

# Work and the Production of Silence

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I'll tell you this, If I ever work anywhere else, I'll never get involved with a union. I have learned that a union is good. But let somebody else do the dirty work. ... I've learned companies are very oriented against unions and to them, once you get involved in that or whatever, you're like their worst enemy and they have a fear of you.

Maria, female worker fired during union drive at HealthTech

The isolation was the worst part. I didn't have a disease. They [other women workers] wanted to talk to me, but they were afraid. They said, 'But we don't want to get involved.' But I said, 'You're not getting involved in anything by talking to me.'

Lorraine, female union activist at HealthTech

Lorraine and Maria, Hispana women workers employed at the newly built HealthTech plant in Albuquerque, echoed each other's disillusion and sense of defeat in 1983, several months after they had participated in a union drive that resulted in a vote of 141 against the union and only 71 for it. The history of the union campaign, which we glimpsed at several different points, illustrates the process that encapsulates the exercise of power, the creation of resistance, and the production of silence in the workplace. The interviews conducted by Guillermo Grenier, a sociologist pursuing research for his dissertation in sociology during the union campaign, and those conducted by myself, Patricia Zavella, and Jennifer Martinez as part of a National Science Foundation project studying working mothers in the sunbelt give us a sense of the relationship between the exercise of power, the making of histories, and the creation of silences, gaps, and forgettings.

What I will emphasize in telling the story of the HealthTech union drive is the creation of gaps and fissures that constitute silences – portions of histories that get suppressed in the later reconstruction of History. At one level this is a series of local recountings or histories of one union drive in a southwestern American city. But I will present a more unified story which itself is a construction: a piecing together of partial recountings and observations, not by workers or management, but by myself using interviews and field notes produced by my co-researchers and Guillermo Grenier.<sup>1</sup>

In constructing this history, I have taken the view that there are two competing histories: one put forward by management and the other by workers who favoured the union. This not simply a matter of two dichotomous groups and stories that did not mesh, but of a dialectical process where some workers come to share the management's story and others sharpen a counter-history in an attempt to draw additional workers to their side. The voices of unionists such as Bonnie, Annette, Andres, Lorraine, and Maria tell an activists' history, while that of Lucille articulates a history sympathetic to the management vision. Still others felt that they could not actively embrace either version, but preferred to assent to the side that was least likely to jeopardize their jobs.

The outcome in this struggle was that one of these histories was effectively silenced, partly through the removal of union activists from the labour force in the months that followed the union defeat. But the defeat also left no institutional basis for a continued reiteration of the activists' side of the story (i.e., an active union organization legitimately inside the plant). This silencing did not just 'happen'; rather, the exercise of power in the workplace forcefully drove the activists' histories underground or out of the plant. Ultimately, we can see the suppression of these counter-histories in the way in which struggles against participant-management schemes have been silenced and a paradigm for 'flexible, non-hierarchical' management-worker relations has become nearly hegemonic and enshrined in Labor Secretary Robert Reich's policies within the Clinton administration during the 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

### The Ambiguous Relationship between Consent and Resistance

To understand the dynamic interplay between these two histories, we need to interrogate the dynamics of resistance and consent on the shop floor. This focus on the labour process is crucial, I would argue, because it is through the experience of the day-to-day tasks of work which are structured by management that workers come either to agree with management's history or to forge a counter-history or histories.

The capitalist industrial workplace, where corporations own the means of production and where workers sell their labour for a wage, is a site where power is exercised in the everyday operation of the labour process. Power and control are diffused through the organization of production (for example, in the use of assembly lines or batch processing), the placement of workers in relation to machines, the use of a particular kind of wage system (piece rates, quota-bonus systems, learning curves), the implementation of work discipline, and the hiring and firing of workers. A worker's active engagement with this system is always inherently ambiguous, containing elements of both consent and resistance (Kondo 1990:218–25). Management control systems (whether they are based on simple, technological, and/or bureaucratic control; see Edwards 1979) push towards individualizing the worker, isolating her from co-workers, and driving her towards higher and higher levels of productivity (engendering coping and consent with the system).

Yet such an exercise of power also creates resistance. (Foucault 1980:142; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983:147). Workers attempt to exercise autonomy and control over their work, undercutting the rules, cutting corners, and coping with the system of control. Some of this opposition can be manifest in a highly individualized way, as described by James Scott in *Weapons of the Weak* (1985). In other cases, resistance becomes collective. Workers develop a shared set of tactics, a vision of the management that sets them in opposition to the firm, or a set of work rules that cuts through management's ability to extract higher levels of production. The creation of a counter-history that summarizes this opposition often revolves around those recountings of moments when resistance becomes collective rather than individual. It also involves the cultural reinterpretation of management ideology – the appropriation of key terms and their redefinition.

