

inequality and economic insecurity that we've seen grow over the past several decades. We've worked through those issues. There might be some other areas, which at times, there's some conflicts between different parties. But I know a lot of these folks for many, many, many years, and I'm optimistic, because I see a culture of people wanting to sit down and try to work through and have the city grow.

We want to see the city economy grow. We want to see it come back now, of course, from the pandemic, but we also want to see it grow in a way that the prosperity is broad based. We want to see our city economy be a diverse economy. We want to make sure that we have sufficient revenues to support budgets that reflect our values as a city. But we need to make sure that we have sustainable economic growth as well, in order to support those priorities as well.

We often forget it's not only just another city; it's arguably, I will say, the most important city in the world. It absolutely is. But, you know, there's an ecosystem, which makes our city work in a partnership between the various sectors of the labor movement, academia, government, business and industry. We all kind of work together to achieve, at times when it's working well, this growing and thriving economy. The numbers were pretty staggering. As I said, we reached 4.6 million workers in the city. We had 70 million tourists a year. A growing, thriving, booming travel and tourism industry, entertainment sector, hospitality sector, building sector. So many things going right, everybody kind of working together. That is not always seen in a lot of cities around our country, but it has been seen here. We have to restore that as well, as we climb out of the pandemic.

**Q: Before the pandemic, there was a big upsurge of strikes across the country. Why?**

**VA:** In a lot of these big work actions we saw throughout the country, like the teachers' Red For Ed drive, I think there's a correlation between that and the rise of people's support for unions. They've said that, hey, these organizations are the ones that are out there on the front lines fighting for more favorable working conditions, wages, benefits, safety in the workplace, protections in case you get injured at work, retirement security, things like that. I think the folks recognize it. You reach a certain tipping point as a society.

And when we see literally decades of wage pressures against workers and the decline of worker power through collective bargaining, people look and they say: "Wait, wasn't the National Labor Relations Act actually created to support unionization?" Yes, it was. We always say: the NLRA wasn't ever meant to be neutral. The legislation actually says: "that it shall be the policy of the federal government to encourage collective bargaining." So I think you see all these things kind of came together and people were pushing back against the Trump administration, which is being more aggressively anti-worker, and a Trump NLRB which was being more aggressively anti-worker. There was a level of activism that we haven't seen in a while and I think that desire for workers to

have a voice in their workplace is still there and still strong and we want to continue to support that.

**Q: And do you think, with the new attention to essential workers, with all the pain that especially minority workers have experienced in this crisis, that we'll come out of this with renewed energy in the labor movement?**

**VA:** I think so. We just spoke about climate. The pandemic has disproportionately impacted lower income communities and communities of color. Quite often when we have these climate-related events throughout the country, as we saw directly here with Sandy, they impact the most vulnerable communities. Very often those are communities of color, lower income communities of color.

I do think that the disproportionate impact that we see on these folks is going to lead all of us to make sure that we continue to work with them. We see policies that are created that are going to be not only looking for our economy to recover in a post pandemic world, but that are also going to deal with some of those who've been disproportionately impacted. There's just too much economic insecurity and we need to try to figure out how do we grow our economy in such a way that the economic activity is going to reach those people who have been left behind for too long. And create meaningful work for them with family sustaining wages and benefits. It's part of a broader discussion, but I think you'll continue to see support for that.

**Q: On that hopeful note, I'd like to thank you for being so generous with your time today. Any concluding thoughts?**

**VA:** Only to say that I think we've had a real positive span at the CLC the past 10 years. I know we've got a lot of work ahead of us. But the past 10 years have been some of the most rewarding work that I've had in my life. And I look forward to continuing to serve the workers in the city in the best way that I can. We're fortunate to have a phenomenal team at the Central Labor Council that we put together – some of the most dedicated people that we have. And that's why we've been able to do what we try to do in the city – bring people together.

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*REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW, vol. 23, no. 1 (Fall 2020).  
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## ORGANIZING

### *There is Power in a Union: How I Became a Labor Activist*

by Drucilla Cornell

When a global pandemic, ongoing climate crisis and creeping American authoritarianism seem to promise a dark future, one naturally looks for any rays of hope. Recent events have encouraged me to both take a fresh look at encouraging signs around us of youthful activism, and to reassess my own history as a young woman in the labor and anti-war movements during some of our bleakest years. In this article, I will try to make sense of that for a new generation in the hope that it may offer some useful perspectives on meeting the challenges we all face today.

My activism, like so many others in my generation, grew out of the gross contradictions between what the United States supposedly stood for as the leader of the "free world" and the brutal realities of systematic racism, sexism, classism and neo-colonialism abroad. I was born in 1950, the dawn of a promised "American Century," in the Southern California homeland of the John Birch Society, a militant anti-communist organization. It was a scary time. Just five years before, the U.S. had dropped atomic bombs that annihilated two large Japanese cities. And by 1950 Russia had its first nuclear weapon, with more countries soon to follow. I began first grade with the movie *The Red Scare*, which showed us that the "communists" were everywhere and after us and our "democracy." The threat of nuclear war with the Soviet Union was always on the horizon. Members of the Democratic Party were condemned as "dangerous communists." To be an "American" was to be a Republican. White meant Anglo-Saxon, or the fantasy that you were. Conspiratorial claims and demonization of anyone thinking differently were core principles. Sound familiar today?!

