

# Because a Better World Is Possible: Women Casino Workers, Union Activism and the Creation of a Just Workplace

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*Based on a re-analysis of data from a qualitative study of the work experience of 36 women casino workers, this article examines the contributions and personal characteristics of the 13 women in the sample who described themselves as committed union activists. These women, all leaders in the Hotel Employees, Restaurant Employees Union, were proud that collectively they had improved wages, benefits, and the conditions of work in Nevada casinos, and had created an environment that reinforced pride in a job well-done, provided job security, and promoted strong families and communities. These women's workplace experience serves as a reminder to the profession of the importance of collective power in the creation of a more just and humane world.*

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*Like I said, it's a right-to-work state. They can let you go for anything, and they can make any kind of bogus thing up. You don't ever know. . . . When you have a union hotel, you have protection in the union. You have shop stewards that will protect you, and they will fight for you. . . . It's like having a public defender and a good lawyer.*

Mary, cocktail waitress in a union casino<sup>1</sup>

*I think employees have a little more backbone [when] they're protected by the contract and. . . . management has to go through procedures to fire them. [When] they can't just walk up and say, "you're fired" . . . or "I don't*

<sup>1</sup> All names except where otherwise indicated are pseudonyms.

*like the way you look today" . . . or "you've put on too much weight." And that's the difference . . . at a union house you have a little bit more respect and dignity than you do at a non-union house.*

Betty, cocktail waitress in a union casino

For a good part of its professional history, social work has had an uneasy relationship with work, particularly with the experience of workers in the workplace and with workplace organizing (Straussner & Phillips, 1988). Its interest in workplace issues has tended to be limited, relatively narrow, and often has centered on factors that inhibit a worker's job performance, like substance abuse (Goldmeier, 1994; Lawson, 1987; Madonia, 1985; Strauss, 1951). Employee assistance programs have been one of the profession's primary concerns, which is not surprising since clinical social workers have played a major role in providing EAP services (Bennett & Lehman, 1997; Heyman, 1971; Root, 1997). If social work's relationship with the workplace has been tenuous, its relationship with unions has been even more so (Straussner & Phillips, 1988). Social work's reticence in this area deserves a study in its own right and is beyond the scope of this article, but certainly the profession's close association with government bureaucracy, on the one hand, and corporate funders, on the other, is at issue, as is the profession's historic striving for professional status.

In the context of this general neglect, however, there have always been social work scholars and practitioners drawn to issues of class, workplace conditions, and union organizing. The profession's early history was characterized by deep commitment on the part of progressive social workers to workers and their struggles. For example, trade unions were a central feature of work at Hull House. Florence Kelley, a socialist, sophisticated international theorist and experienced trade union activist, energized the Hull House collective upon her arrival in 1891 with her commitment to the working class. She investigated sweatshops, inspected factories, and founded the National Consumers League, which advocated for a minimum wage and a limitation on the working hours of women and children. In 1903, with Jane Addams, Mary Kenney, Mary McDowell, and Sophonisba Breckinridge, Kelley established the Chicago Women's Trade Union

League, whose main objectives were to educate women about the advantages of trade union membership and support women's demands for better working conditions. Meetings of the WTUL and other unions were often held at Hull House and members of the settlement helped support workers during industrial disputes (Sklar, 1995). Mary Van Kleeck, E. Franklin Frazier, Bertha Capen Reynolds, and members of the Rank and File Movement were other social workers who cast their lot with workers and workplace organizing.

