in the early 1900s. Beginning with the small 1901 strike against William Whiteley's store in London and continuing with strikes throughout the United Kingdom, retail workers began destroying the living-in system. By the beginning of World War I, workers in the UK had largely won the right to choose between room-and-board and wage increases (USDAW 2016). And, following the war, the retail unions in the UK began to expand rapidly, reaching some 86,000 members by 1920, only to collapse again in the postwar economic recession.

In America, while the unions were far weaker than in the UK, workers found that they could have a lot of power without the aid of the union. Especially in the larger department stores, retail managers, in keeping with their patriarchal methods before World War I, created massive "welfare capitalism" programs in the 1920s, offering workers profit-sharing, vacation homes, employer-sponsored pension and health care plans and, quite famously, at Macy's, a free turkey every Thanksgiving. As managers used these tactics to gain greater worker loyalty and discourage turnover, they openly condemned unions as un-American and unwelcome in their stores. The RCIPA, small and not especially powerful, had no effective means to combat these sorts of tactics (Kirstein 1950, 48).

It is also worth noting that American retail jobs were strictly segregated throughout the late nineteenth early twentieth centuries. While African American and other non-white workers often had jobs in the stores, especially in larger department stores, these jobs fell into two categories: either behind the scenes or in servile positions, as washroom attendants, cleaning staff and elevator operators. African American workers were not employed in sales generally, except in the few African American owned stores in segregated neighbourhoods. (Even these stores were sometimes the sites of racial violence. A famous lynching took place in Memphis, Tennessee in 1892, when three African American men opened a grocery store that might take customers away from a nearby white-owned store; it was this case that first drew the attention of journalist

Ida B. Wells to lynching, and launched her career as an anti-lynching activist.) By and large, the unions did nothing to challenge this situation.

The Great Depression and World War II would dramatically change the situation of retail workers in America and beyond. These decades would mark the end of retail unions in Axis-controlled countries, and a new respect for their tremendous service in the UK during the war. At the same time, in the US, these years would bear witness to the rise in the power of unions within the retail industry, introduce different retail strategies with profound effects on workers' situation, see the first major challenges to segregated hiring practices and would forever transform the conditions of retail workers.

Unions ascendant, 1930–1950

The Great Depression saw a tremendous increase in strikes against retail stores. With national support for workers and unions growing rapidly in the early Great Depression, workers were more willing to go on strike than ever before. The largest strike of the early Depression years took place in Milwaukee, a centre of radical labour activism. In September 1934, Milwaukee retail workers at several different stores applied for RCIPA membership, and in November of that year they demanded a union contract at the large Boston Store. When management refused, workers went on strike, hitting the store at the beginning of the Christmas shopping season. Store managers applied for and received an anti-picketing injunction, and the strike became a war of attrition, with store managers taking out advertisements in the city's papers condemning the union, and with workers resorting to breaking windows and throwing stink bombs into the store to drive away customers. By January 1935, the strike was over, with workers receiving merit-based raises and with most workers receiving their jobs back. Workers received neither the level of raises nor the union representation they had demanded (White 2016).

More important, though equally unsuccessful in most regards, were a series of small strikes in New York City that would lead to the creation of a more radical retail workers' union, the retail branch of the Office Workers' Union. Affiliated with the Communist-led Trade Union Unity League, the Office Workers' Union defied all the accepted wisdom of retail organising, setting its sights on the upscale department stores as well as the lower-priced stores where the RCIPA had previously been successful. When managers at the S. Klein's store, a cut-rate department store on Union Square, fired a number of workers for union organising, workers at Klein's went on strike; within a few days, workers at the competing Ohrbach's store went on strike as well (Opler 2002).

