

COBBLE, DOROTHY SUE. *Dishing It Out. Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana [etc.] 1991. xiv, 327 pp. Ill. \$ 34.95.

Sue Cobble's timely analysis of the growth and decline of the unions that represented American waiting workers moves labor historians past the industrial paradigm and into the contemporary world of service work and the post-industrial economy. This is "worksites unionism" (p. 9), that shifts the study of labor relations to the location where goods and services are consumed. Well written and studded with sprightly anecdotes, it is splendid labor history for the 1990s.

Her study concentrates on the historic relationship between waitress locals and the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union (HERE) that flourished in the United States in the early twentieth century and virtually died in the 1980s. Sensitive throughout her analysis to the cultural and political contexts of gender, race, ethnicity and generation, Cobble's story is nonetheless grounded in the interests of what American labor historians have called the "old labor history", that is studies of unions as institutions and policy formulators. But the practitioners of the old labor history will be surprised to find in *Dishing It Out*, a vital and durable tradition of craft unionism dominated by feisty and dedicated women waitresses.

The organization of the book highlights this institutional approach, commencing with two lengthy but somewhat repetitious analyses of institution building and policy development. A third section considers waitresses as craft workers before the final and formal consideration of gender as political controversy within the union and at the workplace.

Although a national study, Cobble concentrates on American cities where union activity among male workers encouraged and supported the organization of waiters and waitresses and where union records and participants survived. Butte, Montana, with its miners' locals, San Francisco with its union longshoremen, Detroit and its autoworkers, Chicago and New York City with their multi-cultural traditions of agitation and activity become the centers of analysis.

Service work in hotels and restaurants became feminized in the early twentieth century, encouraged by the commercialization of food service, the labor shortages in World War I, and changing public attitudes in the 1920s toward women's roles in public places. Initially white women displaced black and white male waiters as cheaper and more docile workers, enduring the routine of a seven day week. They were used as strikebearers until HERE began to recognize the need to organize them and demand equal pay. But the organizational form of women's locals reflected their personal situations as females relatively independent of the traditional family wage ideal either as working wives, self-supporters, or as divorced female heads of families. In these early years, waitresses established union locals controlled and led by women, separate from waiters' locals. In this case, the sexual division of labor clearly had its organizational merits for women workers. Cobble described them as full-time workers, highly mobile perhaps, but women with life-long careers in waitressing. They developed a distinct work culture and enjoyed the camaraderie on the job, including manipulating the customers, while putting up with grueling hours and public condescension. One is reminded of the roles of Susan Sarandon in

the recent American films: *Atlantic City*, *White Castle*, and the controversial *Thelma and Louise*.

Cobble's admiration for these early waitress locals as sex segregated and craft conscious marks her study as revisionist, given the decline of female autonomy and control that lay ahead in the supposedly more progressive years of industrial unions in the 1930s and 1940s. But her enthusiasm for these hardy union women is dominated by a twentieth-century frame of reference. She demonstrates that waitress organizations outlasted and represented more workers than any other efforts among clerical workers, telephone operators, or other female occupations. However, a glance back at the late nineteenth-century America would disclose similar, enduring organizations among self-supporting and providing women shoe stitchers and collar ironers. The tradition that Cobble celebrates of women craft workers as autonomous unionists is more enduring and significant than she claims.

Cobble is very sympathetic with the vision of feminism represented in the early waitress locals, that is, an emphasis on sex separation and difference as approaches for women to obtain justice and opportunity rather than equality and sameness with men, a debate that has been raging within feminism in the 1980s. Relationships between activist waitresses and middle-class feminists remained mostly supportive (especially with those in the Women's Trade Union League of the American Federation of Labor) but divisive on issues like the Equal Rights Amendment. Generational differences between older waitresses with years of experience and union loyalty and the inexperienced and politically naive were augmented by what Cobble unblinkingly reveals as the racist and exclusionist policies of female craft unionism. These union waitresses were a craft sisterhood of white women, generally of American birth and Western European background. They shunned, as did their male counterparts in printing and cigarmaking, Asians and African-Americans. Nor were they concerned with more general issues of women's rights or the problems of working-class women. This was craft unionism for waitresses and no others, while their concerns about moral respectability intensified racist and exclusionary reactions.