In recent years, a number of social work scholars have carried on this tradition by exploring workplace issues like unemployment (Briar, 1980; Karger, 1988; Reisch & Gorin, 2001; Sharraden, 1985); occupational health and workplace hazards (Dawson, 1993; Dawson, Charley & Harrison, 1997; Lewis, 1997; Mor-Borak & Tynan, 1993; Root, 1997); environmental racism in the workplace (Dawson & Madsen, 1995; Hoff & McNutt, 1994; Hoff & Rogge, 1996; Rogge, 1996; Silver, 1992); the impact of layoffs, de-industrialization, and globalization (Jones & Chandler, 2001; Reisch & Gambrill, 1997; Reisch & Gorin, 2001; Rocha, 2001; Rose, 1997; Zippay, 2001), and the situation of particular groups of workers (Chandler & Jones, 2003; Gringeri, 2001; Jones & Chandler, 2001; Whitebook, 1999). Welfare reform has generated increased interest in work as well, as women receiving public assistance are thrust into the low-wage labor market (Cancian & Meyer, 2000; Dinerman & Faulkner, 2000; Gooden, 2000; Piven, Acker, Hallock, and Morgen, 2002). The profession's growing interest in workers mirrors a general resurgence in working class and labor studies in the last decade and a half. The growth of inequality worldwide has prompted progressive researchers both in and out of the academy to produce a wealth of studies and theoretical analyses of workers, wages, class, and unions (Bonacich & Appelbaum, 2000; Chang, 2000; Ehrenreich, 2001; Figart, Murtari & Power, 2002; Heymann, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Johnson, 2002; Kazis & Miller, 2001; Louie, 2001; Mishel, Bernstein, & Schmitt, 2001; Mort, 1998; Nelson & Smith, 1999; Rosen, 2002; Teixeira & Rogers, 2000; Zweig, 2000.)

For the last four years, we have been studying the work experience of women casino workers in Nevada and its effect on the women, their families and their communities. In this paper we

focus on those 13 women in the 36-member sample who identified themselves as committed union activists. In their interviews, these maids, waitresses, laundry workers, and cooks told story after story of significantly and concretely changing workplace conditions through their work with the Hotel Employees, Restaurant Employees Union (H.E.R.E.), a union that has distinguished itself by its emphasis on grassroots, member-to-member organizing. The women not only had a strong sense of themselves as activists but also as makers of history, and felt their own lives, joined with others, were contributing to the struggle to make a better world possible. In this they embodied Paulo Freire's idea of conscientization, that is, they had become "Subjects who [act] upon and transform [their] world, and in so doing [move] toward ever new possibilities of fuller and richer [lives] individually and collectively (Freire, 1998, p. 14). We also found that the union activists shared a set of personal characteristics (belief in the dignity of work, commitment to co-workers, and dedication to justice) that was apparent in all aspects of their lives.

Our encounters with the union activists were deeply affecting. In every case, we left the interviews feeling that amid the casino glitter, we had been graced by connection with some of the strongest and most inspiring women in our state. The connections have survived, and in several cases become friendships. In that way, we are not objective about the causes for which these women struggle. We believe they carry hope for a better life for working people in Nevada, and whenever possible we join with them. We feel, too, that their lives and collective struggles hold important lessons for social work as it strives to make an impact in a globalized world. The profession has tended to distance itself from collective struggles in general and union activities in particular. These women's lives—and more, their success in building genuine power—offer a reason to re-think that position.

### The Study

This article is based on a re-analysis of data from a qualitative study, still in progress, in which we are investigating the work experience of women casino workers and its effect on their families and communities (Jones & Chandler, 2001). In the larger

study, we have interviewed 36 women casino workers. We have also conducted four focus groups (with social workers, Latino leaders, teachers, and health professionals, all of whom have had contact with women casino workers and their families) and over forty interviews with key-informants (economists, demographers, labor union officials, and other persons with expertise in this area).

The women we interviewed were referred to us or identified through a snowball sampling technique. The interviews, lasting from one to four hours, were guided by open-ended questions that centered on the women's casino work experience, the nature of their work, and the work's effect on families and communities. We audio-taped the interviews in their entirety and later transcribed them for analysis. We also collected demographic information.

Our re-analysis of the data for this paper was guided by an adaptation of grounded theory, an inductive analytical method that allows the data to speak for itself (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We began the analytical process by identifying primary themes in each interview. Then, using a process of constant comparative analysis, we refined final themes across the sample by comparing the themes in individual interviews to those in other interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Part of our commitment as feminist researchers was to let women "speak their own lives." We have learned the benefits of this approach from oral historians who with great patience listen to the fullness of their subjects' stories. We worried that limiting subjects' participation in this paper to a string of brief quotations would reduce the richness of the women's lives, and worse, that a kind of flatness would creep into their accounts. Thus, we chose to use longer quotations and to include a "paradigm case," that is, one woman's story that reflects themes present in all the interviews.