My mother had me dye my red hair blonde before entering kindergarten because red was associated with having some kind of Irish heritage and a marker that we were not really and truly "white." There was an unchallenged definition of women: no can do. Women can't be lawyers, professors, firefighters, scientists, mathematicians, and on and on. A brief stint as a primary school teacher was all you could hope for before settling down as a wife or mother. So where was the freedom in this claustrophobic world? Well supposedly, unlike those poor people behind the "iron curtain," we could vote.

In 1956 there was a major election between President Dwight Eisenhower and his Democratic rival, Adlai Stevenson. In the gerrymandered town of San Marino, you really could not even vote

if you were a Democrat. There were literally no Democrats in the town. I met my first Democratic party member when I was 17. We had a straw election in my first-grade class. Everyone voted for Dwight Eisenhower. Except me. I don't know why I didn't vote for him. It had nothing to do with his policies, or that he was a Republican or that someone in my family was voting for him. My grandmother said it was because I hated to see anyone excluded from birthday parties. But once I decided I stood by it. I was asked to change my vote twice. When I did not, I was sent down to the principal's office. The worry was that I was under communist influence or maybe that someone in my family was a closeted Democrat. My mother was very upset. My grandmother was called in from work and came up with the birthday idea. We had just started to read "See Dick run and Jane sit and admire him" so I obviously was not influenced by communist propaganda. Nor was I trying to embarrass my mother. All I did was vote. The ideology had been pounded into my head that the right to vote was why the United States was the free world. Something was the matter. Of course, at six I had no idea what. But the lesson lingered somewhere. We have the right to vote – but we are not supposed to exercise it if it goes against how all the neighbors say you are supposed to behave and think.

There was a breath of fresh air in this suffocating environment — my grandmother. Yes, the one who came up with the birthday idea to get me out of my school's worry that I had been contaminated by Communist influence. My grandmother was a German immigrant daughter of an injured railroad worker and an in-house private domestic worker. She was forced to leave school at 13 to support her family in sweatshops, which is what too many non-union workplaces still are. It was her idea to move the family to California where she got a job in the book bindery in a company called Kellow-Brown. She saw a job in the office, jumped at it and got it. In what at first seems like the feminine version of the Horatio Alger story, she married the president of the company who was also from a poor background.

But tragedy struck in the 10th year of their marriage when he died one afternoon of a heart attack. It was 1931, the height of the depression. Of course the question came up: who was to become president of the company? Three weeks after her husband's death she went to Kellow-Brown and said she would become president and that was that. To say that this was unusual is an understatement. Women did not run printing companies. Period. But she did and

was the only woman president of a printing company for the next 50 years. She understood that many would not want to work under a woman, and they could leave with no hard feelings. But anyone who stayed would not be fired or laid off. She kept that promise. So here was a woman who lived her life against “no can do,” and she made it clear that I could too.

### From Rebel to Activist

Perhaps my grandmother was right. If I was guided by anything it was a vague principle of non-exclusion and a rebellion against what I saw as arbitrary authoritarianism. In the eighth grade I stopped listening to bells that directed us to change classes, running up hours of detention because I was late for every class. It was a critique that I was more than an automatic response machine. But in high school I returned to the issue of voting.

In 1954, *Brown vs Board of Education*, the ground-shattering Supreme Court case against systematic racism, challenged one of the basic Jim Crow laws – the “separate but equal” doctrine which segregated African Americans in schools at all levels of education. In declaring it unconstitutional, SCOTUS did not overturn the 1896 ruling in *Plessy vs Ferguson*, which had upheld Jim Crow segregation codes. In the U.S., the Supreme Court follows the precedent of prior courts, so how did *Brown* strike down the separate but equal legal structure without openly overturning the earlier case? What the court did instead was use sociological studies to show that separate but equal could never deliver equality to African Americans and therefore was unconstitutional. *Brown* was then and is now the final word on the idea that separate but equal could do anything but deliver a grotesque mimicry of what education is for African American young people.

Famously, Little Rock, Arkansas was integrated with brave African American students standing up to white hatred in the form of violent physical attacks with bottles and anything else the white mob could pick up. The National Guard was called in. But was full, long-lasting racial integration achieved? Far from it. The threat of integration became the driving force of white flight from the cities and exclusionary zoning in the suburbs. In 1964 the Civil Rights Act was passed and the next year the Voting Rights Act, a huge victory for the Freedom Riders and what became popularly known as the civil rights movement. African American activists and diverse groups of allies had over many years literally risked life and limb to finally enable everyone – whatever their race or ethnicity – to safely vote and enjoy equal rights as citizens. But the sad reality is that the *Brown* ruling alone could not deliver full school integration. This failure led the NAACP to call on white students to voluntarily re-register in all black local schools. I responded to their call and I tried to register at South Pasadena High School, the biggest all-black school close to my house, but my parents would not let me go. It was only in 1971 that the Supreme Court, in *Swann V. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, attempted to correct this failing by mandating inter-school busing. This sadly was fought so bitterly by many white parents and resisted by conservative politicians throughout the

1970s that it was largely crushed as a real possibility to achieve school integration.

At 15, I volunteered to register African Americans to vote in South Pasadena. It is a myth that only in the South were African Americans denied the right to vote. Gerrymandering and outright oppression of African Americans haunted the entire country. Disenfranchisement was a national problem which was finally recognized as such with the Voting Rights Act. Tragically, our present right-wing-majority Supreme Court recently gutted key provisions of that law. Once again, we seem to be facing the hypocrisy of a country holding itself out as “free,” rooted in the right to vote, while outright denying that right to African Americans.

