The Organization of American Historians

Patricia A. Cooper
Drexel University

The Organization of American Historians met in Philadelphia in April 1987; I attended three labor-related sessions. "The United Packinghouse Workers of America Oral History Project: Methods and Findings" proved to be a thoroughly enjoyable panel, in part because of the information about the history of the militant, left-leaning United Packinghouse Workers (UPW), but also because of the attention to the practice of oral history. Roy Rosenzweig (George Mason) read a paper by James Cavanaugh, who was on the staff of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin when the project was undertaken. The paper, which was both a history of the UPW and an explanation of how the oral history project was conceptualized and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities in the era of Reagan. The project's chief difficulty and key strength was the decentralized nature of the UPW, which required oral historians to conduct interviews in local communities in Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, Missouri, and Texas, along with the major yards and plants in Chicago. Most of the interviewees did not go on to become national leaders, but instead "spent their entire working careers inside packing plants." The union paid varying but serious attention to matters of race and gender, attention that seems to have carried over into the conceptualization of the project itself.

Rick Halpern and Roger Horowitz both pointed to the importance of race, local autonomy, and radicalism (particularly that of communists) in the formation and operation of these locals. Halpern's paper, "Race and Radicalism in the Chicago Stockyards," detailed the historical basis for racial mistrust and hostility, and how workers overcame these divisions in the 1930s through militant direct action in the process of unionization. Blacks, who comprised 30 percent of the labor force, were at the very center of the UPW movement of the 1930s. Horowitz's paper, "Official Policy versus Practice in the UPWA," looked at characteristics of the UPW nationally and locally that made it progressive—its enlightened race and gender policies (the latter was less admirable than the former) and its internal democracy. Commentators Roy Rosenzweig and Alice Hoffman raised questions about the roots of interracial alliance, the limits of internal union democracy, and issues of oral history methods such as the project's use of detailed abstracts rather than transcripts.

The session titled "Samuel Gompers from Three Perspectives: A Reexamination at Shop Floor, National, and International Range," was refreshing be-

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cause of the novel approaches of the papers and the fact that all three presenters, Stuart Kaufman, Grace Palladino, and Dorothee Schneider, have worked together on the Samuel Gompers Papers. Kaufman's earlier book on Gompers stressed the intellectual origins of his thought, but in this paper, titled "Shop Floor Roots of Pure and Simple Unionism: The Case of Samuel Gompers," Kaufman looked at the ways in which Gompers's shop-floor experience as a cigar maker during the 1860s and 1880s shaped his outlook. Kaufman argued that Gompers's pure and simple unionism grew out of his defense of values related to family sanctity and workplace independence. To secure cigar makers' independence, Gompers favored creating strong, financially secure, politically autonomous, and disciplined organizations. Gompers opposed the tenement house cigar-making system because of its threat to the union, its infringements on the independence of workers, its "desecration of motherhood and childhood," and because he believed it forshadowed the fate of all cigar makers if not successfully resisted. In this and other situations, Gompers's direct experience of family and work shaped his outlook.

In "The Ties That Bind: Samuel Gompers and the Structure of Solidarity, 1886–1895," Grace Palladino challenged the accepted wisdom on Gompers—that during these early years he was a conservative, self-serving, class collaborationist who devised a structure for the American Federation of Labor that inherently obstructed the possibility of forging true class solidarity. Palladino showed that Gompers's policies represented a straightforward and informed assessment of the world he saw around him and were devised to deal with certain realities, such as the tremendous diversity among workers, workers' crippling factionalism, and the wide variations in industry development and workers' political consciousness. Gompers selected a strategy that he believed would overcome these divisions and slowly build class unity and solidarity. In "Samuel Gompers Overseas: European-American Relations of the American Federation of Labor, 1886–1917," Dorothee Schneider carried the analysis of the labor leader into his "middle years" when Gompers appears in a somewhat less favorable light. Schneider placed the efforts of Gompers and the AFL to forge links to the European labor movement in the context of the changing climate for and characteristics of both the American and European labor movements during these years. Although Gompers's propensity to dine and travel in lavish style during his 1909 European tour offended many European labor leaders, it was divergent agendas and strategies—particularly attitudes toward political activity—that so starkly set the Americans apart from their European counterparts, especially those in France. Commentators Melvyn Dubofsky and Walter Licht raised questions about Gompers's personal life—his Jewishness, his relationship to his wife and children, his character and thinking. They also explored his public performance including the limits over time of his early strategy and the relationship between his actions and the development of capitalism during these years.

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The session on "Female Consciousness and Working-Class Militance" offered two very different papers that stimulated lively discussion. In "Partners in the Struggle: Gender and Class Consciousness Among Jewish Women Garment Workers," Susan Glenn suggested a model of twentieth-century Jewish women's consciousness that stressed class solidarity, a partnership with men, and a gender-integrated approach to strikes and labor organizing. Beginning with an analysis of workers' Eastern European background and culture followed by a look at the family and community dynamics of their activity in the socialist and labor movements, Glenn concluded that sisterhood and women's culture are not useful concepts for understanding Jewish women's labor militance. Ardis Cameron, in "Feminism from Below: 'Surplus Women,' Consciousness, and Workers' Militancy," looked at women workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts in the 1880s. In Lawrence, sex ratios were "lopsided," and self-supporting women in the workplace and the community dominated the local economy. Cameron discussed women's self-conscious activity and the concept of womanhood in the Lawrence strike of 1882, as well as the town's male response to the unhealthy "surplus" of women, whom they urged to move elsewhere. In contrast to Glenn, Cameron presented a model stressing a separate, distinct women's culture. Both papers illustrated the variety of women's experiences and the ways in which culture is constantly being created, rather than simply being inherited from the past. Commentators Patricia Cooper, Carole Turbin, and Alice Kessler-Harris pointed to various concerns with both papers, but much of the discussion focused on the value and limitations of the concept of women's culture. The session clearly pointed the way toward further research and debate on these crucial questions.

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