A limitation of the study is the small size of sample. However, consistent with the principles of qualitative research, a small sample facilitates the collection of "thick description," that is rich and full-bodied data (Geertz, 1989). The sample was also self-selected. The findings therefore cannot be generalized to other populations.

## Context

We have discussed the nature of casino work elsewhere (Jones & Chandler, 2001), but it bears repeating—casino work is very hard work. Not one woman we interviewed said otherwise. On the contrary, they described their work as physically demanding, fast-paced, and injurious to their health. Wages, except on the highly organized Las Vegas strip, are extraordinarily low. One woman described Reno as a “two-job town,” meaning that workers must work two jobs to survive.

Two further notes are in order. First, there are enormous differences between Reno and Las Vegas. H.E.R.E. represents workers in both locations, but in Reno only about 1200 workers in two properties are organized. On the other hand, Las Vegas Local 226 (or the Culinary Union, as H.E.R.E. is called there) with 50,000 members is the largest local in the country. Second, H.E.R.E. is part of the “new union movement,” which is characterized by grassroots, member-to-member organizing, community coalitions, and the development of a leadership cadre among workers of color, immigrants, women, and employees in service industries (Mort, 1998; Moberg 2001). Local 226 has emerged as a standard-bearer of that movement (Moberg, 2001). The victorious six-year Frontier Strike galvanized union members in Las Vegas and brought thousands of supporters from across the United States to march in solidarity with the strikers (HEREIU, 1999b). The consciousness and leadership that was built in that and other strikes are palpable among Las Vegas union members who are keenly aware of their power and potential.

## Findings: Personal Characteristics of Union Activists

The thirteen women union activists, three of whom worked in Las Vegas and ten in Reno, were quite diverse in age, marital status, race, and country of origin (see Table 1). Given this diversity, we were surprised to discover how much they had in common. Three personal characteristics stood out in the analysis: a belief in the dignity of work, commitment to helpful and rich relationships with co-workers, and a commitment to justice.

All of the women had a strong work ethic and believed in the

Table 1  
Sample Demographics

N=13		Job Titles	
<i>Age</i>		Bartender	1
Range:	39–67	Cocktail Waitress	2
Mean:	44	Cook	2
<i>Ethnicity</i>		Food Server	3
Hispanic	8	Head Porter	1
Caucasian	5	Laundry Worker	1
<i>Immigrant Status</i>		Porterette	1
Non-immigrants	6	Maid	2
Immigrants	7	<i>Education Completed</i>	
<i>Immigrants' Country of Origin</i>		Grade school	4
Nicaragua	1	Some High School	2
El Salvador	1	High School	6
Mexico	5	Some College	1
<i>Immigrants' Years in USA</i>		<i>Marital Status</i>	
Range:	13–23	Married	3
Mean:	18	Divorced	9
<i>Years Working in Casinos</i>		Single	1
Range:	5–32	<i>Children</i>	
Mean:	15	Women without children	2
<i>Casino Location</i>		Women with children	11
Las Vegas	3	Number of children:	
Reno	10	Range:	0–3
		Mean:	2

value of work and a job well done. Dorothy, a maid, discussed her attitude toward work:

*You know, with Greta [her work partner] and I, we wanted our rooms to look really good. 'Cause it's like your home. You want it to look good, too. That was our job, and we wanted to do it really good. . . . My mom taught [me] . . . to do a job good.*

Liza, an immigrant from Mexico with 19 years experience, talked about her experience working at the espresso bar:

*Espresso is a very busy place, especially Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. And they schedule—two people! To me that is careless of the customers,*

*because the customers are the ones who's going to pay for not putting more people in there. . . . I can work, and I like it. You know, I like running. I like doing things fast and make comfortable all the customers because that's what it is all about. To get a very satisfied customer.*

Liza felt that it was the workers, not the management, who were the experts and knew best how to please the customer.

All the women spoke of the importance of their relationships with co-workers. Listening to their stories, it soon became apparent that there was a connection between workplace relationships and job satisfaction. These relationships made difficult work conditions tolerable. Dorothy, for example, described her work as two-sided, both hard and enjoyable, but it was clearly her work-based friendships that helped make it the latter.