### Anti-War and Anti-Racist Activism

I went to college in 1968 at the height of the Vietnam War, when mass student movements swept the country. Just the year before, B-movie actor and corporate pitchman Ronald Reagan was elected governor of California. As fierce in his pro-war rhetoric as he was in denouncing anti-poverty programs, Medicare “socialism,” and “illegal immigrants,” Reagan spent the next eight years building a platform to run for the White House and twisting the Republican Party into the hard-right plutocratic mob we see today. I first enrolled at Scripps College, then an all-women bastion in the cluster of Claremont Colleges not far from my childhood home. There, another main issue was the fight to establish a Black Studies Department, which I quickly joined. But the center of student activism in California was the UC Berkeley-Stanford nexus up north. In 1969, Governor Reagan ordered the National Guard to stamp out the Berkeley anti-war movement by occupying the city for over two weeks. In his smiling, ever-so-genial way, the Great Communicator said: “If it takes a bloodbath, let’s get it over with. No more appeasement!”<sup>1</sup> The following year, my best friend and I transferred to Stanford. I left Scripps as not only a committed activist, but a Marxist as well.

By 1970, 54,900 American soldiers had died fighting in the jungles of Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> War deaths of Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians were estimated at 2.5 to 3.6 million. My country’s air force was daily carpet-bombing the country with munitions that ultimately totaled over three times the bomb-tonnage dropped on Japan in all of World War II. And it was spraying toxic chemical defoliants across vast swaths of the rural landscape, killing crops and erasing jungle vegetation to give bombing runs clearer human targets. This ecocide was simultaneously causing long-term sickening of both the resident population and the invading armies.

Stanford, we soon learned, was up to its eyeballs in war-related research projects. Located at the Palo Alto heart of Silicon Valley, then as now its electrical engineering and business school faculty and grads built many of the dominant high-tech companies and their suppliers. Its board of trustees was packed with corporate chieftains, including major defense contractors like Lockheed. Its Applied Electronics Laboratory (AEL) relied on classified research for over one-third of its funding. A few feet off-campus in Stanford

Industrial Park, the Stanford Research Institute drew half its funding from the Defense Department – including chemical and biological weapons projects (CBW).

Young activist researchers at nearby Pacific Studies Center in East Palo Alto documented all this in impressive detail, flooding the campus with regular handouts that found their way into nearly daily movement debates and planning meetings.<sup>3</sup> One in particular sparked a dramatic acceleration of Stanford anti-war fervor. As campus protests over Stanford Research Institute’s war contracts mounted, five members of the board of trustees reluctantly agreed to speak at a large campus meeting in March 1969. Before the meeting, researchers found evidence that board member William Hewlett (co-founder of Hewlett-Packard) was also on the board of the FMC Corporation. When Hewlett appeared with the other trustees, an activist student asked him point-blank if it was true that FMC had been manufacturing nerve gas for the war. After initially denying it, Hewlett finally admitted that it had, in a plant that it sold to the government a few months earlier. Hundreds of outraged students poured out of the meeting and began a peaceful takeover of the AEL, shutting down its classified research for nine days.

The movement escalated when the United States invaded and later bombed Cambodia. The war was expanding. My partner, E, and I were out every night participating in the mass demonstrations and joining sit-ins during the day. The protests were against the Vietnam War, certainly, but more specifically against Stanford’s own profiteering as part of the war machine. The student movement effectively shut down the university for weeks at a time. Broken windows were boarded up and anti-war slogans were spray-painted on the right-wing think tank/retirement home in Hoover Tower.

For all its inevitable shortcomings and setbacks, our student movement achieved some lasting victories. To quell the disruption and horrible national publicity, Stanford’s Board of trustees was forced to sever the connection between the University and Stanford Research Institute, after renaming it SRI. And they agreed to ban all classified research at Stanford – a ban that continues to this day.

Then the nominally “liberal” Stanford administration retaliated. There was a demonstration in the Stanford hospital which involved destruction of property in the creation of barricades against the police. Neither E nor I were involved in that demonstration. The student newspaper, the *Stanford Daily*, was there taking photos. The administration demanded the photos of the demonstrators who had openly destroyed property. The newspaper refused, claiming freedom of the press and protection of the 4th amendment against unlawful seizures. A lawsuit brought by the administration granted a limited search warrant only for that demonstration and for those caught in the act of destroying property. As I recall, the search warrant allowed for about 10 photos. But Stanford did not follow the limited search warrant. Instead, it collected hundreds of photos of many different demonstrations and randomly suspended over 100 students. I was one of those suspended.

By that time E and I had joined a Marxist-Leninist group, *Venceremos*, a split off from the Revolutionary Union. The split had to do with *Venceremos*’ commitment to “third world leadership” and the primacy of anti-imperialist, anti-racist struggles. Concretely this meant that *Venceremos* was committed to defending the Black Panther Party, which was under brutal attack including the murders of key members. If and when it was necessary, the organization was committed to armed self-defense of the Panthers. Of course, the anti-war movement always had an anti-racist component, though stronger in some parts of the student movement than others. After all it was only “gooks” being killed in Vietnam, not human beings. In *Venceremos*, anti-racism was built into third world leadership.