When resistance becomes full-blown and collective, management then takes steps to break that resistance, reasserting its history and at the same time attempting to persuade other workers of its vision of the labour process. Yet this is not simply a matter of two competing stories or histories, since relations among workers change as some become aligned with management, others join the activists, and still others sit on the sidelines.

A union drive results in either success or failure; while a successful drive may keep alive the two counterpoised stories, a defeat usually means the submersion of the counter-vision. It remains, I will argue in the conclusions of this paper, in the possibility of everyday acts of resistance (tied to a concrete labour process, system of pay, and set of management policies) that a collective counter-history can emerge. Women workers' accounts of their everyday cop-

ing and resistance, as well as their comments on management's exercise of power, their own experience of that power, and their participation in counter-tactics, give us a sense of how the exercise of power can create silences or fragmented stories of resistance and also a sense of defeat. In the conservative climate of the 1980s, when few union struggles were successful and when corporate hegemony was supported by the state, it is important to examine the forces that disperse histories, as well as those that help to resurrect memories and break silences.<sup>3</sup>

### The Construction of Two Histories

The union drive at HealthTech took place in 1982 and 1983 in a new branch plant located in Albuquerque. Within the last twenty years the city has begun to attract branch plants of large corporations, primarily in apparel manufacture and electronics. A number of these plants have introduced aspects of participative management, making Albuquerque somewhat of a 'laboratory' for the management of the future. Thus when HealthTech opened its doors in 1981, it was one of the most innovative plants in the city, operating on what management termed a 'high-involvement' philosophy and also hiring a workforce that was 90 per cent female and 65 per cent Hispanic.

The 'high-involvement' philosophy at HealthTech, which became the dominant theme of management's recounting of the plant's unique history, had several ingredients. We learned from interviews with the plant manager and plant psychologist that benefits for production and clerical employees were equal, there were no time clocks, and workers could be late and make up time at the end of the day.

The plant manager and plant psychologist emphasized the innovative structure of the plant, including its open-door policy and team organization. Each department was divided into 'production teams' of twelve to fourteen workers. The plant operated on two shifts, and each team decided on a rotation schedule, which normally meant that individuals worked two weeks on days and two weeks on nights. Team-mates often took breaks or lunch together. The 'team concept' also meant a massive restructuring of the cultural categories through which management-worker relations were interpreted. Each team had a 'facilitator,' not a supervisor. The facilitator was thus not a 'boss' but someone who helped improve the interpersonal relationships on the team and aided individuals with their productivity. The team itself was supposed to have an important role in decision making. Two team members interviewed prospective employees (after they had been interviewed by management), and if the team members

brought back a negative evaluation, the person was not hired. These ideal-typical accounts emphasized the positive aspects of this new organization, and it was only after the union campaign and after we had access to Grenier's data that we came to the view that management, through the team structure, had co-opted the 'informal work group' long ago discovered by the human-relations school of management psychology (Mayo 1933; Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939).

Workers' recountings of their relationship to management and the union drive emerged slowly. Jennifer Martinez and I began interviewing in October 1982, and by mid-January 1983 (when I returned to Rhode Island) we had completed eight interviews. At the time of some of our first interviews in October, the union drive had begun to 'heat up,' and Jenny, a shy and very quiet nineteen-year-old mother whose husband was chronically unemployed, dropped the comment that 'the union's trying to get in too ... and it's terrible.' I did not pursue her remark, remembering my promise to the plant psychologist (who was providing me with the names of working mothers) that I would not ask questions or mention the union drive to any of the interviewees.

During my next interview on 26 October, Annette, a young single parent, told me of her role as a member of the organizing committee. I turned the tape recorded off for most of this conversation, not wanting to jeopardize my interviewee, should the tapes ever become part of a legal proceeding. We discussed the leaflet that the organizing committee had distributed that week, as well as the fact that her facilitator had stopped having team meetings because of the pro-union sentiment among team members. A week later I was also visited by the union organizers, who had heard that I was conducting research and who wanted my help in obtaining names and addresses of women workers. I learned that the firm had attempted to remove one of the pro-union workers from the compensation committee. In November Dolores discussed the way in which union sentiments were being expressed in team meetings. After the interview she told Jennifer that she was 'not keen on union activity in general.' However, she was inclined to vote for the union, if it could do away with the rotating shift schedule, which, as a mother, she found particularly difficult. In January 1983 Jennifer also interviewed Lorraine, and she told Jennifer of her role in a committee to fight against the union.

During the spring, while I was in Rhode Island, I received a newspaper clipping concerning a community meeting at which a sociologist read a statement claiming that the firm had deliberately fired members of the organizing team and engaged in additional union-busting tactics. Then I learned that the union had lost the vote in May. When I returned to Albuquerque the following

month, I met the sociologist, Guillermo Grenier, who after his statement had been barred from the plant, but had continued work on his dissertation, concentrating on the union drive.