*So they raised the rooms to fifteen, so we'd have thirty rooms we'd do together. Yeah, it was fun. It was horrible. We'd have to hurry so fast. . . . Our faces would be all red. But you know, I've worked there so long I feel . . . like the people there are my family. . . . I've grown up with these people.*

Another characteristic reflected in all the women's stories was a well-developed sense of justice. Nicolasa de la Puente (her real name), a cook and president of Reno's Local 86, described her every-day experience standing on the side of justice:

*I love doing this work. I know that it is the right thing to do. I want to be able to help, and change all these families where the father doesn't have to work two jobs. Where the mother can stay longer at home raising those kids and have a happy family. . . . You do it for other people. You do it for the things you believe. You do it for doing the right thing.*

#### Findings: Using Collective Power to Change Workplaces

In analyzing the interviews, we were repeatedly struck by the pride the 13 union activists took in improvements they collectively had brought about in their workplaces. We noted further that these successes had given the women great confidence in their ability—when united—to be actors in the workplace and community. Geoconda Kline (her real name), a former maid and immigrant from Nicaragua, recently elected president of Local 226, described collective power:

*When I start to organize, it was an incredible experience for me because I start to believe in the power. . . . [I]t was like for me this fist. We got the power. The companies can't have everything. . . . I really found this is the truth. You never knew your power and the power your co-workers can have together. If we get together, we can move companies.*

The collective power Geo describes needs to be differentiated from empowerment, a concept with which social work is more familiar. "Empowering" a single mother, for example, is a practice strategy that social workers readily embrace. All too often, however, social workers' vision stops at the individual level and ignores the challenge of building the collective power necessary to change the conditions of life.

As for the difference that union makes in a workplace, the women we interviewed were absolutely clear about that. Margaret, a Reno cocktail waitress, said it this way, "When you go from . . . a non-union house to a union house, the difference is night and day." Union, according to the women, means higher wages, better benefits, job security; dignity on the job, a reduction in discriminatory practices, the creation of a leadership cadre within the casino, and better service for the customers.

*Hourly wages* are at the core of working people's well-being, and here the women felt that union was key. We did not meet a single worker who was not aware of the difference in wages between Las Vegas and Reno, and that the difference was the result of the Culinary Union. In Las Vegas, housekeepers on the Strip start at \$14.00 an hour. In Reno—despite the fact that most of the casinos are owned by the same gaming corporations that pay workers decently in Las Vegas—non-union housekeepers begin at \$6.50 an hour. H.E.R.E. is not as strong in Reno, but even in Reno, there is a significant difference between union and non-union casinos. Union housekeepers in Reno start at \$8.50 and with ten years of seniority can make as much as \$13.00 an hour.

The women felt that unionization meant a significant difference in *benefits* as well. In Las Vegas we were often told that the union's health plan, which covers spouses, same-sex domestic partners, and families at no cost, is one of the best in the nation (HEREIU, 1999a). Union leaders know the health plan is key to workers' security, in some ways more important than wages. In Reno, non-

union casino workers generally pay \$30 a month for their own coverage and \$100–130 for family coverage, sums that low-wage workers simply cannot afford. It is the main reason why Nevada leads the nation in the rate of non-insurance (Chandler, 2002).

The women explained that *job security* is greatly enhanced in a unionized property. Nevada is a right to work state, or, as workers joke, “a right-to-get-fired state!” Workers’ jobs in non-union casinos are truly insecure, and stories abound in the interviews of willful firings about which employees could do nothing. It’s no surprise, then, that the increased job security that the union contract brought was enormously appreciated. Two Reno women, a cook and a maid, commented:

Nicolasa de la Puente (her real name): *[This union house] has been the best [place I’ve worked in the last 25, 30 years], because I don’t have to worry about I’m going to go to work and my boss doesn’t like me today, and he’ll fire me. They can fire you for no reason everywhere else. Comb your hair in a different way and they don’t like it—[you’re fired].*

Dorothy: *[A union makes] a lot of difference. [Before] they treated us like workhorses. [Now there’s] job security. They’re careful about who they fire.*

*Dignity on the job* was also critically important to union activists who were adept at using the contract to stop abusive treatment of employees by management. For women who had seen a great deal of unfairness, this made a huge difference. As Margaret, the cocktail waitress, said,

*I was a shop steward for 12 years . . . and think the reason I enjoyed [being in the union] so much . . . was because you can make changes . . . You can speak for people who can’t speak for themselves. It’s more just like helping.*