The upheavals of the Great Depression and World War II challenged the basis of craft unionism and sex segregation. The repeal of Prohibition opened up new work opportunities for men and women such as bartending and introduced tactics such as the sit-down strike eagerly embraced by militant waitresses and supported by CIO union men. The book's delightful cover photograph of sit-down strikers at a Detroit Woolworth's lunch counter in 1937 conveys the defiant spirit of craft sisters. Institutionalized collective bargaining delivered the five day, 40 hour work week as the union standard and work rules that meant any waitress who dared to polish silver or sweep a floor would be in trouble with the union. The hiring hall involved the union in overseeing job performance and by controlling the labor supply offered essential services to business. "Occupational unionism" (p. 137) provided job security and flexibility to waitresses and insisted on work sharing rather than seniority rights. Peer discipline in waitress locals to enforce craft rules seemed more important than wages and fringe benefits. Beginning in the 1930s, however, the gradual abandonment of female controlled locals for participation in mixed locals with waiters diminished the power of waitresses to influence union policy.

The most significant controversy over gender (in addition to equal pay and night

work) involved male opposition to female bartending after the end of Prohibition. One bartender insisted that on the job you had to know when to talk to the customers and when not to talk and “show me the woman who knows that” (p. 167). On this issue waitress locals exhibited their ambivalence over the propriety of women in such traditional male craft work and cultural space. Black female bartenders in Chicago in their own locals fought alone to try save their jobs while they faced the grim alternatives of prostitution or poverty. White women in the union did not help, but their inaction and loyalty to waitressing as a craft proved costly. By the 1940s, male waiters successfully excluded women from lucrative jobs as banquets, exclusive restaurants, and in night clubs especially in San Francisco and New York City. The loyalty of organized waitresses to their craft and their ambivalent views about gender equality led in the 1960s and 1970s to a collision with a younger, more feminist generation of waitresses.

In a disappointingly short section on work culture and family life, Cobble provides a statistical profile of forty women leaders who may or may not represent the rank and file in the union. Still, the reader wants to know more about such leaders as Myra Wolfgang of Detroit and Lucy Kendall, to whom the book is dedicated. The skills of adversarial confrontation and maneuvering achieved by these activist women on the job and the union did not help them deal with challenges to the food service industry or anti-union policies of the 1970s and 1980s. Most importantly, they did not understand the younger women who became temporary waitresses while waiting for other lines of work to open to them. These young women, convinced that opportunities awaited them in traditionally male work, were indifferent and even hostile to waitressing as a craft or a life-long occupation. Young male and female workers in the fast food business wanted only minimal training, accepted minimum wages, and cared little for health care benefits. The sensitivity of younger, feminist women toward sex discrimination and sexual harassment were at odds with the more reserved attitudes of older union waitresses like Myra Wolfgang who clung to protective legislation and sex segregation as a solution to worker grievances. The progressive culinary unions that emerged in the 1980s in Massachusetts and California created a different model: heterogeneous in race, sex, and ethnicity and with interests in health care, housing, and community safety. They emphasized equality and inclusiveness rather than difference and craft tradition as the vehicle for women unionists.

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SHIRAISHI, TAKASHI. *An Age in Motion. Popular Radicalism in Java, 1912–1926.* [Asia East by South.] Cornell University Press, Ithaca [etc.] 1990. xxiv, 365 pp. \$ 34.95.

This is a fascinating book. Having researched the archives extensively, Shiraishi manages to translate crucial empirical data relating to the struggle for emancipation into historical drama. The early emergence and unfolding of national consciousness and anti-colonial protest and action is brought to life through a number of life stories and by relating the experiences of several pioneering individuals. The central