The strikes were dramatic ones. The strikers took advantage of Communist-affiliated allies to transform the stores and Square alike into a battleground, decorating statues with picket signs, etching strike slogans into the store windows, handing balloons with strike slogans on them to the children of customers, recruiting writers and actors to join their picket lines on special strike "theme days", introducing white mice into the stores to frighten customers, and interrupting charity banquets at which the store owners spoke. Again and again, the strikers found ways to capture the public imagination, enough so that by 1935 there was a play based on the strikes, *The Klein-Ohrbach Strike*, produced by the important Workers Laboratory Theatre, and by 1936, there was a novel based on the strikes, Leane Zugsmith's *A Time To Remember*. Despite the attention they received, the strikes were not successful. At both stores, workers got reinstatement, and at Ohrbach's workers got a verbal promise of reduced hours. At both stores, however, managers laid off workers in the weeks and months after the strikes had taken place, marking a serious defeat for the radicals. After these and other similarly devastating losses, the Office Workers' Union

merged with an RCIPA local to create the important Local 1250, which would become a major force in organising department store workers in New York City into unions (Opler 2002).

If the dramatic strikes of the early Depression years were largely unsuccessful, that would change in the late 1930s, when organising and striking resulted in permanent and powerful unions. The key moment in retail unions' history occurred in early 1937, when, in the aftermath of sit-down strikes at auto and rubber plants, workers at five-and-dime stores went on a sit-down strike in Detroit, Michigan. Locking themselves inside Woolworth stores, and singling out Woolworth heiress Barbara Hutton as a target for their ire, the Detroit Woolworth workers quickly made headlines throughout the country. This tactic played nicely into the radical worldview of the 1930s, which often singled out wealthy women as particularly greedy, wasteful and deserving of contempt, and throughout the Woolworth strikes, workers played up the contrast between the hardworking female Woolworth clerks and the wealthy, lazy, spoiled Barbara Hutton, both with songs invoking Hutton's name and with what became their favourite chant in some of the stores on strike, 'Barbara Hutton, she gets mutton! Woolworth workers, they get nothin'!' (Frank 2012; Opler 2007).

The strikes spread. In New York City, former OWU organisers started to pay more attention to workers at five-and-dime stores, and in March 1937 they wound up leading massive sit-down strikes in a number of New York five-and-dime stores, capturing the front pages of newspapers and attracting tremendous attention (and eventually pressuring New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and others to intervene on behalf of the workers). Unlike in the earlier strikes, the Woolworth strikes ended with contracts, raises, and improvement in working hours. After years of defeats and compromises, unions had finally won a clear-cut victory in the retail industry. Influenced by these victories, a group of more politically moderate RCIPA insurgents in New York City abandoned the AFL, joining with the former OWU leaders in forming a union that would eventually become the CIO's retail union, the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU) (Opler 2007).

These same years also marked the beginnings of effective labour organising in San Francisco's retail industry. As early as 1936, organisers for the powerful west coast branch of the International Longshoremen's Association had led small strikes of warehouse workers in five-and-dime stores, and in 1937 these strikes spread to the sales workers. That year, as workers did in five-and-dime stores throughout the rest of the country, workers launched a massive strike against Woolworth stores in San Francisco that won workers better conditions, better hours, and union recognition. In 1938 this campaign culminated in a still larger strike against twenty-seven of the largest department stores in San Francisco in an effort to win all retail workers in the city shorter work weeks, store-wide seniority policies and union contracts (Reagan 2016).

The 1938 San Francisco strike was an important if not entirely victorious one. The strikers resorted to tactics similar to those used in earlier New York City strikes, making them as dramatic as possible. Female picketers wore their best dresses to the picket lines, and the *New York Times* suggested that, at least on the first day, the picket lines looked more like "fashion shows" than anything else, with the strikers engaging in dance steps, chatting with passers-by and keeping the mood as light as possible. This light mood did not last long; the strike became a violent one within days, with workers and police (and sometimes workers and store managers as well) fighting on the streets outside of the stores. For two months, workers kept the stores shut down, until they reached a somewhat weak compromise, accepting a seniority clause but giving up on the shorter workday and union shop clauses. Despite this weak compromise, the strike meant that the Department Store Employees Union (DSEU) was in San Francisco to stay, and the city's retail trade would remain unionised for years to come (Reagan 2016; Kirstein 1950).