During the last two months of the campaign and into the summer months of 1983, Guillermo Grenier interviewed a number of the union activists. His taped discussions were wide-ranging (in contrast to our use of specific questions about the labour process asked of each interviewee). He was interested in discovering how activists were drawn to the union and what the current management tactics (particularly after the union loss) were. In contrast, our interviews provided a window on each woman's successes and struggles with the labour process and tapped a wider range of female employees (including four who had not voted for the union and a very active anti-union organizer). In sum, we knew more about women's work and family relationships, while Guillermo's interviews gave us much more insight into the exercise of power by the management and its impact on pro-union women.

Over the next few months, I worked with Guillermo to put together an article on the union drive. It soon became apparent that union support was concentrated in two of the channel-swaging and several of the drill-swaging teams, while teams that had been formed by newly recruited workers during the winter and spring of 1983 had remained solidly anti-union. The role of the channel and drill workers in starting the union drive led us to examine the labour process in these departments and the ways in which everyday work experiences are intimately connected with the evolution of individual tactics of resistance, the emergence of a group consciousness, and the development of a counter-history.

#### **Shop-Floor Resistance and the Emergence of a Counter-History**

Workers at HealthTech made surgical sutures. Trainees attached surgical thread on curved steel needles (a process called 'swaging') through the use of 'learning curves.' Each week the trainee was given a production goal of completing so many dozen swaged needles each day; the number increased until the employee reached '100 per cent efficiency.' Employees were not paid by the piece (as is often the case when learning curves are used) but by the hour. Nevertheless, workers were 'pushing against a clock' and trying to 'make their numbers,' increasing their production on a daily basis, since their six-month evaluation and subsequent raises depended on maintaining productivity.

Drill and channel swaging were two different methods of attaching a surgical needle to a gut or silk cord. Since the channel technique involved a step in

which the needle was curved (drill needles had been curved in a previous process), it took eighteen months to master, while the drill technique took twelve. Learning curves were used to train women in both swaging and 'winding,' that is, the winding of the surgical thread in a figure-eight pattern preparatory to its being placed in a foil envelope. Both drill and channel workers had to 'demonstrate' or maintain the 100 per cent efficiency level for a period of thirteen weeks at the end of their training period before they received a bonus raise. Then workers were supposed to enter a year's 'payback period' during which they worked at 100 per cent efficiency at either drill or channel swaging before they were allowed to learn another job. In practice, only a few workers in the drill department had completed their demonstration period when Jennifer and I were conducting interviews, and virtually no workers had attempted demonstration in the channel department.

Those in the other two departments (foil and overwrap, where needles were wrapped in foil, and devices, where 'staples' to be used in surgery were packaged) found their jobs much easier. Since most of the jobs entailed loading machines or watching the progress of the foil wrapping, the quotas did not seem difficult to achieve. Workers also rotated jobs, breaking the monotony of working on an assembly line. Clearly, the women in channel and drill swaging faced a different kind of work process and much more pressure to achieve 100 per cent efficiency, a difficult goal, especially for those working with the trickier technique of channel swaging.

These differences in the labour process led us back to our interviews with Annette and Bonnie. In them we could see the ambiguous nature of the work itself, the way that it engendered both coping and resistance. Workers attempted to forge tactics to produce more ('make the numbers'), both exerting some control over the labour process and also drawing themselves more tightly into it as they raised their productivity. They also developed a sense of the unfairness of management's attempt to extract greater levels of productivity. Resistance may have started at the point of production, but it was honed and became both collective and public in the context of team meetings, where individual facilitators often created an atmosphere that was far from being 'participative' and 'democratic.'

Bonnie has been among the first workers hired when HealthTech moved to Albuquerque in 1981. She was chosen from more than nine hundred initial applicants and was on one of the first teams formed. She told Guillermo in March 1983 that at first she was quite nervous about doing well in her job. 'I was really scared at first. Because it's very tedious, you know. Right down into the machine ... It really took me a month or so to get into it. You only had so

many days to produce that much. And if you don't make it ... well, "goodbye." So I was really kind of panicked, but I picked up on it ... There was so much to learn that it was quite scary.' However, Bonnie did well enough to become a trainer of new employees. She was one of only two of the original twelve team members who were still employed by the spring of 1983.

My interview with her revealed her everyday tactics on the job, her efforts to pace her work, and the difficulties she had with her machine. She explained that 'every half hour; I'd try to do 25 dozen every half hour ... The needles, they weren't perfect. So you had to hold your needles differently sometimes. And you had to be real careful not to get fins on them ... when it flares out at the sides ... And if the needle wasn't cut right, then you have to try and work with those needles and that sometimes slows you down a bit.'

Bonnie also explained the difficulties that she had with her machine and how she would cope with them. 'A lot of times it would jam up on you. Or they'd get out of alignment real easy. If you tried to tighten them up, they'd come down real hard and before you knew it, your machine was out of alignment. And then you'd have to clock out again on machine breakdown or whatever and sit there and put in new dies.' Since she had to make the same quota each day, excessive repairs and machine difficulties often kept her numbers down.