As part of the Stanford administration’s retaliation against the anti-war movement, they targeted Professor H. Bruce Franklin, an Air Force veteran and Stanford PhD. who had gone on to become a tenured, much-published member of the English Department faculty. But he was also an eloquent antiwar speaker and a leader of *Venceremos*. Early in 1971, student researchers learned that the U.S. Navy was funding an SRI project on naval attack strategy (Gamut-H) at Stanford’s Computer Center. On February 10th, Franklin joined other speakers in a public rally to support a march there and occupation of the building. University President Richard Lyman immediately organized hearings to punish him. The only charge they could come up with was that his speech allegedly “incited” all us apparently lemming-like Stanford students and staff to peacefully occupy the building. E and I offered supportive testimony as witnesses and contacted prominent journalists to publicize the outrageous act of free speech suppression, leading to a major article by the *New York Times Magazine*.<sup>4</sup> Incredibly, widespread protest could not keep the university administration from firing him.<sup>5</sup>

Part of our political commitment, as revolutionary socialists in the only Marxist group we could find, was to reject class- and white-skinned privilege. In Marxist-Leninist parties, part of the way one rejected enrollment in the privileged class, or bourgeoisie, was to abandon that class and move into the working class. I took that mandate to reject class privilege very seriously. As my activism exhausted most of my waking hours, Stanford suspended me. I never went back. I decided to swap campus classes for the working class, and somehow talked myself into getting hired as a line worker at a local electronics factory called Antex.

### The Silicon Valley Union Movement

In 1970, nearly one-third of working people in California was a union member. Union density was even higher in states like Indiana, Michigan and Washington. Nationwide, 27.8 percent of workers still had union protections: above-average wages, benefits, safety measures, paid sick days, grievance procedures and a voice about their work lives. Since then, the fraction of workers in unions has plunged by more than half. In California, density dropped from 30.5 percent then to 15.2 percent today, as it has dropped to 10.3 percent nationwide.<sup>6</sup> How can this be, when public opinion polls show that a rising share of American adults



are pro-union – two-thirds according to the latest Gallup Poll? Growing research evidence points to two, uniquely American forces: relentless attacks on worker power by right-wing, phony-populist politicians and by sophisticated corporate union busters.<sup>7</sup>

As Silicon Valley has produced ever more corporate giants competing for tech riches, a long-running source of elite unity there has been the antipathy to labor rights. Behind the modern, windowless façade of many of its electronics suppliers like Antex was no shining, antiseptic work palace of pampered techies. It was instead part of a network of resolutely non-union sweatshops that produced their billions in profits before production of electronics moved offshore to an even more exploited workforce overseas.

Mine is a story of a time when workers still had many more rights under the National Labor Relations Act – the pro-union law signed by FDR in 1935 amidst the great industrial sit-in strikes. The workforce of Antex was almost entirely made up of women of color, many undocumented immigrants. There was also a strong African American presence, but only a handful of white women. All the workers were women, said to be favored for their so-called nimble fingers. Their desperate willingness to accept poverty wages to try to support their families may also have had something to do with it. There was no lunchroom. No vending machines. We had a half-hour lunch. The only restaurant close to the factory was a McDonalds with a drive-through. It was a rush to pick up the food, let alone eat it. We had one five-minute break. There were no benefits. No sick leave and certainly nothing so grand as maternity leave. It was the embodiment of a sweatshop.

I worked the swing shift from 4 p.m. to midnight. The white women worked in what was called the “acid room,” where our job was to transform raw materials to electronically conductive parts for computers. We worked without protective clothing. The fumes in the room were horrible. Breathing was extremely difficult. Eyes watered, coughing came with breathing. There were frequent fires. We put them out the old-fashioned way by beating back the flames with whatever we could find. We finally demanded a fire extinguisher. It was nightmarish to work in that room. The vast majority of the workers were dye sorters. Dye sorting involves sorting microscopic particles by color with a microscope. Eye damage was a serious danger and we were to find out later that, because of the threat to the eyes, dye sorters were supposed to have a break every hour to rest their eyes. Of course, the managers did not allow that.

I became close with another worker on the swing shift, P, who worked one of the machines. She had several friends and family working on our shift as well as the day and graveyard shifts. We agreed to form a group to discuss what we could do to fight back against the dangerous conditions in the factory. The group was largely African American women and the core of this group remained leaders throughout the union-organizing struggle. Here is where the story becomes dated. We decided that our best option was to file a complaint with OSHA, listing all of what we saw as health and safety violations.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration Act (OSHA) was passed by a Democratic-majority Congress and signed into law in 1970 by President Richard Nixon. It was a new agency and very active, with a number of idealistic young people signing up to work as agents in the field. We filed our complaint anonymously, which is crucial to this process. Within two days of the complaint, two agents showed up unannounced. Agents sometimes made surprise visits without a complaint being filed, and of course given the anonymity the company was not told who filed the complaint or even that a complaint had been filed. OSHA still exists but is terribly underfunded and is unrecognizable as the agency it once was in 1973. The undermining of the effectiveness of OSHA is part of a long story of the brutal attacks on workers’ rights in this country. More on that later.

We were thrilled when OSHA filed over a hundred violations against the company and gave them a month to correct them. I will never forget the day when those of us in the acid room were given protective clothing. The dye sorters were given their breaks mandated by law. The factory had been filthy, infested with bugs and sometimes mice. The company’s solution was to get a cat, which some of us named Jerry, but this was way too much work for one cat. Lunch was extended by 15 minutes. It was still a sweatshop, but we had won this huge battle with the help of committed OSHA agents.