Following the massive retail workers' uprisings of 1937 and 1938, the retail workers unions saw gains across the country. In Denver, Newark, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Boston, and Providence, retail workers voted to unionise. But the bulk of the retail unions' strength was always in San Francisco and New York City. In these cities, most of the major stores were unionised – in New York, managers at Macy's, Gimbels, Hearns, Bloomingdale's and Sterns all signed contracts with the CIO, perhaps in hopes of avoiding the unpleasant strikes that had shaken so many other stores in these years. In San Francisco the Emporium, Hale Brothers and J.C. Penney stores (among many others) all signed contracts with the AFL's RCIPA. The unions' accomplishments were important ones – some of the largest stores in the country's largest cities were now union stores, and they would remain so for many years to come. At the same time, it's important to note the limits of this organising drive; retail workers' unions never achieved anything close to the size or power of the unions in the auto or steel industry, and there were a number of stores – especially more downscale stores and grocery stores – that remained largely untouched by unionisation drives even in this era (Kirstein 1950).

Retail employers also faced a challenge to their segregated hiring practices in the 1930s. While at the largest New York City stores, down on 34th Street, racial segregation remained virtually unchallenged (despite the radical politics of many of the leaders, the retail workers unions did almost nothing on this issue, preferring to focus on more standard labour issues like wages and hours), during the Great Depression African Americans did begin organising to push retailers to offer more jobs to African American workers in the famous "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" Campaigns. Beginning with struggles against Chicago Woolworth stores in the late 1920s and expanding into New York City in the 1930s, this campaign pitted African American consumers against retailers who owned stores in their neighbourhoods. With the support of important activists like Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., the campaign was eventually successful enough that every major store in Harlem employed at least one African American worker by the end of the 1930s (Greenberg 1997).

As with other workers, then, the Depression era marked some important gains for retail workers. However, retail workers still faced some important obstacles, especially with regard to the major labour legislation of the 1930s. Until 1941, courts were reluctant to apply the Wagner Act, which protected workers' right to choose their own unions, to retailing. Even more important, the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which established the 40-hour week, the minimum wage, an end to child labour, and other important reforms, explicitly exempted retail workers, so long as their work was primarily related to intrastate commerce (*New York Times* 1938, 1, 1941, 28).

As a result, most retail workers lacked the eight-hour day, and the length of the workday, a concern throughout their history, continued to be a sticking point. This issue of the length of the workday became a key issue for an unexpected 1941 strike against New York's Gimbels store, led by the radicals who had left the Office Workers Union and now joined with the CIO. Gimbels, like Macy's and other upscale department stores, catered to a largely upper-class and wealthy clientele.

That did not stop the workers, however, from engaging in some fairly militant tactics in the strike, releasing pigeons into the store and taking their picket lines right into the store in order to cause disruption and force customers out. These sorts of tactics proved effective, and the workers won the eight-hour day, but also earned the local union the tremendous ire of store managers. Gimbels' managers, who had signed a union contract precisely because they hoped the more moderate national CIO leaders could help them avoid this sort of disruption, were furious, and happily testified in state hearings later that year against the radicals leading their local unions.



Figure 15.1 Sales clerk and customer examining a dress at Saks Fifth Avenue store following a fashion show presented by the Chrysler Girls' Club of the Chrysler Corporation in 1942.

Source: Siegel, A. S., photographer. (1942) Detroit, Michigan. Girl and sales lady examining a dress at Saks Fifth Avenue store following a fashion show presented by the Chrysler Girls' Club of the Chrysler Corporation. Detroit Michigan United States Wayne County, 1942.

Source: Spring. [Photograph] Library of Congress

In Europe, as always, things were different, depending especially on what country one was in. In countries occupied by the Axis powers, unions were made illegal and driven out of existence in the 1930s and early 1940s. In the United Kingdom, however, retail unions, now under the umbrella of the National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers (NUDAW), had grown quite large, with around 200,000 members, and increasingly powerful. Their role as non-essential workers during the war would mean that they were frequently drafted, and some estimates suggest that as many as 100,000 of these members served in the armed forces during the war (Richardson 1979, 144–145).