The activists, who knew the contract backwards and forwards, spent a good deal of time educating workers about their rights and “re-training” supervisors. Quoting Margaret again:

*A lot of times [the supervisors] will try and pull stuff . . . and we have to retrain them a little bit. Eventually they have to give in. I mean you can file so many grievances against them, and pretty soon the food and beverage director gets tired of it, and [says to the supervisor], “When are you going to learn? Here’s the contract. Read it. Follow it.” I had one supervisor that started yelling at me in the break room, and I just turned around and told him, “I’m on break. If you have anything to say to me, you can take me to your office and say it in a professional manner or else quit wasting my*

*time." And I walked out and left him standing there. . . . Actually, he came up and apologized to me later. They can't get away with treating me like crap like they can at [non-union houses] because you have a recourse. . . . [The supervisors] kick and scream, but eventually they [come around]. You have to bring them down to being more human. They want to be, "I'm king up here," but they end up having to give up a lot of power.*

The union contract, the women pointed out, also mitigated the problems of *discrimination* against women, older workers, minority workers, and workers whose first language is not English. Knowing that there were contract rules to be followed and an effective grievance procedure improved relations among all groups, and the women activists commented on it regularly. In one example, a Reno cocktail waitress told us with considerable pride about a 65 year-old woman who was still working as a cocktail waitress: "[At a nonunion house] she'd be gone. Yeah, you don't see anybody over 35 cocktailing at a nonunion casino."

The women also felt that the union contract dramatically improves *relationships among the workers*. The reason, according to them, was simple: a union contract guarantees that if a worker does her job, she will be able to keep it as long as she wants. A Reno cocktail waitress explained: "You're there longer [so] you can build your friendships. At the other place the turnover was constant. But here, gosh, I've known these girls for 15 years."

Finally, it was clear in the interviews that unions and union organizing create a *leadership cadre* that is at the core of a just workplace environment. Leadership development is a central organizing concept of the new union movement, and is something that all the women union activists understood. Rank and file leaders facilitate communication, are key to educating members about issues, handle grievances, set an example of discipline and positive relationships, and encourage workers to "keep on keeping on". Without them, nothing would happen.

The women we interviewed were grateful to their own teachers—the union organizers who had preceded them—and were eager to pass the lessons on. Most important, they liked the new sense of themselves. "I've gotten a lot stronger," a Reno maid said.

*I used to be really shy and stuff, [and] I'm still a little bit, but not so bad. I was really scared of people. . . . Working with the union, that's really*

*helped me a lot. Going to the marches and all the rallies. . . . I was scared, but I did it anyway. . . . The first time . . . a group of us [went] to one of the bosses, I was one of the spokespersons. I was shaking, you know! (laughter) I was literally scared to death, but I did it anyway. It was really hard, but it was really worth it, and it's helped me a lot. It has made me stronger in my whole life. I stood up to my husband and I couldn't do that [before].*

The women knew how important it was to build leaders, and for most that took the form of building "committees," the groups of workers who are the union's core organizing teams. Alma, a former maid who now works for the union, spoke proudly about a committee member she helped develop:

*One of my committee [members], her name is Helen, she says, "I have changed so much, Alma. I have learned so much. . . . I'm not scared to go to management." But besides that, as a woman she has changed and she knows this. [For me] that's a great feeling. That's my prize. That's my pay. . . . [I]t's such a nice feeling. 'Cause what she's learning . . . she's passing that to her co-workers. She's a leader. And now she's telling her co-workers . . . And that's like a ladder, you know?*

The women had a strong sense of themselves as activists, as makers of history and this awareness extended beyond themselves and their own families to global realities and to the coming generations. They had developed philosophies that sustained them for the long fight. Nicolasa de la Puente spoke of her own leadership and commitment:

*See, the way that the union grows is by leaders. So if we are being called the leaders, we have to lead our co-workers. [You] always have to explain to them why we're doing it and how we're going to do it, and how we're protected. If you don't go through all that, people are not going to do anything. You show the workers that you're strong and you're going to show the company that you're strong, but you cannot do it alone. You have to have the workforce to back you up. If you say you're going to do something and you don't do it, you lose credibility. I always said that once you're a leader, you have to be a leader, and you cannot back down, because then you're nothing.*