Annette, the young widow and single parent whom I interviewed on 26 October, had been hired in September 1981 and became a member of channel team B. In my interview with her, she described a number of difficulties. 'Because I was taught with the smallest needle there is in channel. And I had problems with keeping my hands steady, because you just like ... shake trying to aim for those little grooves.' Annette struggled on her own and was able to 'pick up' the technique by herself.

She had slightly different problems with her machine. As she explained, 'Well, in channel swaging, you get a stubborn product and the dies and the needles don't want to go together and you get defects until you get one that will run with your needle ... The facilitator had me trying different dies to find out which dies the needles worked best with and stuff like that. So my numbers dropped then too.'

Annette explained that she had recently been put on probation. If her numbers did not improve within two weeks, she would face a three-day suspension. She felt this was really punishment for her pro-union activities. 'Because they are getting kind of nervous because the union wants to get in. So they are doing anything to get rid of people that are like for [the union]. Like I'm on the union committee.'

Bonnie's and Annette's accounts of the labour process and their individual tactics for coping with it illustrate the ambiguous nature of women's strategies. They emerged from struggles with the machine, the needles, the dies, and the silk or gut thread. As such, these were attempts to take control of the labour process, but since they also brought measure of success, they pulled the worker more clearly along the road to higher and higher production. In some workplaces, such as the apparel plant that I studied in Rhode Island, women devised a set of work rules that limited management's attempts to increase productivity. They also developed a well-honed critique of management, who lowered the piece rates so that workers had to complete more garments in order to make the same wages (see Lamphere 1987).

At HealthTech individual tactics developed into a collective critique in a different context, that of the team meeting. Facilitators used the meetings to create and communicate management's history of the firm, stressing the uniqueness of its participative structure. At the same time, they used peer pressure to get workers to perform. The contradictions between the ideology of participation and the management's tactics to control helped workers develop a collective critique. Not only did they hear one another relate their tactics, struggles, and difficulties, but they experienced the way that these recountings were used against each of them. Bonnie's interview with Guillermo and my discussions with Annette revealed these dynamics clearly.

Bonnie told Guillermo that she had initially responded favourably to the team philosophy. As Bonnie said, 'I thought it was kind of nice. It might be kind of fun. It was all new to me: to have somebody ... if you had a problem in your team you could have somebody to help you out.' However, Bonnie became disillusioned with the team process. Jim, one of the early facilitators for the channel department teams A and B, often tried to provoke conflict among workers. 'It got really hairy in there. We just dreaded to go into those meetings. And they'd last two or three hours. I'd get home at six ... He just really got a kick out of tearing people over. Oh, people would just sit there and cry. He'd get them into tears. It was a mess ... a total mess.' Under these circumstances, Bonnie felt that it was embarrassing for workers to have to justify their low production numbers or explain their troubles with the machines during a public meeting.

Participating in a firing was also a difficult process for Bonnie, as was clear when she told Guillermo about the decision to fire one male team member. 'Well, it's terrible. That person is sitting right there ... It was for his numbers. He really was a good worker and a good person ... But his numbers weren't there. He'd had some trouble with his machine, and I guess it had just gotten

down to the wire and they had to fire him. I guess we all agreed that if this was what we are supposed to do, we've got to do it. If you don't make your numbers, you've got to go ... It was awful.' Annette, on team B, said the following about Jim's meetings: 'It would be just like one big "tattle-tale session." That's the way our other facilitator ... the one before José. He had the meetings being conducted like that. It got to where everybody was fighting with each other and everything.'

When José was assigned to be the facilitator of teams A and B (and Jim was fired), members of team B acted to put the brakes on José's use of peer pressure and more openly confront him. 'He's ask us our opinion in the team meeting and when we gave it to him, we'd be considered bitchy ... So he got really mad one week and he said "no more team meetings." Because we just weren't getting anything out of them any more ... But what he wanted was for everyone to rat on each other ... we're not [willing to do that].' By October Annette's team had developed its own support system. 'We have team support as far as helping each other goes and everything ... we kind of back each other up ... We back each other up, not only in the production area, but I guess in other problems too - personal problems.'

The high-involvement philosophy and the team structure at first enlisted cooperation from Bonnie and Annette, but as they confronted the underlying sources of control (the demand to produce more under difficult conditions), they began, not just to use individual tactics to deal with the labour process, but also to participate in collective resistance. The stories that they recounted to Guillermo and me told of two competing histories in the making, one of management's vision of the firm and the other of the increasingly militant team members whose experience both on the shop floor and in the team meetings produced a counter-history.