In the US, World War II and the early Cold War years severely weakened unionisation in the retail industry. Many of the most militant organisers left the stores; men left for the front or sometimes for other war industry jobs, and women, who before the war had no more promising job opportunities, now found work in war production plants a lucrative alternative to the stores. At the same time, the political divisions between moderate Democrats, who ran the national RWDSU, and the more radical voices who were often in charge of the more successful locals, especially in New York, began to surface more clearly in the war and postwar years.

The earliest signs of major internal conflict within the RWDSU took place amidst a major labour conflict, at the Montgomery Ward store in Chicago. Montgomery Ward chairman Sewell Avery, a fierce opponent of the New Deal and especially of the government's involvement in his business, rejected the federal government's insistence that he allow workers at Montgomery Ward stores in Chicago to unionise peacefully during the war. After some unproductive efforts at negotiation with Avery, the federal government took over Montgomery Ward stores and allowed workers to form unions, only ceasing their involvement in the store management after the war was over. The strike sharply divided the union. Local leaders who were affiliated with the Communist Party condemned the strike, committed as they were to defeating Hitler at all costs, while national leaders who were moderate Democrats tended to celebrate their victory against the store managers (Phillips 2013, 84–87).

The divisions got significantly worse after the war. At first, there were serious efforts by the radical and local leaders to collaborate, but with the passage of the 1947 Taft–Hartley Act that required non-Communist union leaders to sign affidavits stating explicitly their lack of membership in the Communist Party, the divisions greatly worsened. In 1948, as early Cold War paranoia took hold of the country, national CIO leaders vocally condemned Communist influences in the New York local unions and participated, although reluctantly, in a House Un-American Activities Committee investigation into the role of Communists in the retail and wholesale trade in New York City.

Adding to the CIO's political troubles were two major structural changes in the American retail industry. During the war, due to labour shortages, retail managers increasingly experimented with self-service retailing, which allowed customers direct access to merchandise and eliminated the need for some salespeople, in some cases allowing stores to run with half the salespeople as the full-service stores (Ziskind 2003, 58). This would expand in the postwar years, spreading to Europe as well by the late 1950s (USDAW 2016). In addition, as suburbanisation became more and more prominent in the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s, store managers increasingly focused on the suburban market, opening up new branch stores that were separate from the cities that had so often been the union's strength.

In New York, the centre of the RWDSU's strength but also the centre of the union's political struggles, the combination of political disarray and the transformation of the retail industry was disastrous. Retail union organisers attempted again and again to organise in the suburban branch stores, but these efforts were problematic. For one thing, the stores were often located in malls rather than on public streets, which made picketing more difficult. For another, there were fewer workers available to picket. In the city, as historian Minna Ziskind has demonstrated, workers could picket neighbouring stores during their lunch breaks; they could not do so in the suburbs, where the unions lacked support. They set up a few picket lines here and there where store managers proved fiercely intractable, but these picket lines were poorly staffed and had no real effect on the stores' function. By the late 1950s, Ziskind writes, 'admissions of responsibility [for the union's failures in the suburbs] were almost routine parts of meetings'. The union's presence in the suburban branch stores would always be limited, and one of their major bases of strength – the big department stores – was rapidly fading in importance, as the stores became increasingly reliant upon the branch stores for sales and profits (Ziskind 2003, 65).

However, despite these important setbacks, there were clear signs of progress, especially for the RCIPA in this era. In 1944, a new leader, James Suffridge, took over the RCIPA, and became an important force in the industry. Suffridge, a veteran of struggles in the Oakland grocery workers' unions, quickly worked to centralise power in the union, and modernise operations.

Politically moderate (he was a registered Republican, but routinely supported Democratic candidates for office), Suffridge had some important qualities that his predecessors in the RCIPA had lacked. He was a fierce proponent of integration, and had long since refused to allow segregated locals in the union, and insisted upon organising white and non-white workers alike into the union. He was also extremely savvy about the importance of chain stores to the retail industry, and by the late 1940s he set about hiring large numbers of organisers to work directly for his international union, circumventing the locals in an effort to organise the national chain stores that were increasingly dominating the retail industry. Finally, Suffridge was, by all accounts, a militant leader, more than willing to have workers go on strike if it meant a chance for a better contract. (Harrington 1962, 13–42; Zielinski 2001).