### Complicating Factors, or Why Life Still Trips Us Up

As positive a force as union activism was in the women's lives, it was not without its difficulties. First, organizing, especially the kind that requires off-hours home-visits, is an enormous amount

of work and takes time away from family and children. This was hard on the women, many of whom were single mothers. Their principal strategy for staying connected with their children and spouses was involving them in union activities. Alma and Geoconda Kline, two full-time union organizers, were among the many women who spoke about these issues:

*Alma: Honestly, [my kids] are with me a hundred percent. They understand . . . this is not a regular job. This is a movement, and you work hours. Next weekend, no day off because you have to do it. If you start working here at the union, you . . . have to give yourself a hundred percent. Or don't be here. So my kids, they understand. We don't see them that much, so the little time that I spend with them, it's like quality time. But they do understand. And they learn. They're the future leaders.*

*Geoconda: My daughter . . . she grew up on the picket line. . . . They grow up with the movement. They know it's something important. . . . When we have something they can participate, we bring them. It's good they get involved. Because the more they get involved, the more they understand, the more they can see how important it is for them to have a union, too.*

Other women, like Rosa, a waitress who had worked for the union in Reno, felt the contradiction more keenly:

*[It] was a big struggle to find a balance in between work and family. Family is yours, 24 hours a day, every day of the year. Then with work for the union, it is like you belong to them. . . . Say today's Sunday. I don't care if it's your son's birthday or you decide to take a vacation, because we have to do this and that. That was very tough.*

Long hours are the reality of any kind of activism, of course. Still, the ideal of the union organizer as a single man, available at all hours of the day any day of the week, is a male model that unions have to think about if they wish to recruit women to their ranks and retain them.

A second problem was burn-out. The truth is in long struggles people get tired. The main way that the women expressed burn-out, it seemed to us, was in frustration about their fellow workers. This was more a reality in Reno than in Las Vegas. Union women in Las Vegas had worked incredibly hard, but they had come away with victories. Las Vegas is now one of the most organized cities in the West, and the six-year strike at the Frontier casino

ended in victory. In Reno, with only 1200 union members and victories few and far between, burn-out was more of a problem. Women did not in general criticize the idea of unionization, to which they remained committed, but they had a lot to say about workers who wanted the hard-won benefits yet refused to join the struggle. Three Reno activists talked about burn-out:

*Dorothy: I'm just tired of fighting for everyone. I'm getting so disgusted. Shoot,[you] just fight so hard for them and they still don't want to stand up.*

*Liza: I hate when somebody comes up to me with, 'How's the union?' I get so upset because I think the union is YOU. You are the union. We are the union. Nobody else is going to come over here and help you if you don't help yourself.*

*Dolores: People's spirits get really down. Because they say, how many years? And nothing happening. I say, 'Do you know why it's not happening? Because you're not involved. If you were involved, you will get this right now.*

But in the end they all still believed in union. There was no doubt about that.

### A Paradigm Case

In this section we present a “paradigm case” that will, we think, provide readers with a fuller sense of these union activists. We selected Peggy Pierce (her real name) whose story embodies the primary themes that emerged in the analysis particularly well.

We met Peggy at a noisy Starbucks just off the Las Vegas strip on a sunny winter afternoon. Peggy is a small, wiry, and delightful woman who came to Las Vegas thirteen years ago to break into show business. To support herself on her way to the top, she got a union job serving food at the Desert Inn. It didn't work out quite like she'd planned. “I discovered after about three years that I was really terrible at show business,” she laughed.

*I had horrible stage fright. . . . you know, show business is brutal. You have to be able to get out of bed every morning and tell every single person you meet that you are the most talented person that's ever lived. You have to be relentless! You have to start every conversation with it. It took all the self-confidence I had to tell one person a week that I was very talented.*

Peggy worked at the Desert Inn for twelve years, and like many workers we interviewed, when she looked around, her temporary casino job had become her life. She'd busted in show business, but had a house, a pension, a good hourly wage, and a union.

She'd also developed an entire family of co-workers at the Desert Inn. "The Desert Inn was one of the last really small hotels on the Strip," she said. "And it was a wonderful experience."