Soon after the victory with OSHA, my suspension from Stanford was overturned with all the rest of the suspended students due to the violation of the limited search warrant of the student newspaper. Professor Anthony Amsterdam, a constitutional litigator and then a professor at NYU, represented the class for free and our suspensions were wiped off our records. Again, this dates the story because Amsterdam, a brilliant and generous constitutional lawyer, was working with a very different 4th amendment. The U.S. Constitution, since 9/11 and the passage of the Patriot Act, has been significantly weakened. Random searches are the name of the game now to protect “our security.” I had only a few units to complete to graduate but was way too wrapped up in the struggle at Antex to return to school.

It is often said that oppression breeds resistance, but in my experience it is *empowerment*. We felt empowered whenever we looked at the new safety protections. There were no unions in Silicon Valley, which probably helps explain the number of billionaires that are splashed on the pages of newspapers. But we decided to be the first, with the hope that other workers would follow our example. There were now nine of us in our group which included the original five members and two Latinas who had joined. We declared ourselves a union-organizing committee and approached the United Auto Workers. They enthusiastically agreed to support us. A UAW staff organizer was assigned to us.

We began the arduous process of getting union cards signed. Some of the workers who did not have papers were afraid of signing union cards because of the fear of deportation. We encouraged them to come to the on-site meetings. At that time once a union

drive was announced, the employer had to allow meetings on the grounds of the company and give workers paid time to attend. We had three such meetings, which were extremely well-attended. After all, why not take time off of work with pay to hear about the union? None of us were experienced public speakers, so we rotated. I was so nervous, I collapsed into a folding chair but kept speaking anyway. In order to file for an election one third of the workers have to sign union cards. We had over 50%. Of course the on-site meetings helped us get the word out that we had a union backing us. Again this dates the story. On-site meetings as a matter of law have long since been lost. It is a huge loss.

The UAW announced to the company that they were filing for an election. Two days later, P was fired for no good reason, supposedly for insubordination. She refused to leave the premises on the basis that she was being illegally fired because of her union activism. Word got around to me about what was happening to P and I charged to the bosses’ office. I was promptly fired for insubordination as well. I also refused to leave the premises. The police were called in to arrest us for trespassing. We ran to the ladies’ room to put our heads together about what to do next. The police started calling for us to come out. We decided the only thing to do was strike. P said she would try to hold the police off with the only weapon on hand, used pads and tampons, and when she saw a chance she would run into the production area and announce the strike. It worked. The police backed off, at least for a time. I climbed out the window to announce to the workers in building B that we were on strike. One of the workers turned off the main electrical switch. The building fell dark and quiet. I think many of us were almost in awe of our power. And then we all began to cheer. We poured out and all of us marched to building A where P had also called the strike. No one stayed inside. We were jubilant. We told the police that we were on strike and it was our right to picket the premises. We were legally right. In 1973 the right to strike really meant something.

The next step was to call the UAW representative. A spontaneous strike is known as a wildcat strike. We wanted the UAW to back us. I drove to a pay phone and called the union to tell them we were now on strike because P and I were fired for our union activism. Our union representative arrived with the hour. We did not have signs, but we kept singing and chanting until he arrived. So far, the strike only included the swing shift. That night several of us slept at my apartment that I shared with E. By the morning the UAW had agreed to back the strike and hired P and myself as temporary

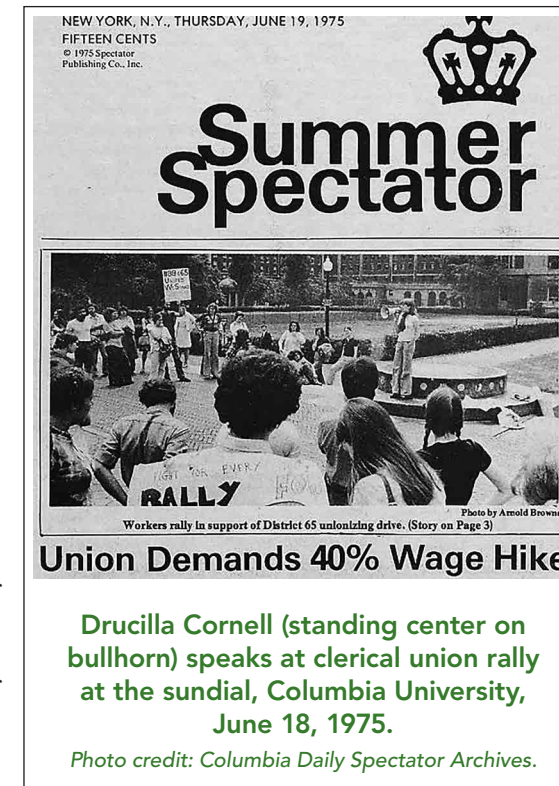
staff organizers to help with the next steps of the union drive. We were thrilled. UAW had a strike fund which was dispersed to striking workers to help with their expenses. Few unions have such funds now.

The next morning P and I went with leaflets to call on the day workers to join us. Late that night, we went to the graveyard shift with the same message. The UAW filed a number of unfair labor practices, including P’s and my firings and general intimidation of the workers. They also filed for an expedited election. We went from being a wildcat strike to a legitimate union strike against unfair labor practices. But we had only weeks to convince the workers to vote for the union and to keep up the strike and the company shut down. Normally an NLRB agent would investigate the charges of unfair labor practices to see if there is enough evidence to hold a formal hearing. We had another problem. We knew that workers without papers had been threatened with deportation, so they were unwilling to speak to a government agent.