### The Successful Exercise of Power

Management's history became much clearer from conversations that Guillermo had with the plant psychologist and various facilitators. They revealed an overall management strategy that was being orchestrated by the plant psychologist, which in turn allowed many facilitators to be much more successful than Jim and José in controlling their teams. In talking with Guillermo, the psychologist mentioned the company's 'proactive approach,' in which each facilitator orchestrated and initiated the discussion of the union at team meetings and communicated anti-union ideas to the employees. In addition, the psychologist and facilitators used what was called the 'individual conflict approach': attempting to isolate individuals already known to be pro-union. Both these approaches

demonstrate management's ability to exercise power through subtle, cohesive forms. They often had the impact of silencing workers in team meetings, turning potential resistance into agreement with the company perspective.

Dennis, who was the facilitator for drill teams A, B, and C, was particularly successful in using these tactics. Where channel teams A and B had been able to silence their supervisor, the reverse was true in Dennis's drill teams. The histories that we collected from members of his teams showed the role of management in developing splits within the workforce, drawing some members to their side and effectively silencing others. In drill team A, Lucille was active in forming the pro-company organization, as she told Jennifer when she was interviewed in January 1983.

Well, there was quite a bit of conflict, because there was a couple on our team that wanted the union. And the rest didn't want the union, and there was some that didn't care one way or the other or didn't know enough about it to care ... We changed the minds of the ones that wanted the union ... about six or seven weeks ago. The union stopped being pushy ... What we did was, several of us from different departments got together and started an anti-union committee. And we had our own meetings and passed out our own flyers.

Andres, another team member, described to Guillermo how Dennis had utilized Lucille's anti-union stance as early as September 1982 to silence others. At that meeting, Lucille had asked, 'How far would the union go to get into the plant?' In response, Dennis pulled out a piece of paper and said something like 'Oh, by the way, I've got something to read you about the union.' He read out an account that a union in New York had gotten its members a twenty-five-cent raise. 'Is this the kind of union you want representing you?' he asked. Andres retorted, 'Why don't you stick to the facts of what the union had done at other HealthTech plants and what it can do here, and not some other union at another place?'

Elena, another anti-unionist, responded, 'If you're not happy with the company, why don't you resign?' She continued her attack, almost yelling at Andres. Dennis did not speak up. 'He allowed the wolf pack to attack me,' Andres commented. Such acrimonious conflict meant that workers became reluctant to speak out, afraid of being ridiculed or even fired.

In drill team B, pro-union support seemed stronger and was quietly developing among the group who consistently worked on the day shift (all women, including Dolores and Valerie, two Hispana mothers whom Jennifer and I interviewed). Guillermo was present at a team meeting on 17 September 1982 when Dennis, the facilitator, took action to bring out any anti-union views that

might be expressed publicly by team members. He mentioned a television show of the previous evening: 'Speaking of TV, did anyone see the piece on Coors on "60 Minutes" last night?' A couple of workers responded that they had, as did a female personnel administrator whom Dennis had invited to come to the meeting. He encouraged her to give her views.

It showed how the union keeps trying to get in at the Coors plant in Colorado, even when the workers don't want anything to do with it. It was real funny because they showed how they got all the employees in a great big room asking them what they thought of the company, and every single one of them said how much they liked working for the company, how much the company was trying to help them and all that stuff ... They showed all the stuff the company was doing for the workers - the gym they had set up, the benefits and all that ... And it was a really good show.

The administrator's speech was sufficient to bring out anti-union sentiments from three other workers.

In team C, Dennis managed the resignation of a union supporter from a plant committee through public intimidation. His target was Rosa, the pro-union employee on the compensation committee, whom I had heard about from the union organizers in October 1982. Guillermo interviewed Rosa with her mother, Margarita, who also worked at HealthTech, in June 1983 after the union's loss. Rosa recounted the history of her painful experience, telling Guillermo that during a team meeting the previous October Dennis had discussed the leaflet that the union had just distributed. He 'tore the leaflet apart' and then asked for comments. As Rosa reported,

Tracy spoke up. She said, 'I don't feel Rosa should be on the compensation committee because I don't feel she is trustworthy enough not to express what we feel or want.' She said my name had been on the union leaflet with other people she thought were not trustworthy enough because we were not for the HealthTech philosophy ... When she got through I said that I'd voluntarily step down from the committee. I didn't want to be on it if people felt that way about it. Plus, I suspected that I was being set up. Tracy had always been my friend. People said we were like sisters, that we even looked like sisters.

Dennis refused to let Rosa step down and said that the other teams should have a chance to decide this issue. The next day at a meeting of about seventy-five members of the whole drill department, he raised the issue of Rosa's resignation and asked for comments. Tracy again stood up and accused Rosa, 'almost yelling.' Finally, Anne, a team-mate, defended Rosa's performance on

the committee. Rosa finally retorted, 'I feel I'm being harassed for my political opinion and that is discrimination.' Anne later reported to Guillermo, 'They totally humiliated her in this mass meeting. They called her a hypocrite ... She was very upset afterwards. She couldn't do anything that night. She was in tears and to me that was humiliating.'