*I mean the night before the Desert Inn closed [in 1999], I stood there at the casino and I couldn't get myself to walk out. That whole experience—of working a very long time in one place—is really fading from America. And the truth is—it's a cliché, but you really are like a family. You know people when their children are born. You hear about their kids when they graduate from high school. You're there when they get married, when their first grandchildren come.*

Peggy and her co-workers took a great deal of pride in their work and in the Desert Inn itself: "I was a shop steward and it seemed like I fought constantly with management. [Still,] it was as good as work can be. The co-workers were terrific. And you know, we were all very proud of the place. It had a great reputation."

Peggy felt that workers' pride in the Desert Inn had everything to do with being union. It enabled her and other shop stewards to insist on workplace fairness and dignity, which in her mind stood at the root of customer service. Management, she said, had a hard time with that concept:

*One of the things we say in the union is, 'nothing organizes workers as much as a bad boss.' And we got a doozie. I mean this guy was a piece of work. He thought he was going to run this room on the basis of juice. And it wasn't going to happen. Because I wasn't going to do the juice thing. I wasn't going to cozy up to him, and I was not going to get screwed out of every good order. So I started filing grievances. A lot of them.*

"If a room's run on juice," Peggy explained, "it's run on favoritism and favors. It breaks every rule in the union contract—and it also poisons the atmosphere."

*Nobody trusts each other. . . . Everybody's looking over their shoulder. . . . It's a terrible atmosphere to work in. I think that it absolutely does not serve the industry. The bosses don't feel that strongly about it because they*

*don't understand how bad it gets. I also think that a lot of time the bosses don't understand how well a room can work when everyone knows they're going to be treated fairly. . . . You can actually create teamwork. When I was a captain, which gave me a lot of control over the room, everybody on my shift absolutely knew all the time that everything was going to go by the book, and people relaxed. They always knew they weren't going to get ripped off. It makes it completely different. I also think that it makes it possible . . . to serve the guests better. I wish we could convince the hotels of that. . . .*

Peggy had a well-developed sense of social justice which she said she'd gotten from her parents who were active in the civil rights movement: "I grew up surrounded by . . . a sense that there is injustice in the world, and that's not right. That's something that you should . . . do something about. That's part of what being a decent person is about." She went on, "I can pretty much take care of myself on any job . . ."

*But in a non-union place, even if you can take care of yourself . . . all around you there are people being taken advantage of . . . some because they don't have the personality to take care of themselves or they don't have the intellectual ability or they don't have the language ability or they're getting picked on just because they're people of color. In a non-union place, I was often trying to fight for these people who couldn't speak up for themselves. But once I was in a union place, I had protection. I didn't have to worry about whether or not speaking up for someone else was going to affect my job. I could just speak up and say, "This isn't right." [In a union place] you always know that if you do your job, [you can keep it]. You don't have to be friends with the boss. The boss doesn't have to like you or like what you look like, or any of that kind of stuff.*

Peggy also spoke of her growing insider's awareness of the importance of what Culinary was doing in Las Vegas:

*I'm very, very proud of being a member of Local 226. I became aware about ten years ago, if you wanted to learn about unions, you had to come to my union in Las Vegas because we were trailblazers. My leadership was doing things that no one had done before or they hadn't done in 30, 40 years. And a big part of that is organizing. We don't sit still. As gaming gets bigger, we have to get bigger, so that we can maintain the power that we have and hopefully increase it.*

We talked with Peggy just a month and a half after September 11<sup>th</sup> which had hit the Culinary Union very hard. One hundred

forty H.E.R.E. members died in the World Trade Center. In Las Vegas, Peggy said, the effects of September 11<sup>th</sup> were immediate. "About 15,000 people got laid off on the Strip. All of the expansion plans came to a sudden stop, so all the construction workers got laid off. Cab drivers took a huge hit, and then there's just this ripple effect."

Peggy described Culinary's direct approach to laid-off Las Vegas workers' needs with pride. "The community got together, and the union proposed a Helping Hand Center," she said.