In 1973, working for the National Labor Relations board was a good option for a progressive lawyer. Our lawyer was amazing. He agreed to meet with as many of the workers as possible who had been threatened with deportation. We met in a deserted street and he agreed to be blindfolded. He listened closely to their stories. We could only mobilize a handful of workers, but he decided they were convincing and that they showed a pattern of discrimination that justified an expedited election. To put even more pressure on the bosses, we had my partner apply for a job as a dye sorter. He was of course turned down because he did not have “nimble fingers,” so we filed a gender discrimination suit under Title 7 of the Civil Rights Act.

E and I owned a used telephone truck. Some on the organizing committee stayed at our house in part for safety in numbers so we could join the picket line together. Things got scary and several of us received death threats. Solidarity helped us bolster our courage. My partner E always joined the picket line. We worked 24/7 to keep the strike going. The day of the election came. As expected, some workers were too scared to show up, but enough did so the election could go forward. And we won by a significant margin, which would help us in the negotiations.

We showed up for negotiations a few days after our victory. P and I were elected to the negotiation committee. Our UAW representative was with us. What did we find? The company had



closed down and moved. We had no idea where the company had gone. The rumor was South Korea. We were shocked and horrified. Yes, demoralized. The company had found new “fields” of cheaper labor. We now take it for granted that all our fancy electronic toys are outsourced to other countries, but in 1973 that was not the case. We lost a battle. But the experience of fighting side by side through thick and thin all the while creating new forms of solidarity changed me forever and I like to think it did so for many of the others who participated. That kind of collective action is not just a memory you carry in your head. The experience of pouring out of the factory together, feeling our own power to shut down the factory, living and fighting day in and day out on the picket line was lived as a new way of being human together. That stayed with me.

### Union Organizing at Columbia

It was not surprising then that, when E and I moved to New York in 1973, I quickly got involved in the clerical union movement that had taken off in the city, as well as other parts of the country.<sup>8</sup> E had the misfortune of a birthday that drew a low number in the draft lottery, then passed the army physical with flying colors. Next stop: Vietnam! But he applied for and was granted conscientious objector status. He then had to work two years of community service. After that he enrolled in economics graduate school at Columbia University. I was hired at Columbia as a phone operator. The union drive of the clerical workers at Columbia was already in full swing. One of the phone operators, M, asked me if I wanted to attend a union meeting and of course I said yes. We both became active, signing up clerical workers for the union including the operators that worked with us. The union was District 65 which at that time was independent. Only later did District 65 merge with UAW. Our union activities were pretty well known which we felt would protect us, a naive presupposition no doubt. But I was used to being fully backed by the union and thought that strong union support would keep Columbia—a university, not a sweat shop—from violating the law. Wrong!

M was called in and fired first. In our “employment-at-will” system, bosses always have no shortage of excuses for firing a worker. I went in to witness M’s firing under one of the employment rules of the university. I was promptly fired, and our boss made a mistake. She announced that I was going to be next anyway as the other “troublemaker.” We refused to leave, encouraging the other operators to walk out with us. We were old fashioned phone operators so if we walked out no one could call into the university, a pretty big inconvenience. Our boss called the security guards who were already unionized and refused to remove us. At some point our boss called the higher-ups in the university. The police were called and we were escorted off campus. We promptly took the train to the union office, then located in Astor Place in the West Village. The union agreed that we had a strong case, particularly given our boss’s language, and filed a complaint with the NLRB. This time we had to endure a formal hearing. The main role of the anti-union lawyer is to discredit the integrity and trustworthiness of the worker. Both M

and I were on the stand for hours with petty details about our lives being supposedly used against our credibility. It took about ten months to win at the level of the Board’s regional office. The university appealed to the National Board and although it took well over a year, we won again.

Now we had a formal judgement that our firings were unfair labor practices. We met with other union supporters on the steps of Lowe Library and marched triumphantly to the employment office. Instead of being rehired, the police were called and we were arrested for trespassing. We were in shock—the National Board had demanded our rehiring as a matter of law! How could we be arrested?

That was when we learned that the NLRB has no independent enforcement power. What does that mean concretely? The employer does not have to take any legal action against a judgment by the NLRB because the NLRB cannot enforce its own judgment. The Board has to take the order up through the federal courts to get an order of enforcement. In this case it went up to the Supreme Court which denied jurisdiction, which meant that the order of the National Board stood and we were rehired. Eight years had passed. M and I were both rehired. M had completed her nursing training and I had become a law professor. We decided not to return to our jobs as phone operators. It took ten years for the clerical workers to get Columbia to sign a contract, but they did. Ours was one of the first of many unfair labor practices committed by the university. But after years and years of a bitter fight, the clerical workers won. They finally not only won the union election, but they also successfully negotiated a contract. Ten years after my firing I was asked to return to the steps of Lowe Library to celebrate their victory. I was thrilled to do so.

### NYC Clerical Organizing

After our “arrest” by Columbia University, the police let us go once we got to the police station. We went on to pursue other jobs. M returned to nursing school and I was hired as a junior staff organizer for District 65. Of course, we had our NLRB case to deal with in the first years after our firing. M and I formed a consciousness-raising group that met in her apartment in the South Bronx twice a month. By this time we both considered ourselves feminists. The rising up of clerical workers—then an almost all-female workforce—was seen by many including me as part of the women’s movement. It was an exciting time with many clerical workers beginning union drives in their workplaces. As a staff organizer I was no longer inside the workplace with them. Still, I was sent to union meetings and particularly to negotiations with senior organizers.