Suffridge's rise coincided with other events that demonstrated that the AFL would leave the war in a more militant fashion. In Oakland, California, workers at the Kahn's and Hasting's stores struck under RCIPA leadership in 1946, part of a massive postwar strike wave. Truck drivers from the AFL's Teamsters refused to cross the picket line to deliver goods to the store, but store managers employed non-union trucking companies to try to break the strike. It was a serious error: some 100,000 workers in Oakland declared themselves on strike, closing all stores except for pharmacies and grocery stores, taking over traffic, banning all non-union members from downtown Oakland, and carefully monitoring those stores that remained open for any signs of price gouging (Kirstein 1950; Lipsitz 1994, 148–152).

The unions also attempted to expand internationally, especially in Canada. Beginning in 1948, the RWDSU participated in a major drive to organise at Eaton's in Toronto, the largest department store in Canada (and Canada's third largest employer). The campaign was problematic from the get-go; the RWDSU was still reeling from the struggle over communism in the US, and the Canadian store managers used that to their great advantage to paint the union as a whole as a Communist-inspired movement. To make matters worse, as Donica Belisle has demonstrated, the union's emphasis on masculine rhetoric and male figures did not match the largely female workforce at Eaton's. The result was that the campaign at Eaton's, the largest union drive in Canadian history, was a dismal failure (Belisle 2005).

More importantly, though by far the least studied aspect of retail workers' history, the RCIPA and RWDSU both found some important successes in the grocery industry in this era. In the early 1940s, the RCIPA extended into grocery stores throughout the Philadelphia area, including victories against such chains as A&P and Food Fair, and in other scattered cities throughout the country. By the early 1950s, grocery stores in most major cities – Los Angeles, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit and St Louis, were largely unionised (*New York Times* 1940, 26; Zundel 1954, 306).

This did not mean that retail workers were getting significantly higher wages or that their conditions were improving dramatically. If anything, the 1950s and 1960s saw retail workers' wages stagnating, with workers making an average of \$1.68 an hour in the early 1960s, well below the \$2.25 in manufacturing and other trades (Schaffer 1963). Additionally, a sizable minority – around 1/3 – of retail workers continued to work more than 44 hours a week. While a far cry from the 112-hour work week workers had faced in the nineteenth century, the long workdays that had been the impetus for unionisation in the nineteenth century had continued well beyond the rise of unions in retailing. These long work hours came at least sometimes with unions' support; in union stores, workers received additional bonuses for working longer hours, and got time-and-a-half for working on Sundays. In addition, some union organisers took the view that by allowing retail chain stores to stay open later (especially with the increased wages), they would undercut smaller non-chain stores that were generally non-union, thus allowing union membership numbers to grow (Walsh 1993, 50). And, whether they opposed

these conditions or not, developments of the late twentieth century would mean that retail workers' unions were facing a long and steady decline in the coming years.

Towards the twenty-first century: Walmart and globalisation

The late twentieth and early twenty-first century have not been promising for retail workers. Working hours, wages and discrimination continue to be key parts of working in the retail industry, while unions have faded in importance, leaving workers with limited ability to change their working conditions.

By far the most important development in retailing in the late twentieth century was the rise of Walmart and other big-box stores. Corporations like Target and Walmart expanded rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s to become the most important players in the retail industry. Their model of the big-box store – low prices, low overhead and low wages combined with a very high sales volume – became the new hallmark of the retail industry, which had massive implications for retail workers.

Store managers at these big-box stores have taken tremendous measures to prevent workers from organising unions in their stores. In the late 1970s and 1980s, for instance, when the Teamsters made tremendous strides in a unionisation campaign among Walmart distribution centres, company managers threatened to close the warehouses if the workers voted to support the union in a National Labor Relations Board election. In 2000, when meat cutters at Walmart stores began organising under the auspices of the United Food and Commercial Workers, Walmart announced that they would no longer employ meat cutters at all in their stores, requiring customers instead to buy pre-cut meat (Lichtenstein 2009, 128, 137).