*In Nevada all unemployment is done by telephone, and the whole system was immediately overwhelmed. I mean, people sat on the phone for hours and hours and couldn't get through. And the thing is that the longer that you don't get through, the farther your unemployment check recedes in front of you. You've got to get through to them to get any money. So we erected a huge tent out in the parking lot [of the union], and opened a rapid response center. We had an actual unemployment office there. Clark County Social Services came in and set up an office. The Welfare Department . . . and Nevada Power came in. United Way set up a displaced workers fund . . . targeted at rental assistance. We pulled this whole thing together in, like, a week. I can't believe we managed to do it. The day before I thought, 'we're not going to make it.' But the next morning we got here at 7 o'clock and there were about 50, 60 people in line and they had been there since 4:00. Over the next three weeks, 7,000 people came through the tent.*

The big news in Peggy's life when we talked with her in November 2001 was that she had decided to run for the Nevada State Assembly. "My decision to run for office has everything to do with being a union member," she explained:

*My union is very politically active. We have for a number of years been involved in elections. Our contract has a clause that says that the union can request a member to come out on a leave of absence from the hotel and work at the union for up to six months in a year. I have come out maybe seven or eight times for political campaigns, and I've done the precinct walking. You know, we know how to get people elected. We're relentless. We do a get-out-the-vote that's tremendous. Right up until ten minutes before the polls close, we're dragging people out of their houses, saying, "You didn't vote yet! You've got seven minutes, and I don't care if you're wearing fuzzy slippers. Let's go."*

But, she said, the officials that Culinary gets elected “sometimes forget us.” So the union began to talk about wanting to run its own people. “About five years ago, Glen Arnodo, the political director of Culinary, asked at a big meeting of shop stewards who would like to run for office,” Peggy said. About twenty people raised their hands, and Peggy was one of them.

*I'll probably be sorry for saying this, but you know the truth is there's only two things that I ever wanted to do, that I ever wanted to be. I wanted to be Frank Sinatra or a senator." I blew it being Frank Sinatra. So now it's on to being a senator.*

A year later Peggy Pierce was elected State Assemblywoman from District 3 in Las Vegas. Her victory, won by the relentless work of Culinary members, was a bright spot amid the gloom that followed the 2002 elections.

We ended the interview by asking Peggy, “You’ve been active a long time. Do you ever get discouraged?” “No,” she replied, and her answer gave us, too, a reason to keep fighting.

*I look at everything as a ten-year battle. You know, one group that is always there, never gives up, never loses sight, are the Quakers. They have been fighting poverty and injustice for a couple hundred years. Their people don't get tired. They don't burn out, and I . . . believe that the reason for that is a spiritual basis for the fight. I have a spiritual basis for the fight. I believe in what I'm doing. I'm comfortable with a certain amount of mystery in the process. . . . If I don't win today's battle, it's because in some way it's supposed to happen in some other way. So I can say at the end of sort of losing a battle, 'Well, you know, the creative force in the universe thought . . . that wasn't the plan.'*

*I'm also a history buff, and I can absolutely see that we make progress over hundreds of years. I mean there really was a time in this world when nobody questioned whether or not slavery was a good idea. Everybody did it. And then, you know, a couple of hundred years ago, the Quakers and some other people, started to think, "Well, this is not just." And today there are pockets of the world with slavery, but nobody believes that it's just. Everybody knows it's evil.*

*So I can look at history and say that we are evolving into a more just world. I know that it doesn't look so good today, but over a hundred years it does change tremendously. But it changes because millions of people make a decision to make a difference, to think differently, to demand justice, to*

*demand justice for other people, to not look the other way, and I just need to be a part of that.*

### Conclusion

“Because a better world is possible” is the core belief that motivates, structures, and inspires the political activism of the current anti-globalization movement. It also shapes the activism of the women who are the focus of this paper. They, too, hold fast to the hope of a more just and humane world. Their work is centered on improving the conditions of the workplace and in the struggle to raise wages, improve benefits, create an environment that reinforces pride in a job well-done, fosters respectful and cooperative relationships with co-workers, provides job security, and promotes strong families and communities. In this they mirror the vision of the anti-globalization movement.

The stories of Peggy Pierce and the other women presented in this paper carry important implications for social workers. Primary among them is the lesson of building collective power that can change workplaces and sometimes the broader world as well. Social work, in this historical period, can and should be part of the reinvigoration of unions and the creation of a more just and humane workplace. Researchers, practitioners, educators, and students can all contribute their expertise to building a movement that addresses the needs of workers both in the United States and internationally. It is and historically has been a vital part of social work’s mission.

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