One of the huge victories for the union was the successful union election at Metropolitan Life, one of the country’s biggest life insurance corporations. The company refused to negotiate seriously, using every trick to avoid serious discussion of the workers’ demands. Employers and lawyers then learned these tricks often in anti-union or union-busting seminars. E and I

signed up for one of those seminars, obviously under other personas. We were both horrified by the explicit lessons on how to break the law and get away with it. The negotiations came to a standstill. The Metropolitan Life workers bravely went on strike. The strike dragged on week after week. There was a strike fund but it was less than UAW and there were 5 or 6 times as many workers as there were at Antex. The president of the union, David Livingston, decided District 65 could no longer sustain the strike. I had been on the picket lines almost every day and attended negotiation meetings. The workers held a meeting voting to continue the strike. They were determined to hold out against the company’s stonewalling. One of the sticking points was over paid maternity leave. The company refused to budge.

The union called a meeting and made it clear that they could no longer fund the strike and that some basic benefits had been won including a limited maternity policy. I knew that not to be the case. I raised my hand. I was sitting in the front row with some of the other organizers. I told the workers that it was true that the union was running out of resources to sustain the strike, but it was not true that any maternity policy of any kind was in the draft contract. I had been profoundly influenced by the great revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg and it seemed to be against everything she had taught to outright lie to the workers. The next day David Livingston fired me for refusing to do what I was told to do.

I went back to the Metropolitan Life picket line and told them I would no longer be participating in their union drive because I had been fired by David Livingston. The next day workers from Metropolitan Life and other workers unionizing with District 65 threw up a picket line around the union office on Astor Place! They were relentless. Three days of picketing led David Livingston to rehire me. The solidarity of the workers, many of whom were in dire straits because of the long strike, showed me once again how solidarity changes how we live together and what possibilities we can open up. I had accepted my fate. They did not.

### Organizing in Hackensack with UE

I stayed at District 65 for another 6 months after I was rehired. The momentum of the clerical movement began to die down because of the brutal oppression against unionizing by the employers in New York City. I decided to return to industrial organizing. Hackensack was still a thriving industrial city in 1976. Electronic manufacturing was mainly more conventional electrical equipment. I wanted to see the lay of the land and worked in several factories as a welder before being hired by United Electrical Workers. UE was famous for its radical political policies and was notorious for its past associations with the U.S. Communist Party (CP).

Welding was the most skilled job I ever had in a factory. Once hired at the UE office in Patterson, New Jersey, we began to strategize as to how to proceed. UE had long been the victim of 1950s-style red baiting, which lost it a lot of its membership to the

International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). There were only three of us in the office. Still we decided to be daring and open several union drives at once in one industrial park in Hackensack. Workers in electrical factories were more skilled and as a result less afraid of being fired, at least in 1976. We worked around the clock but actually won three elections in 6 months. It was a heady time. Negotiations started, but just as negotiations were opening after the election victories, the Teamsters showed up.

The Teamsters were once a proud leader in the union movement, but by 1976 they were said to be largely controlled by the mafia. Company owners were offered sweetheart contracts, in which the bosses pay the Teamsters to get rid of the legitimate union by promising the workers paradise, but deliver nothing. We stayed in as long as we could. I was out leafletting every day to convince the workers that we were the real union. Teamster thugs were always there to threaten us. I kept it up for weeks. The two thugs constantly slashed my tires and I regularly got death threats of one sort or another. I approached my Teamster “brothers” and asked them to act in solidarity with the workers, even though they were women workers. They needed a union that had been elected and sweetheart contracts were an insult to working class solidarity. One of the thugs said, and I’m paraphrasing, “Are you from another planet?” I did not convince either one to stop their endless attempts to attack me as a representative of the UE. I did learn how to change tires. But we were a poor union and the workers either sadly believed the empty promises of the Teamsters or they were too intimidated by the Teamsters’ presence, and we lost our shops. It was a hard defeat to accept.

### Conclusion

I realize that what I have written here is as much about defeats as it is about victories. It is also about a time a half-century ago when workers had substantially more rights than they do now. We still had a National Labor Relations Act that had not been steadily dematerialized to a ghost of itself. The systematic effort by Ronald Reagan and his big business pals to break the unions and attack workers’ rights on both federal and state levels had not even begun. But as I have written, those struggles stayed with me as the promise that we will always fight again. Think now of the impressive uprisings of Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ and #MeToo activists. Survey after survey show that today’s young people are the generation most committed to racial and gender equality, climate sustainability and labor rights. Students have fought their universities to support campus unions and to form new ones. Most recently, high-tech, gig and cultural workers have turned to unionization and won. And even the tech giants around my old college town in Silicon Valley are now facing mounting union pressures.<sup>9</sup> If I have learned anything from my own life of activism it is the timeless truism: as long as there is injustice, the struggle will continue!