Dennis's tactic of setting up the public intimidation of a pro-union worker in front of seventy-five employees was clearly designed to break the growing solidarity of the organizing committee and show more neutral workers the severe penalties that union activism would bring. It was an orchestrated exercise of power and a successful effort to push an activist off the compensation committee and demonstrate to other workers the risks of resistance.

Beginning in December 1982, the management turned to illegal tactics such as firing union supporters and carefully screening out potential employees for pro-union views. The firings were the ultimate exercise of power, the termination of a worker's connection with the company and hence an end to her or his resistance. Management also used the tactics of a tough legal campaign, showing anti-union movies, putting anti-union material in pay envelopes, and isolating union supporters by employing the motto 'Be a winner! Vote No.' The climate of fear created by the firings made it difficult to recruit new union supporters, especially among those recently hired, who were not inclined to join a union anyway. In addition, many women workers felt that this was the best job they had ever had; most were supporting children (either as part of a couple or as a single parent) and could not risk their jobs. The initial collective resistance never spread to a number of the newer teams. The company spent \$1 million on the campaign and was rewarded with a vote against the union by a two-to-one margin. (See Lamphere and Grenier 1988, as well as Grenier 1988, for a full account of the drive.)

The election was not the end of the company's attempt to silence pro-union workers, however. After the drive was defeated, some facilitators had private interviews with each team member, often intimidating the pro-union workers. As Anne, who had supported Rosa, told Guillermo in June 1983, 'Dennis has been going through all his team members ... each individual. And I had my meeting. And I was there three and a half hours.' Later in the interview she said, 'I think the company is going to weed out as many as they can without getting into further charges [with the National Labor Relations Board]. They are being careful.'

In addition, some of the quality-control workers who were anti-union continued to harass union activists by giving them rejections. Lucille, for example, moved to quality control and was still carrying out the anti-union campaign a month after the election was over, according to Anne. 'I don't know why she

[Lucille] has it out for her. But Margarita [Rosa's mother] is really feeling the pressure. More pressure is put on the person who is disliked and they were still mentally harassed. Lucille has not given up the union campaign ... She's still using those tactics ... And she's a QC and she can do it ... She's giving daggers at everybody.'

The isolation and harassment was difficult for some activists to deal with. Lorraine, who had been close to a number of facilitators, felt that she had been particularly ostracized. After she became pro-union, 'They ignored me. Before the campaign started, they were always inviting me to go here and there. Then afterwards ... not even a "hi." They made dirty faces at me. Like when I would approach them ... I kept on ... I tried not to care, but I did care ... And that would bother me, because they had never done it before.' She was also isolated from her co-workers in her department, where many were anti-union. The quotation that begins this paper recounts the success of management in getting workers to refrain from talking to Lorraine and other union activists.

After the union lost, Lorraine suffered increased harassment, eventually leading her to quit. She told Patricia Zavella in August 1983, 'And like at the end, they wouldn't even let me go to work ... Like clock in, when I used to go in, they wouldn't let me clock in, make you go in through a back room and start harassing me, telling me that I was not worth a shit.'

Lorraine was, in fact, quite relieved when she decided to quit her job and found another one. When Patricia asked her how she felt about leaving HealthTech, she replied, 'I felt good ... I mean, I knew, it was like something was coming out of me and I was free again, I didn't have to worry about it. Before I'd come home and I'd cry and I'd cry and I'd cry. And I'd hate what it did for my condition. My body just couldn't take it. I was sick a long time the last months there. Headaches, all different types of things.'

Not all activists reacted as Lorraine did. Bonnie took the union drive in stride, quit her job in the summer of 1983, and seemed to leave the HealthTech experience behind her. Anne, who had sympathized with Rosa, felt that she was tougher than many of her co-workers. She told Guillermo: 'Some people react different to scare tactics. Me - I stand up and fight. That's the way I am. If someone threatens me, I ... especially if I am boxed in a corner, I come out fighting. Some people don't. They give into the threat. And I think that's what a majority of people do. They were afraid. Afraid of losing their jobs. Afraid of the humiliation you were put through ... and you were humiliated.' Maria, who was quoted at the beginning of this article, said that she would still vote for a union but would not be on an organizing committee. She told Guillermo, 'Never again will I ever get involved like that. I know.'

The union filed over fifty grievances with the National Labor Relations Board, especially in an effort to reinstate the four workers who had been fired.

However, the hearings were delayed four times. Finally, in February 1984, almost a year after the election, the NLRB ordered the company to pay \$50,000 to the four fired employees and to four others who were refused jobs because of union sympathies (Grenier 1988:157). By this time, many of the union activists had left the firm, often worn down by the interpersonal struggle waged by the management.