If Walmart is most notorious for its anti-union practices, it is by no means alone. Target stores made a small splash in 2014 when their anti-union video, “Think Hard: Protect Your Signature” was leaked to the public. The video warned employees that if unions came in they would destroy Target’s “fast, fun and friendly culture”. More seriously, when workers at Target stores did organise, as did workers at a store in Valley Stream, New York, Target management crusaded relentlessly against the union, warning that the store might well close if it was unionised; then, after the workers voted against unionisation, and the National Labor Relations Board ordered a second election, store managers actually did close the store for six months, leading up to a massive defeat for the union in the election that followed (Becker 2014).

These anti-union practices have forced union organisers to turn to other techniques to fight on behalf of workers. Most important here are the recent campaigns for the \$15 minimum wage, the Fight for Fifteen movement. With support from the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the Fight for Fifteen movement has successfully skirted the challenges of gaining union recognition in extremely difficult conditions by working on behalf of workers who are, by and large, not unionised. By focusing on the minimum wage, the SEIU’s movement has become remarkably successful, especially among fast food workers, but also increasingly among convenience store workers (DePillis 2016).

Workers also continue to struggle around the length of the workday. Nelson Lichtenstein reports that Walmart managers routinely require workers to put in more than 40 hours a week, and to alter workers’ time cards so that no over time needed to be paid. Workers respond to this old problem with time-honored solution: looking for new jobs and stealing from the stores whenever possible. Here, too, in recent years, workers have turned to more formal methods of protest. Especially important here are the strikes and protests around stores that remain open on Thanksgiving weekends. Beginning in 2011, the union-sponsored campaign, OUR Walmart, organised Black Friday strikes on the very busy shopping day directly after Thanksgiving. As

Jess Guh pointed out in *Counterpunch*, this was a new strategy for the labour movement. The strikes did not include enough workers to slowdown or even greatly complicate store operations; they also had no appreciable effect on customers' desire to shop on Black Friday. What they did instead was raise public awareness of Walmart's labour issues. Accompanying stories on store-sponsored food drives for Walmart employees drove home the point that the unions were trying to make, that Walmart's labour policies were simply unacceptable (Guh 2014).

Big-box stores' presence has also meant that other retail establishments have changed their employment practices. In 2003, supermarket managers at three different chains in southern California announced they were cutting wages and benefits in order to compete more effectively with Walmart. Workers, longstanding members of the UFCW, declared a strike against the stores in response, significantly slowing down business at 900 stores in the state. From October 2003–February 2004, the stores and unions fought bitterly, only to negotiate their way to a compromise that meant a two-tiered hiring system.

Dire as the situation looks for retail workers, the two most serious challenges facing workers in other industries, globalisation and mechanisation, have had far more complicated effects on American retail workers. In the retail industry, globalisation has taken two primary forms. First, large retail businesses based in the US and Europe have systematically displaced smaller firms in the rest of the world. While globalisation began in Europe, American firms began the process in earnest in the 1990s, and quickly became important players. Walmart, for instance, has opened stores (sometimes under different names) in dozens of countries, including Argentina, Brazil, China, India, Japan, Mexico and South Africa. But unlike in other industries, because of the very nature of retailing, globalisation does not mean that the US stores are likely to close as a result of the now-global reach of the store managers. The second aspect of globalisation in retailing is the import of products made all over the world. Again, while this has dramatic and serious effects on American manufacturing industry, its effect on retail workers is negligible.

For all its importance, then, globalisation has simply not been a major factor in the working lives of American retail workers. It has obviously impacted workers in other countries, though the effects have been extremely complex. In a 2006 study on retailing in Mexico, for instance, Charles Tilly and José Luis Álvarez Galván found that the retail sector as a whole in Mexico was not a promising one for workers, with low pay and company unions that are so powerless that at several stores, workers were uncertain if they were even in a union. However, they also found that Walmart's role in Mexico is not, as it has been in the United States, as a leader in the fight to keep unions out of retailing and drive down wages, but rather as a participant in a much more common, mainstream business practice of company unionism and low wages (Tilly and Galván 2006).