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REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW, vol. 23, no. 1 (Fall 2020).  
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#### NOTES:

- 1 Cannon, Lou. *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (Public Affairs, 2003).
- 2 U.S. National Archives, *Vietnam War U.S. Military Casualty Statistics* (2008): www.archives.gov/research/military.
- 3 Pacific Studies Center would later bring my partner (let's call him "E") on board to research labor and transit issues.
- 4 Lamott, Kenneth, "In the Matter of H. Bruce Franklin," *New York Times Magazine* (1/23/1972).
- 5 In May 2019, 85-year-old Bruce Franklin returned to Stanford, unrepentant, to give a speech to undergraduates and publicize his new memoir: Franklin, H. Bruce. *Crash Course: From the Good War to the Forever War* (Rutgers U. Press, 2019). After his 1972 firing, he spent 3 years "blacklisted" in academia, before being hired onto the faculty at the Newark campus of Rutgers University. For another well-written, but sharply contrasting memoir of these events by the University's then-president, see: Lyman, Richard. *Stanford in Turmoil: Campus Unrest 1966-72* (Stanford U. Press, 2009).

- 6 US Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Union Members – 2019* (BLS, January 2020): www.bls.gov. 1970 density estimates are from: Hirsch, Barry, et al., "Estimates of Union Density By State," *Monthly Labor Review* (7/2001).
- 7 Mishel, Lawrence, et al. "Explaining the Erosion of Private Sector Unions," *EPI Report* (7/2020)
- 8 See Julia Reichert & Steven Bognar's excellent 2020 documentary film about the history of women organizing clerical workers: "9 To 5: The Story of a Movement."
- 9 Eidelson, Josh, "Union Power is Putting Pressure on Silicon Valley's Tech Giants," *Bloomberg BusinessWeek* (9/14/2017).



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## BOOK REVIEW

### Class, Caste and Race in the U.S

*Caste: The Origin of Our Discontents*, by Isabel Wilkerson (Random House, 2020)

Reviewed by Rachel Horowitz

Here is a bold investigative attempt to unearth how oppression functions in society and, if, through tracing the workings of different caste systems, we can find a universal element to certain kinds of suffering. Isabel Wilkerson is the first African-American woman to win a Pulitzer Prize in journalism and the author of *The Warmth of Other Suns: the Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. In *Caste*, she compares three hierarchical societies: America, India, and Nazi Germany. With three distinct "subordinate castes", across three continents, Wilkerson uses these societies with very different histories in order to determine the universal elements of a caste system. The author provides a societal definition of caste that deviates from what she perceives as individualistic accounts of racism. She argues that caste is "an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups on the basis of ancestry and often immutable traits, traits that would be neutral in the abstract but are ascribed life-and-death meaning". Therefore, race is America's arbitrary permutation of a caste system, in which the power of the dominant caste restricts the physical and financial security, the happiness, and the health of the subordinate caste on the basis of random variables that we, as a society, have collectively endowed with so much weight.

Whether it be the Untouchables, or Dalits, in India or Jews in Nazi Germany, Wilkerson argues that a caste system upholds a tight order of domination and labor exploitation on the lowest rung of society. The upper caste reaps the benefits while dehumanizing the group they've deemed undeserving of human dignity. Her comparison to Nazi Germany breaks down slightly when one considers that the Nazi's goal was to exterminate Jews, rather than to maintain a continued hierarchy of domination and labor as in American and India. But her comparative stance allows for a fundamental analysis of the social mechanics behind caste. Unlike racism, which she describes as "fluid and superficial", Wilkerson theorizes that casteism is the structure upon which racism is built, and that caste and inequality are so fixed, so entrenched in society, that our entire way of being is determined by where we fall in the caste hierarchy.

The book hinges on the question of immutability— can we escape the fate of the caste in which we were born? The author dismisses class as an example of caste since, she argues, certain determining

elements of class like education, taste, or socioeconomic status "can be acquired through hard work and ingenuity or lost through poor decisions or calamity. If you can act your way out of it, then it is class, not caste". In contrast to this simplistic rationale, Wilkerson argues that there is no true mobility, no opportunity for Black people to truly transcend being lower caste in the American caste system.

As an incredibly accomplished Black woman, Wilkerson's statement seems deeply personal. She includes many powerful anecdotes of caste systems in America, India, and Nazi Germany, but her own experiences of running up against the walls of race and caste seem at the heart of her book. She includes several stories of her experiences working as a journalist for *The New York Times* that involve demeaning treatment while flying first class on assignment. Even though flying first class is a statement of class position, on several occasions, Wilkerson was made to feel as though she didn't belong to that elite club of the "upper caste" who fly first class, despite literally being in the same cabin as everyone else.

This leads to her central question and her ultimately disappointing response. Can there be mobility for the lower caste to rise into the dominant? According to Wilkerson, the answer is no, at least not right now. She illustrates the hardship of those deemed subordinate who do rise in class, but who, she argues, can never achieve a true sense of belonging. She includes a scientific study that found the nerves of upwardly mobile Black people were frayed from the stress of this situation, in comparison to the nerves of lower-class Black people, which don't show the same degeneration. Thus, while Wilkerson interrogates caste in India, Nazi Germany, and Black people in America generally, and builds a convincing case, the status of upper-class Black people in America seems to be what personally drives her. How can she, a woman who has accomplished so much, be so easily put down on a first-class flight, on which she has every right to be? The book asks if there's a kind of predetermination in play, in which all members of a subordinated caste, despite all efforts to rise, will remain fixed in their hierarchical assignment, and seen not as individuals, but as inescapable caste positions.

While Wilkerson's book offers a novel, thought-provoking framework for how to think about race in America as a hierarchical caste system, it falters in its handling of nuances or of the "middle