The wearing down of union activists is also vividly reported in Rick Fantasia's description of a union drive at a hospital in New Hampshire (1988:121-79). The use of anti-union consultants and attempts to isolate and intimidate union activists were reminiscent of the HealthTech case. Despite the fact that the Licensed Practical Nurses and Technicians won an election in 1982, the hospital was successful in delaying the negotiation of a contract. The organizing committee met for three years, but with normal job attrition and continued delays, the local rank and file had essentially given up by 1987.

Intimidation, harassment, and the exercise of myriad forms of everyday control often push activists out of workplaces after a union drive or strike. Those who manage to stay are frequently the ones who had less of a stake in the transformation of the workplace or who sided with the firm during the conflict. I have drawn upon contemporary ethnographic material to illustrate the production of silence in contemporary times, when companies have hired a battery of psychologists, lawyers, and consulting firms and relied on a sympathetic NLRB to delay elections, negotiations for a contract, or hearings on grievances. Although these ethnographic examples illustrate the power and tactics of firms in a modern, capitalist setting, they do, I think, give us some insight into the dynamics of worker-management relations and the production of silence in the past.

### The Excavation of Resistance

The same power relations that create resistance on the shop floor are also those that produce consent and silence. If the labour process, the extraction of surplus labour, and management control of work relationships create resistance, the exercise of power within this same context often produces silence. On the other hand, if resistance in one period is thwarted, the conditions that produced it often remain, since they are embedded in the way that work is organized and managed. It is this everyday set of resistance strategies that is likely to reoccur or even be remembered by those who are relatively unsympathetic to larger forms of collective resistance. Where the exercise of power has silenced whole stories of resistance (erasing them from History), fragments of histories are sometimes evidenced in the recountings of everyday acts on the shop floor.



We can see how this might be the case by examining a historical example based on the research conducted by myself and Ewa Hauser in Central Falls, Rhode Island (Lamphere 1987; Hauser 1981). Hauser initially worked on my research project on working mothers and then returned to conduct oral history research about the Central Falls Polish community for her dissertation. She found it extremely difficult to get her consultants to discuss the strikes of the 1920s and 1930s in Central Falls. In addition to the 1934 work stoppage, there was an important strike of silk workers at the Royal Weaving and General Fabrics mills in July 1931. Unlike the 1934 event, in which few women were to be seen in the crowds confronting the National Guards, the 1931 strike was organized by Ann Burlak, 'the Red Flame,' a Ukrainian woman who was a member of the National Textile Workers Union (a union affiliated with the Communist Party). Women were active on the picket lines and were arrested during the mass picketing. Burlak was arrested and sent to Boston for deportation, despite the fact that she was an American citizen. Hauser repeatedly tried to contact the sister of one of her Polish informants about the strike, but the woman (who had apparently led workers from the mill at the beginning of the strike and had been Burlak's personal secretary) refused to be interviewed (Hauser 1981:320). Burlak herself, in returning to Central Falls to talk with community members in the process of writing her memoirs, found that those who had worked with her during the strike refused to speak with her.<sup>4</sup>

Hauser contrasts her informants' memory of class difference in Poland with the deletion of strikes from their histories of Central Falls. The narratives of life before immigration are filled with evidence of class consciousness and a sense of the different interests between peasants, on the one hand, and landlords and clergy, on the other. In comparison, interviewees on the 1920s and 1930s, when members of the Polish community were actively engaged in protests and strikes, were conspicuously silent on these matters. 'Their memories of the moment of class struggle are either effaced or concealed. In my analysis of the oral histories and direct communication with members of the group about their past, the traces of the pattern of concealment emerge, sometimes in the content, sometimes in the distortion, and sometimes in the anxious laughter or rapid speech of the informant.' Hauser goes on to attribute this concealment to several factors, particularly the 'crushing defeat that the labor movement suffered in America' (Hauser 1981:342). Her position here is that the exercise of power not just on the shop floor but at a later period and throughout the whole society had silenced these histories.

On the other hand, some of our difficulties in excavating and recovering these silences may have been related to our initial lack of knowledge. In 1977 we knew little about the 1931 and 1934 strikes and even less about those at

individual mills in the 1920s. Thus Hauser's questions were vague and on the order of 'Did you ever participate in any of the strikes?' Without a better sense of the location and chronology of these events in connection with the work history of any particular interviewee, it was difficult to probe further if he or she gave a negative or evasive answer.

We were more successful in getting descriptions of everyday resistance, but even here I had not yet put together a good account of the labour process in textile mills or a good history of the firms in Central Falls and their decline in the 1920s and 1930s. Thus Hauser's questions about previous work histories often did not reveal a clear picture of the shop floor or everyday resistance since she did not know what each job entailed, how they were interrelated, what the history of the mill had been, and how foreman and agents controlled the work itself. Only during the early 1980s, while collecting the material for chapters 2, 3, and 4 of my book on the rise and decline of the textile industry in Central Falls, did I begin to know enough about the local industry to ask the appropriate questions of oral history interviews collected by Hauser and others. A much more concrete grasp of the labour process, the history of particular firms, and the structure of power might have helped us excavate some of the fragmented histories long silenced.