Things are even more complex when one gets beyond Mexico. In a more global study of Walmart's employment practices, Tilly found that in most of the world, Walmart's wages are at or near (and in several cases, even above) industry standards (Tilly 2007). A 2006 study by Yuko Aoyama and Guido Schwarz suggests that part of this is because retailing doesn't work like other industries – so much of it is controlled by customer expectations that foreign-owned retailers have to act, to some extent, like local retailers (Aoyama and Schwarz 2006, 290–291), making globalisation in retailing a more complicated phenomenon than in manufacturing.

Like globalisation, mechanisation has had mixed effects on retailing. There have been efforts at using mechanisation to reduce labour costs, to be sure. When computerised price tags and Universal Product Codes (UPC's) were introduced in the 1970s and 1980s, many feared it would mean a severe reduction in the number of workers employed in retail stores, a change that never took place. Similarly, in the late 1990s and especially early 2000s, many major stores introduced self-checkout options for consumers. However, the machines were so unreliable and

unwieldy that by the early 2010s, several store chains, most notably the Albertsons grocery stores, gave up on the machines altogether. Self-checkout remains key to Walmart and other cut-rate stores, but many retailers' focus on customer service means self-checkout is incompatible with their business model.

Other forms of mechanisation, though still in their infancy, are likely to have more serious effects on retail workers. The rise of Internet sales, for instance, has meant major store closings, with major retailers from Office Depot and Sports Authority to Macy's either closing down stores, cutting back on over time or going out of business entirely (Close 2016).

While the rise of Walmart and the Internet of course represent new factors in the lives of retail workers, most of the struggles that American retail workers face are issues they have faced since the nineteenth century. Wages, for instance, continue to be a major problem for retail workers. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, retail workers made an average of \$17.87/hour in September 2016, significantly below the \$25.79 that was the national average. The \$17.87/hour makes retail workers the lowest paid workers in any employment sector except for leisure and hospitality, which included fast food and restaurant workers (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016).

Like low pay, issues of racial inequality also continue to plague the industry. According to a 2015 study conducted by Demos and the NAACP, African American and Latino retail workers were disproportionately underrepresented in management positions, and overrepresented in the lowest-paying retail jobs, such as cashier positions. In addition, according to the same study, African American and Latino employees made between 75–90% of what white employees made in corresponding positions (Ruetschlin and Asante-Muhammad 2015).

Gender inequality likewise continues to play an important role in the retail industry. This was especially central in the famous *Sears* case, where the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) argued that statistically, women were severely underrepresented in the relatively lucrative commission sales jobs. After years of hearings (the charges were first filed in 1973, but the case was not heard by the court until 1984, and the decision not issued until 1986), the Court found that the EEOC's statistical analysis did not, in itself, prove discrimination. Whether or not Sears discriminated against women in these jobs, however, the statistics did demonstrate conclusively that women in retailing did face severe inequality. This has not changed in the intervening decades; a 2015 study by the Institute for Women's Policy Research found that retail saleswomen made 71.2% as much as their male colleagues, as opposed to the 81.1% of their colleagues' salaries made by women in other fields (Institute for Women's Policy Research 2016).

Retail workers also face new problems, most important among them the rise of part-time employment. A 2013 study cosponsored by the Retail Action Project and the Murphy Center for Labor Studies found that between 2003 and 2013, the number of involuntary part-time workers (part-time retail workers looking for full-time work) had more than tripled in number; by March 2014, 7.4 million American workers were involuntary part-time workers, many of them in the retail industry. To make matters worse, managers in many stores have introduced just-in-time scheduling, which requires workers to be available for work on less than 24 hours' notice and often gives workers very little notice about whether they will have any work at all the next day, making scheduling anything outside of work tremendously difficult (Luce, Ham-mad, and Sipe 2016).

Retail work has, unquestionably, changed over the century and a half during which workers have attempted to organise to make their lives better. The rise and fall of unions, however, seems to have not been the driving factor in these changes. Economic and population shifts, changing marketing strategies and a changing business environment have all played a role in making the situation of retail workers today markedly different than that of the nineteenth century

clerks who began organising. Unfortunately, those changes have not, on the whole, substantially improved retail workers' always difficult circumstances.

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