#### Conclusions

The ethnographic material that I have used from interviews and observations on the shop floor in Rhode Island and New Mexico gives us a sense of the forces at work in the creation of gaps and silences in labour history. In constructing two contesting histories (one articulated by management and the other by workers), I have begun with the labour process, because it is both the place where power is always exercised at work and the site of resistance and consent. I have examined a union drive in detail to show how these contesting histories emerge and how, when resistance becomes collective, the exercise of power and the struggle over contending stories move into other arenas (in this case, at team meetings, but also at breaks, during lunch periods, and in larger meetings). I have emphasized that these histories are dynamic and changing and that workers are often drawn to management's vision of the firm or conversely to the activists' version which opposes it. Other workers may avoid commitment to either history, keeping to the sidelines or disengaging as soon as possible. Still others are forcefully silenced for their articulation of support for the activists' histories. The passages quoted at the beginning of this article blame neither the union nor the workers for the defeat; rather, they articulate a sense of being silenced, of dealing with loss and isolation, of becoming an

object of power, of telling a story, but one whose coherence and unity might well be dispersed, fragmented, and rarely told again.

Further removed from such silenced histories, the investigator is often faced with excavating fragments and reassembling pieces from archival materials, newspaper clippings, or oral histories. Here an investigation of the labour process itself, the organization of management control, and the stories of everyday work life can breathe spirit into these fragments. Ordinary workers can be quite articulate concerning every day acts of resistance, even if they have never participated in more-collective forms of organization. Such recountings are a way of breaking through the silences that the exercise of power within the workplace both in the past and in the present has created. We perhaps can never recover these silenced histories, but we can glimpse the forces that both foster acquiescence and unleash resistance, and we can better understand the complexities of power relations at work.

## NOTES

- 1 This essay focuses on a union drive in the United States under historical circumstances when union organizing was particularly difficult. Resistance and organizing take on very distinct characteristics in various national contexts, for example, in England and Canada, which have a much more militant trade union past; see, for example, Wenona Giles's study of Portuguese hotel workers in London (1992) or collections edited by Jackie West (1982) and Audrey Kobayashi (1994). A great deal of attention has been given to women's resistance and accommodation in new Third World industrial zones on the U.S.-Mexican border, Malaya, Indonesia, and other parts of southeast and east Asia. See Kopinak 1996 and Pena 1996 for two recent studies of women in Mexican Maquiladoras, and Wolf 1992 and Turner 1995 for recent research in Indonesia and Japan on women and industrial work. Ong 1991 provides an excellent review of the material on Third World women and industrialization with special attention to women's resistance in southeast Asia, Mexico, and Korea.
- 2 With the election of John J. Sweeney, former head of the Service Employees International Union, to the head of the AFL-CIO, the labour movement is shifting attention to increasing its membership and organizing the unorganized. The SEIU itself is beginning a campaign to stress organizing using member-organizers, encourage more active involvement by the membership, and increase political education. Since there has also been a change in the responsiveness of the National Labor Relations Board (partly because of President Clinton's appointments), organizing drives over the next few years may meet with more success, a change from the 1980s and the period discussed in this essay.
- 3 There is a vast literature on shop-floor resistance and on women and unions in the United States, much of which points to the active presence of immigrant women and women of colour in union struggles and strike activity. Two collections that deal with some of this research are Sacks and Remy 1984 and Bookman and Morgen 1988. Some of the best research on Chicana/Hispana working women includes monographs by Zavella (1987), Romero (1992), and Ruiz (1987) and the recent collection edited by De la Torre and Pesquera (1993). The history of

male-dominated unions and their ambivalence towards women has also been well documented; see, for example, Milkman 1987, Kessler-Harris 1982, and Milkman 1985.

- 4 Polish immigrants to Rhode Island did not bring with them a tradition of labour radicalism, since most were from small peasant villages in Galicia. Other groups, for example, the Jewish, Italian, and English immigrant populations, contained those who carried with them European radical traditions as a basis for continuing to resist and protest in the United States. Paul Buhle, Scott Molloy, Gary Gerstle, Judith Smith, and other members of the Rhode Island Labor History Forum during the 1970s did a great deal to uncover and publicize the history of labour protest, the role of Italian-American radicals, the importance of French-Canadian unionists, and the connections between work, family, and gender among Rhode Island immigrant communities (*Radical History Review* 17 [spring 1978]). Even though the French Canadians, Poles, and Portuguese – to use three prominent examples – were often thought of as quiescent conservative peasants, members of these groups, including many women, became mobilized in labour protests throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, particularly during the 1922 and 1934 textile strikes (Lamphere 1987). I would argue that the Cold War and the conservatism of the labour movement in the post-war period did much to silence memories of this activism.

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